

# REPTILIA DROC

Hide'N'Seek

by

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That evening, Katherine was sprawled out on the sofa after a late dinner, still recuperating from a grueling day serving mediocre food to ornery customers, for an overbearing boss. She was thankful that her energetic, six-year old son had eventually settled down and was playing with his toys nearby on the living room floor. Now, finally Katherine was free to watch some dramas she had recorded on the holoprojector.

The only problem was, she got less than halfway through the first show, and Katherine could already feel her eyes getting heavy. The last thing she remembered was thinking, *I need to get up and make some coffee before I pass out.*

Good intentions aside, Katherine never made it to the kitchen before succumbing to drowsiness. The next thing Katherine knew, she was violently awoken by a sound so thunderous, it caused the walls of her tiny apartment to shake. Katherine let out a yelp of surprise, her sudden start causing her to roll off the sofa, and knock her head against the coffee table on the way down.

"Ow, crite!" she cursed, resting one hand on the coffee table for support and rubbing her aching head with the other. "What was that? Sam, are you alright?" she asked. However, the only reply came from the holoprojector, mixed with the blare of sirens somewhere off in the distance.

Staggering to her feet, Katherine scanned the dimly lit living room, only to discover she was alone, except for Sam's abandoned toys. *OnBoard*, she thought

to her AI assistant. *Where's my son?*

*Sam is currently located in his bedroom,* a male voice responded from within her head.

Katherine hurried down the short hallway to the boy's room, and stopped in the darkened doorway. *Lights,* she commanded, her neural connection illuminating the room to reveal a child-sized bed, with colorful posters on the walls. Toys were scattered across the floor, but there was no sign of the boy.

*Tag his COMM,* Katherine ordered, beginning to panic. As directed, the program used augmented reality to place a blue arrow above a gleaming object lying on the night table next to the bed.

*Unfortunately, it appears Sam has removed his communicator,* the AI reported, stating the obvious.

Katherine swiftly crossed the room, and snatched a metallic bracelet off the nightstand. "Dammit!" She cursed, confirming it was her son's COMM, then stuffed the device into her pocket. How many times had she told him not to take off the traceable accessory?

"Gree Ra'desh!" Katherine uttered the saint's name, "Where is he!" The distraught mother rushed back and forth, checking the few remaining rooms of her cramped apartment, but without success. She was frustrated that it would be four more years before Sam was old enough to get an NC implant of his own, but mostly she was angry with herself for having dozed off before putting the boy to bed.

*OnBoard, send a message to all the neighbors--ask if any of them have seen Sam.*

*Yes, ma'am,* the program replied.

Katherine was heading for the front door, when she stepped on something soft and squishy, which growled back at her in response. Out of curiosity, she bent down to retrieve the object. It was one of Sam's toys, a plush doll made in the image of a Reptilia Droc. She recognized the creature instantly; it was the villain from the boy's favorite cartoon show.

The sight of the toy spurred Katherine's memory. She recalled that her son spent much of last week claiming to have seen the monstrous reptiles themselves, creeping around the old warehouse across the street.

Katherine assumed the boy simply had an overactive imagination, or perhaps mistook one of the more common reptilian denizens for the myth-shrouded creatures. After all, there was no way a Reptilia Droc could be here--on this world--she had assured her son. They were supposed to haunt backwater worlds in the deepest parts of the Outer Territories, well over a hundred light years away, with half of Tydorren controlled space separating them. From the way the barbaric reptiles were portrayed in the show, she doubted they even had ships capable of making the journey, let alone the ability to get past the Corporation's powerful space fleet.

The youngster seemed less than convinced by his mother's reasoning though.



Now, Katherine had a troubled feeling that Sam may have gone looking for these Reptilia Droc. Imaginary monsters aside, it was still a rough neighborhood they lived in. If the small boy really had entered the condemned warehouse, there were still plenty of real world dangers he could encounter.

Opening the living room window, Katherine leaned her head out to survey the dilapidated warehouse below. While the facility was fenced in, she noted a discernible gap in the enclosure, and, with Sam's talent for being able to squeeze through just about any opening, she realized, with a sigh, that it was the most likely place to start her search.

Katherine was still leaning out the window, when a sudden rush of air blew her short, black hair into her face. Brushing the strands back, she looked up to see a trio of patrol shuttles rocketing overhead. Her eyes followed their course, to the site of the disturbance. On the horizon, the night sky was illuminated by a raging column of flame, rising up from the skyline and spreading into a thick, black plume of smoke.

"In the name of Yah'Wei!" Katherine invoked the deity's name in shock, "What the hell is going on out there?"

Katherine was backing away from the open window, her mouth agape, when the holoprojector caught her attention.

"What!? Ah, we cut now from our current program for some breaking news," The recorded netcast had automatically switched to a Zurpoath, with pinkish skin and a tentacle-covered mouth. He was dressed in a slick, iridescent suit and seated behind a glass newsdesk; the Tydorren company logo filled the background. Appearing in mid-air next to the Zurpoath, was the same scene of destruction Katherine had spied out in the distance.

The news anchor continued, "This just in, the Vornis Research building in downtown Yuhanas Leh has just exploded, completely leveling the highrise! The police are now cordoning off the area, while firefighters move in to try and contain the blaze. No word yet on the cause, but our sources say that nothing explosive was being kept at the facility, so the authorities are not ruling out the possibility of terrorism. Citizens are advised to remain indoors, until police can do a security sweep of the city. Stay tuned for more details, and, now, a word from our sponsor..."

With a thought to her NC chip, Katherine shut off the distracting projection. Terrorist attack or not, the only thing that mattered to Katherine now was finding her son. With her course of action decided, Katherine grabbed a small Firefly bot from a kitchen drawer and dashed out of the apartment. *OnBoard, contact the police, give them the address of the warehouse, and ask them to send someone over to help me search for Sam.*

*Yes, ma'am, but given the current emergency, they may not be able to respond for some time.* The AI had a point, but Katherine couldn't afford to wait any longer; she'd have to go alone.



After riding the elevator down to the ground floor, Katherine emerged from the dirty, rundown lobby, and out onto the street. The pavement was still damp from an earlier rainstorm, and the puddles now reflected the lights of the apartment buildings.

The street itself was mostly abandoned; it seemed people were complying with the terrorist warning. Katherine could only spot one person from the next building down; he rushed up the steps to the front door and quickly disappeared inside.

Then, from a window above, Katherine heard someone shout, "Hey beautiful, where do ya think yer off to? Haven't ya heard, sweetheart? It's dangerous out there. Com'on up here, and I'll keep ya safe."

Ignoring the catcall, Katherine made her way across the street to the rusted fence surrounding the warehouse. A loose chain barred the gate, but Katherine was able to duck under the obstruction and squeeze in between the gap. She then traversed the shallow parking lot which spanned the gate to the front of the warehouse. A cool autumn wind blew, causing Katherine to reflexively hunch her shoulders and rub her arms, now wishing she had grabbed a jacket on the way out.

Shouts and sirens continued to sound off in the distance, as Katherine approached the dual loading doors of the facility. She used her Neural Connection to ping the door controls, but the main power seemed to be off. In desperation, she tried tugging on the large, sliding panels, but they refused to budge.

Next, Katherine headed down the left side of the building, a dark, oppressive alley, littered with trash. A short distance into the alley, Katherine lost any light from the moon or streetlamps and could only make out the patter of rain water still dripping from the building's gutter. Katherine reached into her pocket and pulled out the small, golfball-sized Firefly bot she had grabbed earlier. The device rose up from the palm of her hand and cast a faint illumination over the dank alley. It wasn't much, Katherine thought, but any light was a relief at this point.

Wading reluctantly deeper into the alley, Katherine soon came to a second, smaller entrance, but was again discouraged to find the door locked and unresponsive to her ping. She took a step backwards, only to realize she had bumped into someone or something.

With a gasp, Katherine whirled around, to find herself face to face with a tall, insectoid being, whose species she didn't recognize. It had a dark carapace instead of skin, with thick, coarse hairs protruding from its face, along with a cluster of four mandibles, all twitching furiously. The being was hidden under a heavy brown overcoat, covered in filth, and the smell was unbearable. The vagrant didn't utter a word, but simply stared out at Katherine, from beneath its drawn hood, with large, expressionless eyes, divided into a honeycomb pattern.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't see you there," Katherine said as casually as she could, fighting the urge to run for it. "Have you by any chance seen my son? A six-year old Human boy, with brown hair. I think he may have snuck over here."

The Insectoid began to grunt and mumble unintelligibly, then it reached out to her with a crab-like pincher claw, bristling with large, black hairs. Katherine lost no

time backing away. "Ah, no, that's... That's alright. Thanks anyway, I'm just going to keep looking over here."

"I'm going to ground that boy until he's thirty for pulling this stunt," Katherine vowed to herself, as she walked briskly towards the other end of the alley.

Katherine traveled back behind the depot and up along the reverse side with still no luck. Close to giving up, Katherine was considering searching elsewhere, when she stumbled upon a hole in the decaying foundation. It would be a tight fit for her, Katherine thought, appraising the cavity, but a small boy could slip through easily.

Katherine sent the hovering orb through first to light the way, then got down onto her hands and knees to peer through. Unable to make out much from the outside, Katherine sighed, and began to crawl through the breach.



Katherine got about half way across the threshold, when she felt her hips get wedged in the narrow entryway. With a groan, Katherine backed up, and twisted onto her side. She was then able to drag herself the remaining distance, across the cold, damp ground.

Once inside, Katherine rose to her feet and tried to survey her surroundings under the faint glow of the Firefly and what little moonlight shone through broken windows. The warehouse was a huge, open space, about thirty feet high, and going back at least two hundred feet, before ending in total darkness.

The vacated depot was an even bigger mess than she expected. Trash littered the floor, as well as droppings from various animals, while mold grew on the wall. The smell of the place was horrendous.

"Sam, honey?" she called out into the darkness. "It's Mom. Are you in here?" But the only reply was the echo of her own voice, the ongoing drip of water, and the squeak of vanta rats as they scurried away.

As Katherine explored the facility, she spotted blankets and empty cans of food, suggesting that squatters had made a home here at some point--Or perhaps junkies, given the used hyper syringe she saw mixed in with trash.

Of the depot's original contents, there were rusted-out machinery lining the walls and dozens of metal crates scattered about, all of which had been opened and rifled through. Parked further back was an ancient looking freight shuttle, with an open flatbed back. Next to it was a cobweb-strewn loading robot, its once bright yellow paint, faded and peeling. Both looked to have been stripped for parts some time ago.

Katherine was navigating the clutter of crates when a sudden clang from above caused her to jump. Gazing up, she saw a second floor of offices overlooking the warehouse and what looked like a faint glow coming from one of the dirty windows.

"Sam?" she called once more. Scanning the ground floor again, Katherine spotted a rickety, open staircase, lining the far wall. Hopping over an upturned work table, Katherine reached the foot of the rusted stairs.

Katherine was not a fan of heights, and, as she got about fifteen feet off the ground, was wishing the staircase had more enclosing it than a mere railing. However, the sound from upstairs was the only indication Katherine had had so far that she might be on the right track. So, burying her reservations, Katherine trod up the remaining distance to the offices.



Once inside, Katherine found the offices to be in a similar state of decay. Up here, the water damage was even worse and had wreaked havoc with computers and other office equipment.

"Sam!" Katherine tried again, then began searching each room. She soon found a portable glowtube, lying on the floor, which must have been the light she saw from downstairs. Katherine bent down to retrieve the illuminant, eager to have more light, but was dissuaded when she noticed a bright red smear across the tube's surface.

Was that...blood? She wasn't sure, but Katherine left the glowtube behind and decided she better finish her search as quickly as possible.

The next two rooms yielded nothing of interest, but, as she approached the next open doorway, her foot bumped something. Looking down, she saw it was the legs of someone lying face down and protruding from the entrance. Katherine guessed it was one of the squatters who had passed out from too much to drink. Not wanting to rouse the being, she kept her firefly back and remained out in the corridor, and, instead, settled for calling her son's name in a low whisper.

From Katherine's perspective, she was not able to see the blood pooling around the squatter's chest, just beyond the door frame. Nor could she see the other three bodies slumped against the darkened corners of the room. After getting no response, the nervous mother continued on.

Katherine was running out of rooms to search, when she noticed a strong light coming from a door down the hall. As she entered, Katherine found herself in a large, open room that differed from the others. The walls were decaying, and litter blanketed the floor like the rest, but this was contrasted by four, large glowtubes on tripods and a whole stockpile of new and expensive-looking equipment.

Katherine took a closer look at one of the metal cases and was surprised to see the logo of Tydorren's main rival, the Destonnie Corporation. *What was this doing here?* she wondered. *Could Destonnie agents have been responsible for destroying the research building. Maybe this was more about industrial sabotage than terrorism? After all, the blast would have killed far more people had it been during the day.*

A quiet shuffling sound came from somewhere behind her, and Katherine spun around in search of the source. Her first thought was that the squatter from earlier might have awoken, but, as Katherine lowered her gaze, she was relieved to find Sam peeking out from a supply closet, carrying another Reptilia Droc plushie.

Katherine rushed over, dropped to one knee, and hugged the boy tightly,

tears welling in her eyes. "Sam, thank Yah'Wei, I was so worried. What were you thinking? Sneaking over here by yourself? This place is dangerous!"

"I saw them again, Mom, the Reptilia Droc. I saw them from the window, and I wanted to come say hi. Then I heard a big boom, and I got scared, so I hid."

"Sam, we've talked about this; there are no Reptilia Droc in Yuhanas Leh. Now come on. We're going home."

"But, Mom, they ARE here. There's one right now," He pointed over his mother's shoulder.

Katherine rose to her feet and replied in a sterner tone, "That's not funny, Sam. Don't make things worse; you're already in a lot of trouble."

"But Mooommm..."

"That's enough! OK?" Katherine was losing patience. "I don't want to hear another word about those disgusting reptiles."

Just then, Katherine heard a low growl, coming from directly behind her. Katherine's eyes bulged, and her spine stiffened. Turning slowly, she peered hesitantly over her shoulder, only to find a wall of chrome and scaly flesh filling her vision.

Katherine let out a shriek, as she leapt forward, taking hold of Sam's arm as she did so. She spun around to face whatever had snuck up from behind, while simultaneously pulling her son behind her. Tilting her head back, Katherine then looked into the eyes of the nightmare now looming over them.

As far as she could tell, Sam was right. The creature was an actual Reptilia Droc. It matched his toys in the general outline, but the toys were clearly stylized and played down to be friendly. The genuine article was a frightening mound of muscle, over seven feet tall, and maybe sixteen feet long from snout to tail. A bipedal monster from a bygone age, with sharpened claws and a massive crocodilian jaw, filled with thick, yellowed teeth, its scaly bulk was clad in polished chrome armor, accented in bronze, and etched with ornate details.

As the predator glared down at them menacingly, Sam peeked out from behind Katherine's trembling body, and waved, innocently. "Wow, a Chameleon! Hi, I'm Sam! What's your name?"

The creature glanced down at him and only snorted in response. It then reached back and gripped a ring-shaped object clamped to its thigh armor. Upon gripping the device, it disconnected from the reptile's armor, and a blue line ignited along the center of the ring, as it hummed to life. At first Katherine couldn't guess what the ring was or its purpose, but, as the Droc raised its arm to strike, she spotted the sharpened edge, and understood the Droc's intent.

Katherine tried to pick Sam up and make a run for it, but the Chameleon responded by lurching forward to snap with its massive jaws. The strike was mostly for show, but served its purpose, causing Katherine to panic and lose her footing. Toppling to the floor, her son landing on top of her, Katherine was at the Droc's mercy as it closed in. The Reptilia paused to peel back its lips and tilted its head to the side, causing its rigid snout to resemble a sinister grin. The creature proceeded



to lean in with the weapon.

Katherine gripped Sam tightly and squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the end to come, when a thunderous, impossibly deep voice interrupted. It spoke in a harsh, guttural language which Katherine couldn't begin to place.

"Look Mom, here comes another one! This one's a Sprinter." Sam said excitedly, still not grasping the gravity of their situation.

Reluctantly, Katherine opened her eyes to find that the Droc had lowered its weapon and was turning to address the source of the voice. Lifting herself to a seated position, Katherine spotted a second, four-legged reptile, lumbering into the room through a side door. To the left of the entrance was a dirty and partly-shattered picture window, through which Katherine thought she saw another two Reptilia Droc out in the hall, pausing to watch the exchange.

*Gree Ra'desh, this can't be happening!* ran through Katherine's head as she looked on with horror.

The Sprinter, whose black scales were accented with bright yellow splotches, was now within a few feet of its bipedal counterpart. When the former didn't respond, the quadruped Droc rose up onto its hind legs and barked the phrase again, but in a harsher tone. The Chameleon bobbed its head and croaked something back, its inflection suggesting confusion.

The four-legged Droc hissed something back with an authoritarian tone, which agitated the Chameleon. Its green skin darkened, and its tone became even harsher as it gestured first to the Destonnie equipment, then to the boy and his mother.

"What are they saying, Mom?" Sam whispered. Katherine didn't reply, instead she clamped her hand over Sam's mouth, not wishing to draw the attention of the two behemoths. She had to admit, though, that she was curious herself. After all, the outcome of the conversation could very well determine their fate.

The way the two creatures kept looking at the Destonnie gear, it struck Katherine that perhaps she and Sam had seen something they were not supposed to. Had these Reptilia Droc been the ones who set up the equipment? Katherine considered. But what in the world for? Could they have been responsible for the bombing?

Katherine's attention snapped back to the pair of reptiles. The black and yellow Droc snarled viciously at its partner, which seemed to end the discussion. As the black faded out of the Chameleon's green skin pigment, it then proceeded to lower its head and back away from Sam and his mother.

Before Katherine could feel any hint of relief, however, the Sprinter dropped to all fours and trotted methodically closer. It circled them, slowly, looking the boy and his mother up and down, while repeatedly flicking out its long, forked tongue.

After what felt like an eternity, the creature stopped off to Katherine's side and leaned in, its jaws dangerously close to her face. Then, to Katherine's astonishment, the Droc spoke directly to her-- and in nearly flawless Corr'Quin-- but with the same unnervingly deep voice. It said, "If you and your offspring wish to leave this room alive, then listen closely--The only thing you witnessed here tonight was your



rival's equipment." It pointed with a clawed hand. "Do I make myself... clear?" it asked, close enough that Katherine could feel the reptile's breath on her cheek. Katherine was too frightened to utter a word, but she managed to nod her head vigorously.

The Droc backed up. "Then go, while you still can."

Katherine didn't waste a second before she was back on her feet, with Sam in her arms, running full pelt for the doorway. Since she had taken her hand off Sam's mouth, the boy had spent the rest of the escape whining, "But, Mom, I didn't get to talk to'em..."



In record time, Katherine made it outside, through the gate, and on to the street, all while carrying Sam in her arms. Her only thought was to get back inside, lock the door, and barricade it with all the furniture she could move, before calling the police, or, better yet, the military.

"Mom, look!" Sam shouted, pointing back the way they came.

As much as Katherine wanted to keep running and never look back, she decided that it was best not to ignore Sam's warning, considering that the last time there really was a monster standing behind her!

Slowing to stop once she reached the sidewalk, Katherine turned back towards the warehouse. At first she didn't see anything out of the ordinary, until Sam twisted around in her arms and said, "Up there, Mom!"

It was then that she realized he meant the roof-top. Katherine tilted her head back and saw, to her horror, multiple reptilian silhouettes darting across the sloping surface. There were nine in total, and Katherine shuddered to think that so many of the creatures had set up camp directly across the street from her home.

Katherine was pondering why the Droc had all gathered up there, when she was hit with a sudden rush of air. Craning her neck back further, she expected to find a shuttle passing overhead, but was surprised to discover that the night sky was empty.

Then, a slight shimmer caught her notice, and Katherine's jaw dropped open with surprise as a shuttle of alien design appeared over the warehouse, seemingly out of nowhere.

The unusual looking craft came to a stop, hovering about twenty feet above the cluster of Reptilia Droc. Katherine's eyes were drawn to a set of octagonal panels lining the bottom of the shuttle, which began to cast a faint blue glow, rising in intensity. It was followed by a sudden flash, which caused her to reflexively look away. When Katherine turned back to the rooftop, she realized that all of the creatures had vanished, transported up into the shuttle, she presumed.

Its passengers collected, the alien craft pulled away from the warehouse, rising higher into the night air. A short distance later, the shuttle's outline began to shimmer, its frame becoming translucent, before disappearing completely.



The next day, Katherine called out sick from work, needing time to recover and to try and make sense of the previous night's ordeal. She was just beginning to feel an ounce of normalcy when, that evening, a pair of police officers stopped by the apartment.

A simian-descended Wasi, and his partner, a beak-mouthed Bulus, both dressed in dark gray uniforms, proceeded to file into Katherine's tiny living room. They explained that the city-wide security sweep had revealed the Destonnie equipment in the nearby warehouse, raising suspicion of the rival corporation's involvement in the bombing. Once the discovery was reported, and the old depot was entered in the system, it wasn't long before OnBoard's call for assistance was cross referenced, leading the officers to her door.

*Great, NOW the police show up*, Katherine thought to herself. After witnessing the Reptilia Droc's ability to slip on and off-world undetected, she had no intention of disobeying the warning she had received. So, Katherine did her best to mask her unease, while answering the officer's questions. "Yes, after the explosion, my son had decided to sneak off in the chaos. He was always fascinated by that creepy old warehouse, and, of course, I would never let him near it. So, he took the opportunity to do some exploring, the little rascal," she laughed nervously. "Once I realized he was missing, I went chasing after him, and thank Yah'Wei, I found him before anything happened. Oh... Well, yes, I did see the new looking equipment. No, I'm sorry I didn't report it. I didn't realize it was important. I was so worried about finding my son that I wasn't really thinking. No, I didn't see anyone else, officer. Well... except for a homeless being, but he was outside...in the alley."

"I saw a Reptilia Droc!" Sam said excitedly, when the officers questioned him. "There were a bunch of them, and they had swords and armor. And they talked to us! Then they flew off in an invisible spaceship."

Katherine fought hard to stifle a groan. She had told Sam a dozen times since their terrifying encounter to never breathe so much as a word about seeing the Droc. Now, here he was spouting the entire story on the slightest provocation.

One of the officers, the Wasi, turned to Katherine and gave her a questioning look.

"It's his favorite show. He sees Droc hiding behind every parked hoverpod" Katherine shrugged, forcing a grin.

"Of course you did, kid" the Bulus said, patting Sam on the head. Then, nudging his partner, he muttered, "Come on, this is a dead end. Let's finish checking with the other neighbors so we can get out of here and get some dinner; we already skipped lunch, and my feet are killing me."

"Alright, alright. Thank you for your time, ma'am." The Wasi said reluctantly. "However, we may be back with more questions later. And, in the future, if you see anything strange, you should always report it, regardless."

"Absolutely, sir, I will." Katherine said, seeing the officers out. Once the door slid shut behind them, Katherine let out a sigh of relief. Leaning her back against

the door, she looked over at Sam and was about to scold him for bringing up the terrible reptiles, when a disturbingly familiar sound made her pause. As Katherine watched her son playing with his Reptilia Droc action figures, she realized he was doing a near perfect imitation of the cold, guttural language spoken by the creatures last night. The sound sent a chill down her spine.



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