

REPTILIA DROC

Survivor

by

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With a groan, I slowly came around to a pounding headache and a searing pain in my leg. The sensation was compounded by the chill of cold metal against my cheek, and a tremendous pressure on my back.

"Jake, thank goodness!" I heard a familiar female voice within my head. "I am relieved to find that you have regained consciousness."

My eyes were still closed, but, regardless, I could now see the image of a transparent, green sphere beginning to take shape in the blackness. My neural connection chip then continued to fill my vision with stat panels, as it loaded my heads-up display.

"OnBoard? What the hell happened to me?" I thought back in reply. I slowly opened my eyes, only to find I was lying face down on a floor littered with dirt, spilled equipment, and chunks of debris. The room was dark except for a few beams of sunlight, clueing me in that there was now a hole in the ceiling.

The green sphere in my vision pulsed as it replied. "There was an explosion on the east-side of the building. I'm afraid the resulting concussion caused a supply shelf to collapse on top of you. I sent a distress alert to Operations. However, no one has responded, as of yet."

With a grunt, I tried to lift myself off the floor, but the effort sent a sharp jolt of pain through my leg, while the pressure on my back refused to yield. "V'lek," I cursed and slumped to the ground in defeat.

"Now, that's more like it," I grinned as the nano-bandage went to work injecting pain killers and stopping the bleeding. I was now fit to do some exploring, although, I was still stuck with a limp for the next few hours. Hopefully, the attackers had left, 'cause I don't imagine I'd fare too well in a foot chase right about now!



I poked my head out the building's entrance, quickly scanning the surrounding dirt street. Once I felt confident that the area was deserted, I cautiously stepped outside. The planet's air was humid, as usual, mixed with the overwhelming smell of moss and decaying vegetation. It was an atmosphere to which I had gradually become accustomed over the past month, only now it was laced with the stench of smoke and ozone.

Taking a few steps forward, I turned to face Building C where I had been working. It was now half destroyed, collapsed into a smoldering rubble, with wisps of smoke from a fire since burnt out. The pirates must have strafed the compound from the air first. These quick-fab buildings were so crappy; I'm lucky the whole damn thing didn't collapse on me.

"Procedure in the event of an emergency dictates you should report to the Operations center and confirm that a distress signal has been sent," the AI assistant reminded me.

I looked down the lonely road to Ops, lined with more single-story, cookie-cutter buildings. The path was hazy with smoke and littered with trash, knocked-over containers, and spilled personal items. I wasn't looking forward to the walk, but the planet's sun was already low in the sky, giving it a reddish-orange tint, and I didn't want to be out here alone, at night. At least in Ops, I oughta' be able to find a gun and access the compound's security sensors to figure out if anyone else was here.

I began to hobble towards the center of the compound, but stuck to the alleys between buildings, to avoid exposure. Along the way, I found more signs of the battle that must have raged through out the compound. Plasma burns adorned the walls, indicating small arms fire. As well as mysterious lacerations in the metal, that I couldn't account for. But neither of those indicators were as bad as the ominous patch of red-stained earth I had passed along the way. Adding to the tension of the slow march was how dead-silent the whole compound was. The only sound was the incessant chirp of insects from the surrounding marsh land.

As I came to the intersection with the next block of quick-fab buildings, I crouched behind a land skimmer for cover as I looked for signs of life. Laying my hand on the hood, I noticed that the front of vehicle had been smashed in, destroying the engine. At first, I thought the skimmer had crashed into something, but realized, with confusion, that the crushing blow had come from above.

Passing behind another row of four small buildings put Ops within sight across a small, open courtyard. Peering left from the mouth of the alley, I saw the landing

pad which made up a third of the compound. There had originally been three vehicles parked there-- the medium transport we arrived in and two low-altitude shuttles for surveying. Judging from the three distinct, charred heaps of debris, none of the ships managed to escape the attack.

Over to the right was the personnel housing, which looked silent enough. Beyond that was the perimeter fence which encircled the camp to keep out the local wildlife. I paused when I noticed a large hole had been cut out of the wire mesh.

Anxiously, I then limped around to the front entrance of the Ops and discovered yet another disconcerting sight. The metal door to the complex had been somehow wrenched off its frame and now lay on the ground, several yards away. For a moment, I just stood there, looking perplexed from the jagged hole in the building to the warped and battered hatch. If the pirates had used breach charges to force their way into Ops, the door should have been blown inwards. After dismissing this odd detail, I took one more sweep of my surroundings to confirm I wasn't being watched or followed. Then, clutching the handle of my plasma cutter a little more tightly, I stepped inside the darkened building.



The interior of Ops was much like the rest of the compound-- abandoned, underlit, and battle-scarred. The main hallway led past a number of cramped offices before turning left into the main control room. I poked my head in a few of the rooms as I limped by, but found them to be empty as well. One office had a large blood stain seeping out from behind the desk, but I opted not to investigate that any further.

Turning at the end of the corridor, I reached the open doorway to the control area. I stood there in the opening, mouth ajar at what I saw; I nearly dropped the plasma cutter in my hand. The large room had a ring of computer consoles facing inward, surrounding a broad table at the center. What was normally used for projecting holographic maps of the region was now being used to display a grisly pile of corpses. Personnel of different species and rank, people who I knew and had worked with on daily basis, had been butchered and were arranged in some horrible exhibition.

I had to fight back the urge to vomit. It's not that I hadn't seen a dead body before; accidents happened all too often on these big OT harvesting operations. In a way, that's what made it worse, the familiarity of it. The bodies didn't show signs of plasma burns like what you'd expect from a pirate raid. They were lacerated and dismembered, like that worker who got his arm caught in the blades of an excavator last year.

I knew the pirates were supposed to do awful crime to their victims--sentient rights violations, that the home office made sure to leave out of the safety briefings-- but this was different. As I circled the ghastly edifice, something caught my eye, stamped into the blood that was pooling at the table's base--a large,

three-toed foot print. Maybe this wasn't a pirate attack at all.

The strange track reminded of a very different tale I had heard back at the border station--not from the regular guys at the bar, but from a strung-out Zorneth who'd quit and was on his way back to the Conglomerate States. He was really shook up about something, so I bought him an ale and humored him as he went on about savage tribes of alphas that would devour their victims. I was pretty quick to dismiss his yarn at the time, but, after seeing this, one had to wonder...

"OnBoard, take an eye grab of that footprint and run it through the local database."

The AI replied almost instantly, "Match found; the footprint belongs to that of a Reptilia Droc. The file has an attached memo, double-flagged; it reads as follows: 'This species is regarded as extremely dangerous. Any sighting, or evidence, of the Reptilia Droc should be reported to your supervisor immediately.'"

"Gree Ra'desh, this just keeps getting better by the minute."

Suddenly, feeling not so confident in the plasma cutter for defense, I frantically began searching the room for an upgrade. Jackpot! I spotted a plasma assault rifle on the floor next to the body of one of the security officers who was slumped behind the projector table. Putting the less intimidating tool aside, I bent down next to the deceased officer. I hesitated a moment, not thrilled at the prospect of taking a dead being's weapon. However, my desire to stay alive soon conquered my unease, and I seized the weapon.

Turning away from the pile of death, I examined the rifle, noting the location of the safety and the power level. I had fired smaller weapons at the range back home, but had never handled anything fully automatic before. I'd learn quick enough, though.

Now that I was better armed, I had to fight a strong urge to flee the gruesome scene. However, there was more that had to be done before I could split, I told myself.

Limping over to a control console, I leaned my new rifle against the side and plopped down in the seat, relieved to take the weight off my leg. Accessing the computer system, I brought up the log to see whether a distress signal had been sent. It seemed the Ops personnel had tried, but the Droc had employed a jamming field, corrupting the transmission. I thought they weren't supposed to be clever enough for something like that.

The sensors showed the interference had since cleared, so I proceeded to open up the COMM for a new message. "This is Jacob Salnen, worker code: 03925-A67, part of the Destonnie surveying team deployed to the Arris system. The operation has come under attack by the Reptilia Droc and suffered severe casualties. Requesting immediate rescue and evac."

As I transmitted the message into deep space, I lamented the irony of asking for anything "immediate". Outer Territory worlds, still in the surveying process, didn't get a hypernet satellite, so it would be days before the message was picked up by the nearest way station.

With the distress call sent, I was once again tempted to make a quick exit, as I glanced over my shoulder at the mound of death. But if I was going to be stuck here until a rescue team arrived, I needed to be sure there were no more intruders still roaming the camp. Or maybe I'd get lucky, and there would be other survivors who were still in hiding and afraid of being detected if they went online.

I accessed the camp's security cameras, and, with the aid of augmented reality, a dozen transparent windows appeared in mid-air, stacked together. Each window displayed a different view from around camp; With a swipe of my hand, I cycled through the footage. There was a view at each corner of the perimeter fence, showing the tree-lined marsh which surrounded it.

The next set showed each of the four main streets branching off from Ops. They appeared to be completely abandoned, with a repetition of plasma burns and blood stains. Just to be certain, I spent some time panning and zooming on the visible doorways and alleys, but could find no movement.

The scene, after that, showed the airfield. This time, among the destroyed craft, I noticed some undamaged crates in the bottom of the frame. Most likely, it was a variety of sample-extracting equipment, judging from the marking on the cases.

The last two cameras showed the entrances to Ops. I swiped past the front door where I had entered, but paused at the rearview.

There was an odd bit of metal tubing in the frame, long and segmented. I could only make out part of it, with one end going through the doorway, while the rest wrapped along the wall and extended out of view.

The metal was polished chrome with patches of bronze, etched with an intricate pattern of symbols. It just seemed so out of place, compared to the mass-produced equipment normally used in the camp. Then, to my shock, it began to move, slithering like a snake through the open doorway. The tubing got slimmer as it passed by, eventually tapering down to a double pronged blade at the tip.

"What the hell was that?" I asked OnBoard.

"Unknown. Does not match any machinery on the compound's inventory. Could possibly be a probe left behind by the attackers."

"Yeah, well I'd prefer not to find out," I thought back and quickly sealed both doors to the control room.

Scrambling to my feet as quickly as I could, I grabbed the plasma rifle and aimed it towards the door closest to the rear entrance. A few moments passed, and everything remained quiet. Maybe the thing was searching the offices, or, better yet, had left the building all together.

The possibility began to look far less likely when I heard a sudden bumping noise come from above. I jumped and pointed the energy weapon towards the ceiling. Another clunk, and ceiling panels began to bulge outward, before collapsing altogether.

Raining down, along with debris, was the cylindrical object from the security cam, now revealed to be at least twenty feet in length. It landed with a heavy

thud and began to writhe on the ground in a serpentine motion. The machine then rose up on its coils, nearly seven feet in height. The front end of its body swelled, resembling a torso, then tapered down to a neck and, finally, a rectangular head. The drone turned in an S-like motion, locking onto me with a single, blue, glowing optical sensor.

The drone seemed more and more alive as it let out a threatening, synthesized hiss. Metal fins then sprang out from the sides of its body, giving it a cobra-like appearance, as it began to gently sway from side to side. I kept my weapon trained on the creature... machine... whatever... but I was too hypnotized to react.

As it began to slither forward, the drone slowly raised its tail with the same swaying motion, distracting from the menace of the dual-pronged blade serving as the tip. The machine was so alien, I might have kept gawking until the thing was on top of me. Fortunately, OnBoard broke in with, "Jake, based on the machine's aggressive posture and armaments, I highly recommend taking defensive measures immediately!"

The urgency in the AI's feminine voice was enough to snap me out of my daze, and I proceeded to open fire with the rifle. The control room was lit with a violet strobe of light, as searing, hot plasma erupted from the weapon. The drone, which had come within a few yards of me, took several bursts square in the chest. A shower of sparks exploded off its metal carapace, and I waited for the machine to collapse in a pile of molten scrap.

To my surprise, the machine let out a screech, like an animal in pain, and, with lightning speed, dropped back down to its belly and shot across the room. As it resumed its upright posture, I saw the plasma weapon had done little more than leave a spattering of burn marks on its otherwise pristine armor.

I was about to continue my barrage, when the drone decided to respond in kind. A large plasma weapon had popped out from its back, extending crossbow-like wings as it rose atop a mechanical arm. The drone then slumped forward, clearing its head from the line of fire and proceeded to counter attack.

"Oh v'lek!" I cursed and dove behind one of the many computer stations. The machine launched back blue plasma that immediately began to shred the barrier of consoles, causing sparks and melting debris to rain down around me. While the drone's weapon was not a rapid spray, it was clearly a higher yield burst than my own.

OnBoard once again chimed in with advice, "Jake, the enemy appears to have superior armaments, a retreat may be the best course of action."

"Yeah, no crite," I grumbled as I crawled across the floor towards the adjacent entrance.

"OnBoard, I'm gonna' make a run for the door. Open it up, but be ready to seal it again the second I'm through."

"Understood," the AI confirmed.

Abruptly, the hail of gunfire stopped, which made me more uneasy as I wondered what the monster was up to now. Rising to one knee, I peered overtop

the demolished ring of consoles, looking for my attacker. At first glimpse, there was no sign, but if the damn thing was slithering across the floor again, there was still plenty of junk obscuring my view.

Abruptly, a whoosh of air caught my attention, and I turned left in time to see the drone slide into view at lighting speed. The infernal machine was now on my side of the consoles, less than six feet away, with its weapon fixed directly on me.

I was expecting a faceful of plasma, when a powerful jet of white foam came erupting out of the ceiling. Positioned directly under the pressurized burst, the mechanical serpent was caught off guard and let out a high pitched screech as it thrashed spasmodically.

Seizing the opportunity, I rose to my feet and fired another short burst into the drone, one round catching it in the blue optical sensor. Not waiting to see if my attack did any serious damage, I turned and hobbled as quickly as I could towards the door, which was opened as promised.

The instant I was through, I felt a rush of air as it sealed behind me. No sooner was it closed then I heard a muffled explosion. Sparing a glance over my shoulder as I hurriedly limped away, I saw that the door was beginning to glow orange with heat--I wouldn't have long.

Tottering past the row of offices, I asked, "OnBoard, what triggered the fire system back there?"

"I did," the AI replied. "The situation seemed to require a distraction. I hope this unscheduled action was acceptable."

"Darl'n, if you had lips, I would kiss you," I said as I reached the front entrance to Ops. As I staggered out into the open courtyard, I could hear the molten remains of the control room hitting the floor with a plop and a hiss.

Fear then overtook the pain in my leg, and I managed to reach a jerky stride, clearing the twenty yards to the edge of the landing field. I then collapsed at the foot of the crates I had seen on the security cam. Crawling over to a long and narrow crate, I unlatched and threw open the lid of the container. Inside was the laser drill used for taking core samples.

Casting a glance towards Ops, I saw the drone appear in the jagged doorway, its optical sensor dimmed and blemished, but still glowing. The machine dropped onto its belly and started gliding down the path towards me.

I fumbled, trying to get the battery into the drill, while I had OnBoard disengage the safeties on the tool. Meanwhile, the drone moved more slowly and deliberately than back in the control room, but I had a feeling that was more for intimidation than from any kind of damage I had delivered. After all, there was nowhere left to run.

Another instant, and the serpent was upon me, rising up in its cobra-like fashion, complete with metal hood. Off to the side, it drew back the double-pronged blade, poised to strike like a scorpion.

The machine had postured just long enough. As it lashed out with its tail, I let myself fall backwards, yanking the drill out of its case with me. I pressed the

power button as I dropped, sending a beam of searing orange plasma erupting from the drill.

Taking the hit square in the chest, the drone was knocked back as sparks rained off its armor. It tried to swerve out of the way of the beam with a twist of its coils, but I rolled onto my side, keeping the beam locked on the drone's center mass.

The serpent shrieked, activating the large plasma weapon on its back. However, by the time it configured the gun and locked onto me, its torso was glowing bright orange, and its cerulean eye was beginning to flicker. A second later, and the orange beam penetrated the drone and continued to shoot out its back. The glow of the optical sensor extinguished, and my pursuer collapsed to the ground in smoking ruin.

Switching off the laser, I slumped the rest of the way to the ground, letting the drill roll out of my hands. For the next hour, the dead drone and I simply laid sprawled across the landing pad together. I was so exhausted, I would've gladly lain there until morning, but my stomach was quick to protest. I wondered what sort of shape the cafeteria was in?



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