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Draider Race

by Benjamin S. Hartman

A battalion of draiders come and join us in a meal of dried fruits, meats and water. They lounge alongside us in the tent telling more stories and croaking in laughter at our attempts of communication.

Overhead a falling star streaks overhead, likely a piece of debris that plummeted and burned up in the atmosphere.

“[Would you warriors be interested in one of our favorite games?!]”

We look at each other, unsure of how to answer after the capsicum fiasco.

Bloodstone croaks his answer for us. “[They have courage, they can handle the gliders.]” He adds insult to injury by slapping me on the shoulder.

Starfall orders a handful of the draiders to retrieve something. When they come back, Forrest leaps to his feat.

“OH YES! Please tell me those are illegally tuned dune boards!”

Starfall looks to us, unsure of what Forrest has said.

“He’s excited,” I translate.

The draiders smile and bring us outside to show us their prized possession. The gleaming chrome-covered boards have long since been banned use in the Core due to a lack of safety devices and illegal street racing. The boards were only for the adrenaline junkies and could top out at 195 kph.

“So shiny,” Forrest says as he caresses the board. He puts his arm around the draider.

“Thank you for bringing this into my life.

“[We race with these across the sands. Only the bravest are allowed to race these and only the best can win,]” Starfall says. He starts the engine and then jumps onto the board.

“[So, who will challenge me?]”

“Ooh! Ooh! Pick me!” Forrest squeals. He takes the board from the draider, activates the engine and jumps on.

“[Anyone else?]” Bloodstone asks.

“I will,” I reply. Fitch and John chuckle to themselves.

“We don’t want either of you to die now y’hear?” John asks.

“Ah Godfrey don’t listen to them - you’re gonna love it!” Forrest says. “First you squat and use your feet to control the board. They’re *real* touchy, but easy to steer. The hard part is your arms, the wind can knock ‘em right out of their sockets!”

“Comforting,” I reply as I hop onto the board. The engine hums gently, the vibration trickling up my legs.

Starfall also tosses us two ammo clips each. “[Drones will be hunting us too. If you get hit, you lose.]”

“What?!” Forrest exclaims. “That’s not racing!”

“Then you better aim well Forrest. Let’s ride!” I howl and kick down my thruster. The board’s engine roars to life and shoots forward, almost right out from under me if it wasn’t for my magnetic boots.

The other two quickly catch up to me, but I’m lost in admiring the beauty of the desert. The sky is brick red, with the orange sun hinting that dusk is on the horizon. Rolling dunes and swaths of rock that hasn’t seen water in ages are kicked away by the thrust of our engines. My visor protects my eyes, and I notice that Forrest has put his flight goggles down. Starfall doesn’t seem fazed by the wind around us and keeps low on his board.

I watch him focus on the path ahead, yet I can’t help but wonder how old their race and this world are. This world feels ancient, far older than Earth.

The scream of Forrest’s engine wakes me from my daydream and I’m brought back to the present. I crouch down, reducing my drag and edging for the lead.

“Silas, it seems that there’s a drone pursuing you,” Emie says to me. I look behind and see a floating sphere with two cannons for arms.

“Hey Godfrey! Looks like you’ve got a drone on your butt!” Forrest shouts.

“Hey Forrest! Looks like you’re about to be on the wrong side of the mountain!” I scream back. He gives me a confused look before I turn my board in his direction, edging against him. Forrest leans back, trying not to get hit. He looks to the horizon and sees us coming upon a mountain.

“You wouldn’t!” He screams.

“I already am,” I scream as I lean forward and push on his chest. He tries to slap me away, but he can’t reach me.

I pull him in and then shove him away while I veer left, draw my pistol and fire at the drone. The machine flashes red, indicating that it’s been hit.

I hear Forrest scream in the distance. Just before he disappears on the wrong side of the mountain, I realize he’s warning that we’re heading for a *cliff*!

Starfall squats low and readies himself while I struggle not to panic. Our boards only hover, they don’t fly. Once gravity takes over I feel everything clench and hold my breath as I feel my stomach crash into my other organs.

I brace myself for impact, but the boards hold up. When we hit the ground our feet press against the pedals and we take off again. In the distance I see a trail of dust. Forrest has found us and is straining to catch up. The sun has turned orange and its warm glow caresses the horizon. There’s so much of this world locked away in mystery, and I wish we had the time to explore more of it.

Starfall veers in front of me, kicking up sand into my visor. My mask protects me from the debris, but every time I try to get out from behind him he gets in front of me.

“Silas, another drone is behind you,” Emie says. I turn and watch the orbital unit come after me, so I decide to give Starfall a taste of his own medicine. I kick my board up to brake hard, while the droid flies right past me and sets its sights on Starfall.

The draider draws two pistols and fires on the unit, but is momentarily distracted while I press down on the accelerator as hard as I can.

The engine screams to life as I fly forward. I feel all the freedom in the world as I glide across the surface of this beautiful planet. I squat low to reduce my drag and with Starfall being distracted, I take the lead away from him.

Forrest closes in on, but another drone is following him. He's not paying attention to the droid, only to the ground in front of him. An eerie focus possesses him as he edges up on me.

Without warning Forrest stands up and hits me in the chest.

"Tag!" He screams. The act has stunned me for a microsecond, but that was enough for him to take the lead and turn me into the target. I go serpentine to evade the drone, but the unit has no trouble tracking me.

I draw my pistol and fire, but I miss. Starfall is catching up and me waving my arm isn't helping my speed. The drone fires, but I dodge it just in time. The blast hurls rocks out behind us, but they're gone before I can look back.

I take my pistol and fire again. The drone weaves out of the way and I'm getting frustrated.

Starfall croaks in laughter as he veers hard to the right and follows a trail which cuts to a hard left. In front of me and closing fast is a canyon wall. I struggle to turn because the drone is trying to cut me off. I turn hard on my board and hit the brake, but the drone catches on and avoids crashing into the wall. I bite back a curse, draw both of my pistols and fire on the bastard. I finally hit it, but now I've wasted so much time I don't know if I'll ever catch the other two. I push the accelerator and fly into the canyon which lasts for kilometres.

Along the way I see a footpath which leads up. I steer to it and glide up the slope, hoping to see if I can spot the other two. I see the glow of their exhausts and they're busy weaving

through the bottom of the canyon while I get to coast above them. I squat low and hold on for as long as I can, the wind howling all around me. We're approaching the end of the canyon and I've caught up to Forrest, but he's not giving up the lead easily.

I decide to take a gamble and ride off the cliff into the canyon. I grab ahold of the board and keep my feet on the peddles so gravity doesn't take my advantage away.

The back of my board blows dust off of the trail, which distracts Forrest and Starfall long enough for me to take the lead.

On the edge of the horizon I can see the camp. Tiny figures are jumping in the distance. I want the glory of being crowned the winner. This race was the thrill of a lifetime, but I want to savor my victory in front of all.

Out of the corner of my eye I see bouncing curls dancing in the wind. Forrest is less than a metre away and gaining. I do everything I can to gain speed, but the wiry man seems to be better at this than I am.

I take one last look at the sun in the distance. The air is wavy and the sun has crossed the horizon, signaling that night is on its way. Everything glimmers like rubies, as if this world were encrusted with them. This view alone makes the entire race worth it.

Forrest is now only centimetres away, his crazy focus-look fixed on his face. He's not worried about me, he wants to win with speed alone.

I reach over and point at Forrest with my index finger. He notices me out of the corner of his eye, but tries to ignore me.

"I'm not touching you..." I scream over the wind.

I edge towards him, and the closer I get the more he can't look away from my finger. His frowning lips quiver and his eyes are twitching.

"I'm not touching you!"

He tries to keep his eyes open but I inevitably poke his goggles.

"GAH!" He screams and bucks out of the way to clear his vision. The maneuver causes Starfall to surge into the lead and win the race with all of the draiders croaking in victory.

I fly across the finish line and circle back to the Horsemen. Forrest follows close behind.

"I had him! I had him!" Forrest shouts. "What'd you do that for?!"

"Bragging rights," I reply. "I mean, I still beat *you*."

"Bu...but..."

Sujay wraps his arm around me. "You'll have to teach me how to get him to shut up like that."