

## Battlefront

### Status

Tears flowed from the battle-scarred Commander's eyes as his thoughts remained tied to the incalculable Gray losses that had transpired. Commander Jaap had lost many of his close comrades in a rapid withdraw. He stood at attention before his Chief Director in a make-shift office which was nothing more than a patchwork of materials tied together within the great Vineland. It was all the Grays could muster after evacuating from their original home. Kagard blood stains covered the surviving Gray Commander's dented, calcined armor.

Jaap's six limbed body trembled when he swallowed. Grays appeared as humanoids with the exception of two back short limbs that were used for clamping onto the hedgerow network. Jaap's back limbs bled from fiercely grabbing the vines while using his other four limbs to repel the Kagards. The commander lowered his voice, "The Kagards are coming. We can't stop them!" his voice trailed off in resignation.

Ever since the great quake two cycles ago, white Kagards came in ever increasing numbers. Vile Kagard creatures did nothing more than kill, eat, and multiply. Their first appearance somehow coincided with a great quake that knocked out many of the Gray's advanced defenses. At this point they were fighting with weapons from generations past. Director Jurgis shook her head. "We've stopped worse enemies before, Jaap. Use the hedgerows to erect a barricade. Slow their advance."

Her words did not inspire him. He looked defeated as he stared at the facilities floor. It was the same words that he had heard from his previous Director. She walked over to her commander, slapped him across the face, and shook his forearms. "Snap out of it, Jaap. I don't care if it takes our entire armed force. It's us or them. I need you to lead the others." She paused and backed away.

After days of fighting the same four legged, needle sharp Kagards with a seemingly endless supply of replacements, Jaap's body was fatigued, and his spirit had been shaken. It was like fighting a herd of demons that kept coming, surrounding them, and then retreating to find another weak spot before attacking again. The Kagards hunger was never satisfied. So many of Jaap's comrades had died and been eaten that he didn't dare make additional friends from the new reinforcements. New friends only brought new sorrows.

"Be strong for me, Jaap." Jurgis gently grazed her hand across his face and let out a slight grin. They were lovers under cover. Her gentle touch did more to bolster Jaap's strength than any posturing or words would ever do.

Her main enforcer grimaced before regaining his composure, clicking his legs together, and replying, "May the Great Care Taker look after us."

Jurgis nodded.

Jaap desperately wanted to hear her say how the Care Taker would rescue them, but she never did, not even at this precarious hour. Jaap never liked that side of her.

“If I tell you that the Care Taker is looking after us, would that make you feel better?” Jurgis inquired.

Jaap looked away. “Yes.” Her words would have meant more to him if she just said it outright instead of posing her answer in the form of a question.

“Then so he is.” She hated lying to him, but she had to inspire him somehow. Personally Jurgis didn’t believe in any Great Care Taker. The world was what they saw of it, nothing more.

Jurgis’ persuasion worked. Jaap, her primary enforcer and lover, flexed his muscles before striding out of her office with his confidence restored.

Director Jurgis sighed. She turned and studied a map of their latest battle. The jungle of connecting vines, intersection points, and undulating dense area worked to their advantage when they were on the defensive, but when they took the offense, the same hedgerow hindered their progress. The intersecting Vineland glowed and darkened in no recognizable pattern despite years of study. Near the calcined area, the undulations seemed to increase as the density of the vines decreased, but as they moved closer to the Vineland core, the network intensified.

The Grays had won many battles in the past with other white entities, whatever they were, but now she sensed something was different. Every limb of these four legged Kagards sliced through their best armor. There wasn’t a place on the Kagard’s bodies that would not cut or cause pain to the Grays. Kagards were like a pack of beasts striking and cutting them to threads as they feasted upon the wounded Grays. No matter how much food or how many Grays they had consumed, they multiplied and yearned for more. Kagards were not intelligent enough to realize that their rapid rate of consumption would eventually devour all of the food resources, Grays included.

It had been some time since the Great Care Taker had legendarily interjected. In recent times, the enriching influx of nutrients had slowed to a crawl. Their storage areas had been depleted, and the Director knew that her people would starve in the near future. Even the waste streams slowed to a trickle. This only happened in their recorded history once before. . .

“Ma’am, the senior board demands your presence.” Her assistant ensured she was on time for her meetings.

“Give me a minute.” She leaned over the viewing table to survey how the battle was going a half sector away. The tenuous barricade slowed their advance costing thousands of Gray lives. Their strategy was failing. Their light weapons and coalescent field collapsed as the Gray lines fell. Their time would be short lived unless a miracle occurred. Jurgis’ eyes welled and her body trembled when she backed away from the viewing table after observing Kagards consuming the wounded and dead. She hoped her lover, Jaap, had survived the latest skirmish.

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## Emergency Session

As the Chief Director entered the board chambers, she sensed the melancholy environment of their board of directors. “What’s our escape plan, Chief Director?” one of the senior members inquired.

“We don’t have one. We either win this battle or perish. I’ve devoted all of our resources to defending this center at all costs.”

The seven-membered board shook their heads and murmured. It was not the answer they wanted to hear. Their white eyes glowed showing the immense strain and fear that they were enduring. One board member asked, “Have we tried to tunnel through the calcined layer?”

Director Jurgis shook her head. “You know that we’ve tried that many times before. We’ve never broken through the calcined layer except through the Care Taker’s providence. Even that was a rare circumstance.” Although Jurgis didn’t believe in the Care Taker, she used the name when it was politically expedient.

There was a moment of disquieting silence before another board member asked, “What if we attempted to swim upstream through the nutrient stream, or try to survive through the filth of the exit stream?”

“Maybe, but no one has ever successfully returned. Have they? No, our best chance is to fight this out, even if our survival odds are slim.” The Chief Director pointed to the table with a grimace on her face. The truth was she didn’t know what to try next, and that fact bothered her. Expanding the universe was no longer possible now that the calcined layer had taken root.

Eons ago their recorded history spoke of a time when their universe was in a growth stage, but for the past centuries a static equilibrium had taken hold. Questions about how they got there and where they came from were only answered by myths and legends. No one knew for sure, and no one was able to prove their theories. Some argued that they had always lived in a static universe despite the historical records which might have been improperly translated.

“There’s a prophecy that the Great Care Taker will once again intervene in a hopeless, future battle to save the chosen ones. He helped us with the Invisios in the past. Do you think we’re living in the end days?” one of the more faithful board members asked.

Everyone was aware of the Invisios legend. Clustered Invisios had gathered into large clumps that made it impossible to remove them until the Great Care Taker broke through the calcined layer, removed enemy clusters, and made the Invisios appear, an enemy that the Grays had never seen before because they blended in so well. With their massive Invisios centers removed and their invisible shields exposed, it was easy for the Grays to conquer the rest of them.

That question went unanswered as Commander Jaap reappeared with more white and gray battle scars spread across his body. His six limbs and face bore lacerations. "It's no longer safe here. Either run, or join what's left of us."

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## **Final Battle**

Jurgis thrust her sword into the heart of a white Kagard which wiggled and floated away into the vine collective. She slashed away at the Kagards that approached as her back left short arm wrapped itself around a thinner vine. She slashed through a leg of a more aggressive four legged Kagard. Jaap protected her back. A red-black river and rain began to engulf and consume them. She shivered under the duress.

"How long do you think we can hold out, Jaap?"

Jaap threw a light grenade into the approaching horde. They held their ground for a moment before advancing again. Kagard's scissor-like, gnashing teeth showed before them--- their teeth were their best weapon. Jaap wedged a sword into the Kagard's mouth while slicing it to bits with a second short sword. A Kagard to the left chewed through a Sergeant's arm as he screamed out in agony, while another five Kagards consumed a fallen private a few footsteps away.

"As long as it takes to protect you, Chief Director."

The Kagards gnashed their teeth, circled them, and closed in. They surrounded them on all sides as their jagged edges and mouths snarled in anticipation of a new meal.

Jurgis and Jaap swung their swords back to back. Slashing their swords across them, cutting limbs off of the white beasts, and thrusting their swords into their enemies' hearts. They swung at everything that moved. Kagards came at them at all angles cutting their limbs and faces. Jurgis's thrust cut into a white beast's heart. A second beast slashed Jurgis' walking limb causing her to look down when another Kagard severed her left back limb.

"My back limb!" Jurgis cried out as she clenched her teeth.

Jaap grabbed the beast, which cut his forehead, and threw it against other approaching Kagards. "Get behind me, Jurgis." Jaap's heart beat at full capacity.

Jaap pulled her behind him and pushed her against a main vine cluster. He swung his weapons violently, slashing away from the razor sharp edges of the Kagards that threw themselves at them, severing the head of one that all but bit his right forearm off. The red-black river covered their knees as a red downpour enveloped them.

“You never told me if you truly believed in the Great Care Taker prophecy, Jurgis?” Jaap said as he continued to swing his weapon connecting with Kagards on the left and right.

Jurgis was barely able to keep herself above the red river stream. “The only thing I ever believed in was us.”

Jaap turned to pull her from the stream as the white Kagard beasts swarmed over him.

With a firm thrust, Jurgis swung her sword and fell into the murky red-black stream. She faced Jaap’s body and reached out to touch his face. He smiled with her touch before they got drawn into the murky, red stream. The stream washed them away from the battle as they bobbed up and down to breathe. They tried to grab onto vines, but the red-black current pulled them away from the front line.

Kagards were not as fortunate. The stream forced them into vines which clung to them due to their jagged outer shells. Something in the flood current poisoned those Kagards that didn’t drown in the hedgerow.

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## **View From Above**

“We’re losing her, Doctor!” a nurse from Robinwood Medical Center proclaimed.

The elderly, Mrs. Johnson’s heart beat slowed as her blood pressure fell.

Dr. Spalding shook his head. He had slowed and removed the hemorrhaging, but the force of Mrs. Johnson’s head striking the car windshield had led to further complications. The hospital’s top quality surgeon had trouble keeping up with the cascading procession of artery failures, too many arteries needed to be mended. The damage from her hitting the windshield and lacerations into her head was becoming difficult to mend. Infections rapidly spread across her open forehead wounds.

Spalding worked medical miracles just to keep Mrs. Johnson alive. With time, he managed to slow the bleeding and repaired enough of the arteries that he risked giving her some medication to slow the progression of the infection. A shot of adrenaline had its intended effects as the patient responded with increased heart beats and stronger breathing.

Six years ago Spalding had removed a deep seeded tumor in Mrs. Johnson’s brain. He used a new polio derivative cancer treatment which enabled the body to see the cancer and fight the infection through the body’s normal defense mechanisms. A tear flowed out of his right eye when he realized that despite all of his efforts, Mrs. Johnson would never fully recover. The remainder of her life would be limited due to the stroke and trauma she had endured. It would be lucky if she would ever leave the medical facility.

Dr. Spalding disparagingly sighed. “That’s all I dare to do. The rest is up to Mrs. Johnson. I’ll talk to her husband after I wash up.”

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## **Epilogue**

Sometime later, Jaap and Jurgis swam free of the stream and rested below some vines in a sector of their universe far from their previous home. None of the network looked familiar to them; they needed time for their bodies to rejuvenate. The luminosity of the local vines had increased, so there was plenty to eat in this sector. They were fathoms away from the battle site, and there would be no way to retrace their way back with the retraction and vanishing of the red-black stream. No Kagards were in site.

“What happened, Jaap?”

Jaap sighed. “The Great Care Taker has washed us away from the battlefield and destroyed the Kagards.” Jaap snuggled next to Jurgis and then asked her, “Do you believe in the Care Taker now?”

As much as she hated to admit it, Jurgis’ logic could not account for a temporary red-black stream that occurred exactly at the right moment to save them. “I can’t come up with a better explanation, Jaap. You may have been right all along.”

Jaap smiled before he wrapped his arms around her.

They kissed and hugged each other; for in their hearts, they knew that they were the chosen ones who would defend the Vinelands from all intruders.

THE END