

# REPTILIA DROC

Thrill of the Hunt

by

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Maso Dubar was lounging in the back seat of an open-air rover, with an expensive, custom-ordered hunting rifle propped up against the vehicle's door. As the gray-skinned Nazdole relaxed, a comfort bot hovered overhead, blasting him with cool air to provide some relief against the planet's twin suns.

Dubar wished he had thought to equip the machine with bug repellent as another three- inch long, winged insect buzzed past his face. "Damned bugs!" he cursed, swatting at the creature with his hat. "I can't stand the bloody things." Dubar noticed the other being, seated in the front of the rover, glance over at him. "Present company excluded, of course," he added with a smirk.

"As you say, Pon Dubar," replied the Amothie, a tall, thin insectoid being with a brown exoskeleton, yellow, bulging eyes, and large, serrated mandibles. Seyroon returned to his binoculars, peering through the curtain of tall reeds which hid their vehicle from sight. The pair had spent the last few hours watching the parade of animals quench their thirst at a watering hole some thirty yards away.

"Any sign of our critter?" Dubar inquired.

"Nothing yet, but this is a good spot to watch--lots of ba'tuu prey. Chances very good we find one today."

"You've been saying that for the last three days."

"Must be patient, Pon Dubar, not so many ba'tuu as used to be. Not since ba'tuu become big trophy for off-worlders."

“Well, on the plus side,” Dubar smiled, “scarcity will increase the value once I bag it, that’s the basic rule of supply and demand.”

“My life mate say you can’t put value on ba’tuu. It very important in Amothie religion.”

“Uh-huh,” Dubar mumbled, pulling his hat down over his eyes, losing interest.

“She give me much grief, that I track Ba’tuu for off-worlders. She think it very bad maak’wa, or you say, luck.”

“Don’t worry, everyone has a price. She’ll forget old superstitions once she sees the paycheck you bring home. Presuming you deliver a ba’tuu, of course.”

As Seyroon continued to make small talk, Dubar used his neural connection to check on the probes he sent toremotely scout the area from above. The machines were intended for surveillance, but he had their sensors customized for Ba’tuu bio-algorithms. So far, the probes came up negative, but with some refinement, he hoped to eventually do away with native guides like Seyroon.



A few hours later, Amothwa’s second sun began to set over the horizon, casting a warm, orange glow over the grassy plains. As the ba’tuu was less active at night, the pair called it a day, and Seyroon took the rover back to camp. Not long after, the other Amothie bearers who worked with Seyroon began to ride in on hover bikes. Their leader had tasked them with patrolling the nearby game trails, but they reported no sign of the elusive predator.

After unloading their gear, the bearers set to work cooking a small mammal they captured during their scouting. Once it was ready, they offered it to their employer, but Dubar was quick to wave it away. He had heard too many stories about exotic diseases on backwater planets like Amothwa, and, even though he was fully immunized ahead of time, he preferred to stick with his prepackaged food.

Dubar washed down his meal with whiskey, which he had needed the last few nights to get any rest over the constant chirps and howls. He found the grassy plains were home to a rather vocal population of nocturnal animals, although Dubar was relieved to find they were surprisingly absent tonight.

After dinner, Seyroon and his crew gathered around the campfire to relax and sing in their native language. Dubar, however, found their chorus to be rather obnoxious and retired to his tent for some peace and quiet. Using his neural connection, he attempted to connect to the hypernet to check his messages. The last update he got from his subordinates made Dubar uneasy about being absent from the home office for this long. *I wouldn’t be surprised if the whole Torus system has ground to halt before I get back.*

“Crite,” Dubar cursed, as he discovered there were no satellites within range at the moment. That was most shocking part of coming to a third class planet--not having round-the-clock hypernet access. He didn’t know how the natives managed

to live like that.

Giving up on the satellites, Dubar watched as the first of the disk-shaped probes sailed into camp for recharging. About ten minutes later, Dubar received a notice on neural connection that one of the probes had failed to return to camp. It had gone offline a short distance outside of camp, lost in the surrounding reeds.

"Piece of junk," the Nazdole grumbled. Dubar complained to Seyroon, who, in turn, sent his lead bearer, Garang, to retrieve the device.

A short time later, the Amothie returned with the probe in hand, although Dubar and Seyroon were both surprised by its condition. Somehow, the device had received a large gash, which cut straight through the casing on both sides.

"What the hell did that?" Dubar asked, fuming at the lose of his expensive machine.

"Not sure, but no animal did this," Seyroon observed, "Looks like some kind of weapon."

"Maybe bandits?" Garang suggested.

"Could be," Seyroon agreed. "Show me where you found."

Garang nodded, and Seyroon followed him into the shoulder-high grass. Dubar crossed his plump arms and watched the pair disappear out of view, before returning to his tent.



Garang proceeded to lead Seyroon on a zigzagging course through the reeds. Seyroon was beginning to wonder if his second in command could find the spot again in the dark, when finally Garang stopped and pointed with his flashlight.

Seyroon looked down to find a few shards of metal glinting in the lights. From there, the experienced tracker went on to examine the scene with his flashlight. There wasn't much for the casual observer to see, but, for Seyroon, it showed the recent past.

First, he noticed the grass had been pushed aside, indicating that something large had passed through here. He then checked the ground for footprints and saw a variety of impressions left by small animals. He also saw where Grang had walked by earlier.

He then saw something unsettling, but not the multiple tracks of bandits that he was expecting. It was a large, three-toed footprint that didn't belong to any native species that he knew of. Seyroon kept searching and found more prints; he was alarmed to see they came in pairs. Whatever had left the prints was bipedal. From the size of the prints and span between steps, Seyroon guessed the creature was at least seven feet tall.

"What do you think it was?" Garang asked in his native language.

"I don't know," Seyroon replied in kind, "But, whatever it was, it was watching the camp. Then, it must have run into the probe and attacked it. When we get back to camp, pass out the rifles and have the crew take turns standing watch."



Meanwhile, Dubar was sitting in the opening of his tent, wondering what was taking Seyroon so long. He didn't like the talk of bandits. That was the first time Seyroon had mentioned that little tidbit. He was now beginning to wish that he hadn't left his body guards back in town with his shuttle. After all, a corporate director would be worth quite a ransom if they figured out who he was.

Dubar was starting to get even more paranoid, when he heard a rustling in the reeds. At first, Dubar assumed it was the wind, but, with a shudder, he realized the night air was still. Peering off into the darkness, Dubar slowly leaned down to pick up his rifle.

Just then, Seyroon and Garang emerged from the tall grass, causing Dubar to jump. The director was relieved to see it was just the Amothie. Dubar told himself they must have been the source of the rustling noises, ignoring the small detail that they came from the wrong side of the clearing!

Masking his unease with frustration, Dubar called his guide over and demanded an update. Seyroon assured his employer it was just an animal that had damaged the probe after all.

His leader's oversimplification of the truth caused Garang to twitch his mandibles nervously, but he remained silent.

Dubar didn't seem entirely convinced either. "That's it, I'm getting tired of driving around in circles, Seyroon. You said you knew the ba'tuu's territory. If I don't start seeing some results tomorrow, I'm cutting your fee by twenty percent."

"You cannot do this pon Dubar; we have deal!" The guide argued, clacking his mandibles.

"I'm paying for your supposed expertise, so analyze the problem and create a strategy to tackle it." Dubar sneered. "That's what I always tell my idiot staff; now get on it." He then waved off the Amothie, ending the discussion.



The following morning, Seyroon announced a change of tactics for the party. Instead of scouring the plains for the ba'tuu, they would lure the predator to them. The guide explained to his employer that ba'tuus, while known for their hunting prowess, were not above scavenging, particularly in the dry season when prey was in short supply.

Dubar watched with skepticism as Seyroon picked out a clearing in the tall grass which ended in a formation of large, craggy rocks. Meanwhile, the other four Amothie went out to secure the bait, returning a short time later with a freshly-shot kelbarru. The creature was a herbivore with a short, round body, long spindly legs, and a flexible snout, Seyroon touted it as the ba'tuu's favorite prey.

Once the animal was gutted, one of the bearers placed it in the center of Seyroon's ambush. The hunting party then took up position behind the large rock

formation, while the carcass began to bloat under the intense heat of twin suns.

Dubar winced in disgust as a change in the wind carried the foul stench past his high-mounted nostrils. The director was quick to grumble, but Seyroon assured him the unpleasant odor served a purpose. The ba'tuu hunted by smell, he explained, and would be able to pick up the scent from miles away. The stench would then lead the creature straight to them.

"It had better," Dubar begrudgingly conceded. Picking out a comfortable perch, Dubar ordered one of the bearers to lay down some cushions, as he eagerly began to set up his plasma rifle. The custom-ordered weapon was designed to fire a concentrated burst of plasma; it was accurate at long range and lethal against large animals with thick hides. The high intensity round would cut surgically into the target, leaving minimal exterior damage and preserving the trophy.

The additional features, which Dubar had specified, included an AI targeting program set for a ba'tuu bio algorithm. The software was linked to a self-adjusting tripod mount, which meant Dubar had only to point the weapon in the general direction of his prey and wait for the "fire" prompt. The gun cost more than the safari itself, but, to Dubar it was worth every eCoin.

With the trap laid, and Dubar's special weapon assembled, there was little left to do but wait. Seyroon took out a knife and began to whittle away at a small block of wood. As the chitin shelled, bearers passed the time by playing a local card game. Dubar cursed the planet's poor hypernet access once more as he tried to check his stocks.

The director was further agitated, when Seyroon instructed Dubar to shut off his comfort-bot. "Unacceptable! Are you trying to give me heat stroke?"

Seyroon pointed to the hovering machine. "Pon Dubar, please, machine make too much noise, and ba'tuu will see." Dubar scowled but ordered the device to return to the rover, which had been parked well out of sight.



Hours later, the last of the dual suns set below the horizon. The insects began their nightly chorus, but there was still no sign of the elusive carnivore. Dubar rolled his eyes. "Brilliant plan, Seyroon. You said these things only hunt during the day, so there goes the first twenty percent of your fee."

"No, no, Pon Dubar. You give up too soon. Ba'tuu what you call... opportunist. It smell food, then it come at night too."

Dubar considered for a moment. Back at the camp, I could use my comfort-bot again. But then again, the sooner I bag this damn ba'tuu, the sooner I can leave this crite-hole and get back to civilization. "Fine, we'll give it a few more hours. Anything to get this over with." Dubar then ordered the bearers to fetch him more cushions from the rover, and he produced a flask from one of the many pockets lining his vest.



Another few hours, and an empty flask later, Dubar was beginning to feel his eyelids getting heavy. Before he could doze off completely, he was interrupted by Seyroon whispering, "Pon Dubar, the probes say ba'tuu coming." The guide clacked his mandibles excitedly. Dubar raised an eyebrow, then checked the probe's feed himself, using his neural connection chip to bring up the data. He saw a heat signature moving their way, which the software identified as a large, male ba'tuu.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Reinvigorated, Dubar shifted into a kneeling position and took hold of his rifle. The cloudy sky blocked most of the moonlight, but with the gun's infrared scope, the amateur hunter could easily spot the glowing, silhouette of the ba'tuu as it emerged from the tall grass. It was an impressive specimen, Dubar thought, taking stock of the four-legged predator. The ba'tuu looked healthy and well fed, its muscular frame standing four feet high at the shoulder.

Dubar's rifle automatically rotated on its tripod, tracking the carnivore's movement as it crossed the clearing to inspect the rotting kelbarru. As the ba'tuu sniffed and pawed at the carcass, Dubar's rifle locked onto the unsuspecting target. When the "fire" prompt began to flash, Dubar pull the trigger, dousing the scene in violet light, as a single burst of plasma streaked towards the ba'tuu.

The searing round struck the target center mass, causing the animal to bellow and rear up onto its hind legs before collapsing to the ground. The party of bearers stood up to cheer and congratulate their employer.

Dubar let out a triumphant laugh and pumped his four-fingered fist in the air. As he removed the rifle from its tripod mount, Seyroon ordered his second-in-command to confirm the kill. Garang jogged over to the fallen ba'tuu and cautiously knelt down to scan it for lifesigns. Once he gave the all clear sign, Dubar and Seyroon left their rocky perch to inspect the fallen prey for themselves.

A disk-shaped probe floated over to illuminate the scene, giving Dubar his first up-close look at the creature. The ba'tuu was a saurian-descended animal, with long talons, and a powerful jaw ending in a sharpened beak. Its leathery skin sported a tan underbelly, leading up into patches of dark brown, while streaks of vibrant red lined the top of its body. Its most distinguishing feature was easily the plume of crimson feathers which flared out from its neck in a brilliant display.

Dubar smiled broadly, admiring his prize. The proud hunter then knelt down next to the ba'tuu, posing with rifle in hand as the probe captured a 3D scan of his momentous success. Dubar couldn't wait until he had a reliable hypernet connection so he could begin posting the footage to iLink. Dubar could just imagine how jealous the director of the Cappa system would be when he saw his rival's post.

Once the pictures were taken and more congratulations were given, it was time to collect Dubar's trophy. Seyroon instructed Garang to remove the head of the ba'tuu, while another of the bearers, Tayun, was sent to fetch the cooler from the rover. The Amothie nodded and jogged off into the bush, while Garang produced

a diamond knife from his belt. He then knelt down, beside the creature and set to work sawing at its neck, while the others began packing up the gear hidden behind the rock formation.

As Seyroon went back to admiring the ba'tuu, there was a rustling among the tall grass, and, for a moment, he thought he heard a grunt of pain or surprise. He was about to call out to Tayun, when Dubar chuckled and slapped the guide on the back.

"Well, Seyroon, you finally made good on deliver'n that critter. It's past midnight, so technically I outta' dock you that twenty percent, but, since I'm in such a good mood, I'll let it slide."

Seyroon raised his segmented brow ridge warily as he began to thank his employer, but he was soon interrupted by Garang. The Amothie gasped and fearfully uttered something in his native language before backing away from the carcass.

Dubar rolled his bulbous eyes, his smile fading. "What's he go'n on about now?"

Seyroon conferred with Garang in the Amothie tongue for a moment, then replied, "He say, the ba'tuu a... machine."

Dubar gave them both a look of annoyed, skepticism, then glanced down at the animal. In the opening left by the knife, Dubar could see the flesh beneath the skin was oddly rubbery and artificial looking, and there was also a hint of something metallic. Dubar bent down and used his knife to peel back the flesh, only to reveal metal plating. "What the bloody hell? What are you trying to pull here, Seyroon?"

Before the guide could respond, there came a scream from behind the rock formation where the remaining bearers had been gathered. It was followed by a thunderous and bloodthirsty bellow.

Dubar's mouth dropped open, and Garang froze, but Seyroon stayed collected enough to direct the probe, shining its lights toward the rock face. Now illuminated, they caught a glimpse of an Amothie bearer being thrown to the ground, and then inexplicably dragged back behind the crag.

"Seyroon, what the v'lek was that?" Dubar asked in a harsh whisper. "Is it another ba'tuu?"

The guide was visibly shaken, "That not Ba'tuu. Noth'n on these plains make sound like that."

Seyroon and Garang both un-shouldered their rifles, and scanned the boulders for any further sign of movement. They were still watching when a metal object whizzed out from the brush, shattering the probe and dowsing its light.

Dubar raised an arm to guard against the shrapnel raining down from the device, when a blur of movement to the left caught his attention. The director whipped around, pointing his custom rifle, only to discover that Garang, was now nowhere to be found.

"Seyroon, call the rover; tell it to pick us up!" Dubar ordered, but when the guide didn't answer, he turned to find Seyroon fleeing into the brush. "Well, v'lek..."

Dubar was tempted to do the same, until a ferocious roar came from just beyond

the clearing, followed by a scream and ending in a pulpy thud. The surrounding flora began to thrash violently about, while, over the peak, Dubar thought he saw a thick, scale-covered tail whipping back and forth.

Dubar clutched the high-powered rifle in his shaky hands, waving it back and forth, in search of a target. Meanwhile, the frightened director tried to contact his shuttle back in town for help, until he realized, with dismay, that Seyroon was carrying the signal booster.

A snarl came from the rock formation, and Dubar looked up to see a large, shadowy figure launch itself on top of the boulders. Dubar raised his rifle to his eye, switching the scope to night-vision. The orange silhouette was exchanged for a more detailed, green-hued rendering.

The creature illuminated by his scope was a seven-foot tall reptilian biped, brandishing sharpened claws and an elongated jaw filled with teeth. Crouched to strike, the predator was clad in polished combat armor and gripped a menacing, curved sword. Its cold reptilian eyes bore slitted pupils, opened wide to absorb the faint moonlight, as it stared back at Dubar through the scope.

"I-it's impossible!" the hunter stuttered. He recognized the creature instantly from classified Outer Territory reports--it was a Reptilia Droc.

Dubar's mind raced with questions of how and why the creature was here on Amothwa, but they were quickly pushed aside as the Droc opened its crocodile-like jaws to release a long and feral roar. Dubar jumped in terror at the ravenous cry, pulling the trigger of his rifle as he did so. Too shaken to aim, Dubar's shot went wide, as the creature leapt down from the boulder top.

The Droc hit the ground hard, the impact kicking up a cloud of dust. Upon landing, the reptile continued its momentum by charging full tilt towards Dubar. As it did so, a sphere of blue energy surged out from the Droc's armor, surrounding its body.

The cobalt glow among the darkness made the creature into an ideal target, but Dubar would have to hurry, as the creature was rapidly closing the gap between them. Dubar leveled his rifle at the careening reptile and fired dead-center into the energy field.

Sparks flew, and a spray of violet plasma erupted against the blue sphere, causing it to flicker and vanish. A smile began to creep onto Dubar's face, as he lowered the rifle from his eye, expecting to see the Droc collapse to the ground. To his horror, the reptile was still on its feet and continuing its charge.

Dubar suddenly realized the blue light had been a shield, just like the one protecting his shuttle. Dubar never heard of one small enough to be carried by an individual; yet the creature had survived a point blank hit from a weapon design to kill much larger prey.

Now the Droc was nearly on top of Dubar, leaving no time for questions or to use the gun's targeting software. The director could only point, shoot, and pray.

Doing just that, Dubar fired a single shot, while cursing the weapon's one second refresh rate. The hunter squinted from the intense burst of light, and, when



his eyes adjusted to the darkness again, he saw, to his horror, the large but nimble creature had dodged to the left. He had missed, and now, with a blur of speed, the Droc lashed out with its curved sword to cleave off the barrel of his weapon.

Dubar let out an unintelligible cry as he watched the front half of his gun as it clattered to the ground. He didn't even notice when Reptilia twirled the sword in its clawed hand then swung the weapon at Nazdole's left leg.

Dubar toppled to the ground, confused, at first, as to what happened. He was soon screaming in pain as he looked from the gushing stump that used to be his kneecap to his severed lower leg a few feet away.

Clutching his injured limb, Dubar was too distracted to notice that his attacker had stopped and was now watching him intently with yellow eyes. Nor did he observe that an additional five Reptilia Droc had now emerged from the tall grass. Two of the newcomers were the same bipedal species as the attacker, while the other three moved gracefully on four legs and were covered in black scales, accented with splotches of bright green.

Dubar's attention returned to his surroundings as his attacker let out a strange throaty call, before proceeding to back up and drop to one knee. Dubar's eyes darted back and forth, as he finally noticed the additional Reptilia Droc encircling him in the same posture of submission.

Are they bowing to me? Dubar thought. Although even he had to admit that seemed unlikely after their brutal attack against him. The true subject of the Droc's reverence was revealed as a third species of Droc emerged from the curtain of reeds.

The new creature was also bipedal with a tan underbelly, but the rest of its body was black with an intricate pattern of golden accents. Surrounding its neck was a large orange crest which flared open; its forearms and lower legs were adorned in elaborate gold bracelets, encrusted in colorful jewels.

It strode past the other reptiles, without sparing them so much as a glance. Dubar could see that this species was smaller and less muscular than its counterparts. He could easily recognize that this was the leader, and the rest were just the muscle. Admiring the creature's taste in jewelry and his attitude of authority, Dubar thought perhaps he could strike up some sort of deal with this one.

As the apparent leader approached, Dubar's attacker held out its sword, presenting it to the crested leader. The blade was lying flat against its open palms with the hilt extended out in offering.

The regal-looking Droc wrapped its slender, clawed hand around the hilt, the touch triggering a blue glow along the blade. It then raised the weapon into the air, taking a couple of casual swings to adapt to the sword's weight.

The warrior Droc rose to its feet, while the leader focused its gaze on Dubar. Grasping the sword with both hands, it stalked over to the fallen director.

"Wait! You don't want to do this." Dubar said, not knowing if the creature could even understand him. The words did, in fact, cause the crested reptile to pause and look at him curiously, so Dubar continued. "This world is part of Gal Zinge

territory. And... And I'm an important being. I'm the director of the entire Torus system. If you kill me, it will mean war."

Despite the boast of status and consequences, the Droc with the orange frill seemed unimpressed. It let out a snort and stepped forward, now towering over Dubar, with the sword at the ready.

"I can pay you, anything you want!" Dubar pleaded.

To his surprise, the black and gold reptile answered Dubar in Corr'quin, with less accent than the Amothie, "There is only one thing you possess which I desire."

"Huh? Oh... J-just name it." Dubar didn't think he'd actually get a response, but now he felt a glimmer of hope.

"Your head--it will make for an excellent trophy." The Droc peeled back its scaly lips in a toothy smile.

"Wha...?" was all Dubar managed to get out, before a single swipe of the reptile's sword sent his head rolling across the ground.



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