

REPTILIA DROC

Unearthed

by

Christopher Trefz

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Two figures, dressed in white spacesuits, went speeding down the circular stone tunnel on a pair of hovering skimmers. At twenty feet in diameter, the immense passage was lit by a trail of glow-tubes, embedded into the walls every thirty feet or so. The mounted lights created a hypnotic, strobe-like effect as the skimmers whipped. They also served to highlight a pair of large, flexible pipes that stretched off into the distance and gently bobbed in the absence of gravity.

After another few minutes at top velocity, the skimmers began to slow as they approached the opening to a small cavern. Foreman Rankev, and his engineer, Benzo, parked their transports in front of a large, mobile drilling platform, which filled the recess from floor to ceiling, with the pipes, marked red and blue, connecting at its base.

Floating in the small gap, between the rig and the cavern wall, were a pair of furry Dorchens. Also dressed in space suits, the workers used safety lines to secure themselves to the huge machine. Once the riders locked their skimmers in place with grip-pads, they used the small thrusters built into their suits to navigate towards the drilling rig.

"Alright, Orretz, you got us down here." the foreman said over his suit's COMM. "Now what's so v'leking important that you and Zeri held up production and made me leave my nice warm ship to come a mile and half down inside of an asteroid?"

The male Dorchen replied, "Well, sir, we had just finished up in sector fifteen, and we were about to move onto a deposit of iridium over in sector eighteen. The initial

scans showed only ordinary igneous rock up ahead, so we were going to cut through there as a shortcut, but then we hit something harder than the surrounding sediment..." He began to trail off.

"Which was?"

Orretz glanced at his partner, and the shorter female answered. "That's why we called you down, sir. It would better if you come and see for yourself." Zeri and her partner unclipped themselves from the rig, and the group propelled themselves towards the far wall. They passed by the huge drill which formed the front of the rig; its corkscrew design mirrored the spiral texture engraved in the tunnel walls.

The four miners stood in front of the machine. Its powerful flood lights cast long shadows, as Zeri turned to speak, "Like Orretz said, we hit some material that wasn't on the map, which I..."

"It's not unusual to find a few inaccuracies on an exterior scan-- not when you're talking about a three-mile wide chunk of dense rock," Rankev, interrupted, folding his arms.

"Yes, but the weird part was the rig scanners still showed plain sediment even as we were grinding in place against it. We double checked the readings, and, then, decided to backup up and use the extractor arms to widen the tunnel, so we could get out and take a look. That's what we wanted to show you." Zeri stepped aside and gestured towards the cavern wall.

Rankev slowly unfolded his arms in surprise and stepped forward with his engineer to investigate. What they saw, exposed beneath the bluish, craggy rock, was the gleam of polished metal. It was a whitish-gold hue in color, and the reflective surface created a stunning iridescent rainbow effect under the glow of their suit-mounted lights.

"Holy crite..." Rankev cursed, both pairs of his eyes widening. "Is this what I think it is?"

Benzo nodded, "Yes, sir, it certainly looks like gold – or, rather, gold with some other element mixed in, which could account for the resistance they encountered-- but that can be separated out easily enough."

Rankev let out a chuckle, "Oh-ho, Zeri, you and Orretz, are a pair of cheeky gungi, alright. I was ready to put you both on maintenance duty for a month. But I'll damned if you two didn't just earn yourselves a helluva' bonus. Have you re-calibrated the rig scanners yet? How large is the deposit?"

Orretz replied, "That's the thing; we ran a diagnostic on the scanner three times, but it's still coming up as just common stone."

"Doesn't matter; just start extracting the gold. When your shift is over, Benzo can take a look at it back on the ship."

This time, it was Zeri's turn to interrupt, "But, sir, a natural gold formation wouldn't be smooth like that. And there's something else, the surface has... well, it has a seam."

"What are you go'n on about?"

Zeri nudged Orretz with her elbow, and the miner walked over to the exposed metal.

He then used a hand tool to pry away a bit more of the surrounding rock. It crumbled away to reveal a long, thin indentation in the otherwise smooth surface. "Zeri thinks somebody might've put it here."

Rankev turned to his engineer. "Is that possible?"

Benzo shook his head. "When we scouted the asteroid, there were no signs of anyone digging here before us."

"But we've already seen that our sensor data is being thrown off," Zeri argued.

The foreman had made up his mind, however, and replied, "As far as I'm concerned, this is just another mineral deposit. If you two want that bonus, then get back to work on the double."

Rankev and his engineer moved their skimmers a safe distance back up the tunnel before parking again. The foreman wanted to stay and observe the initial extraction; he was eager to see just how large of a deposit his crew had found.

The rig proceeded to vibrate as the machine powered up and unfolded its six multi-jointed arms, each equipped with a different tool, including a drill, plow, and manipulator claw. At the base of the rig was a powerful vacuum system that was used to swallow the debris and launch it out into space, via the length of red tube extending along the tunnel.

As the rock wall collapsed, it exposed more and more of the golden plating. The rig's massive treads carried the machine forward, as its spinning drill made contact with the gleaming surface. There was no sound in the vacuum, but Rankev could tell from the sparks and shudder of the rig, that it had met with significant resistance. Whatever the lustrous metal was, it certainly wasn't gold. A detailed analysis back on the ship would reveal its nature; Rankev could only hope the mysterious material was of comparable value.

The rig continued to shake violently as it fought to pierce the gleaming barrier, while Orretz protested the risk to the machinery. However, Rankev ignored the warnings, as he watched the rig inch forward. With the wall beginning to yield, golden debris was swallowed by the machine and sent up the blue pipe, to the ship's cargo hold.

Suddenly, the digger lurched forward and became obscured in a sudden eruption of dirt. "Orretz! What's happening?" Rankev demanded.

"We must have hit an air pocket, sir. We're vac-ing up the dust now. I should be able to see something here in a second. Oh, crite..."

"What is it now?"

"It looks like a room of some kind."

Rankev gave his engineer a questioning look. "No signs of anyone digging before us, huh?"

Benzo replied, "It could be a secret bunker; this asteroid belt is pretty close to the Ponsauri territory. Whoever it was, they went to an awful lot of effort to hide it so well."

The foreman nodded as he considered. "Orretz, pull the rig back, so we can have a proper look."

Once the huge machine had lumbered out of the way, Rankev could see a dark recess beyond the hole left by the drill. As soon as Oretz and Zeri exited from the small hatch in the side of the rig, the group floated over to investigate.

Approaching the entrance, the miner's suit-mounted lights illuminated the interior wall and were bewildered by what they saw. Painted in realistic detail and vibrant colors was a mural of a tall, slender, humanoid being with reddish-skin. Its elongated cranium had a bulbous protrusion on either side, while a pair of prehensile tails, two yards in length, sprouted from the small of its back. Dressed in a flowing purple robe, the being also held a golden staff in its three-fingered hand.

"Anyone recognize what species that's supposed to be?" Zeri asked.

"No, it doesn't look familiar," Benzo replied.

"Well, I've never seen a top secret corporate bunker before," Orretz joked, "but I don't imagine they normally decorate like this."

"Only one way to find out", Rankev smirked and gave Orretz a light shove. "Get in there and look around."

"Hey!" Orretz protested, but the action was enough to send the worker drifting over the threshold. To everyone's shock, the second Orretz entered the corridor, his feet hit the ground with a thump.

"There's gravity!" Orretz exclaimed as he turned to face the others. Before anyone could reply, lights slowly faded on, revealing the curved walls of an oval-shaped corridor. The structure was golden, with bone-like support arches and etched with unfamiliar symbols that pulsed with an eerie blue glow. The ceiling was lined with clusters of circular lights which ranged in size, while the floor was covered in tiles, forming elaborate geometric patterns.

"Well, I'll be damned," Rankev muttered. "Alright, let's go," he gestured, and his team reluctantly followed him into the passageway with a small jet burst. Once they were all re-adjusted to walking in gravity, the miners examined their surroundings, but the perimeter of the structure seemed to be ring-shaped, and they could only see more hallway on either side, before it wrapped out of view.

Benzo noted, "There's almost enough room to drive the rig through here. How could someone have gotten a structure this big into the center of an asteroid and not even left a mark on the outside? Let alone mask its power readings?"

"You're the engineer; you don't have an idea?" Orretz asked, giving him a look.

"None of the equipment we have could've managed it. They must have used a prototype of some new technology."

Zeri unclipped a portable scanner from her belt and studied the display for a moment. "Whatever was fooling our sensors before, isn't affecting us in here. I'm reading the actual structure now instead of rock. It looks like there's an atmosphere being maintained within the structure, although it's too high in nitrogen to breathe, and there's a containment field activated around the hole to prevent decompression."

"That's real fascinating, Zeri," the foreman mocked, "What about the walls? Is there

any real gold mixed in or coating it?"

"The walls are reading as an unknown alloy."

Rankev frowned at the news, but quickly began to form a new scheme which he proceeded to run past Benzo. "If there's no gold, that means we're gonna' need to call in a salvage team instead. I want you to put together an inventory of everything we find in here and give me your best estimate on the finder's fee we can expect for a facility like this."

Zeri ignored the machinations of her boss and continued with her scan. "Carbon dating is showing the material as... four billion years old!"

Benzo's blinked his nictitating membrane twice in astonishment. "Let me see that?" he said, grabbing the device out of Zeri's hand.

"That's pretty old," Orretz whistled. "Does that mean it's from... Oh, I forget; what was the name of that big empire from before the Corporations?"

"The Wei'Quin era, and that was only millennium ago, you idiot," Rankev snapped, "but it doesn't matter, because obviously the scanner is broken, or it's another trick. It can't possibly be that old."

"Unless it's alien," Zeri proposed.

Rankev folded his arms. "There was no space faring species in the galaxy four billion years ago!"

"None that we know of," Zeri fired back. "I mean, just look around. This is obviously not a corporate bunker."

"She could be right," Benzo said, looking up from the scanner. "The Company does have guidelines for the discovery of alien artifacts and technology."

"Yeah, but they're intended for the Outer Territories, where half the worlds haven't been surveyed yet."

"Still, the guidelines are very clear; notify the home office immediately, and secure the site until a research team can arrive and take over."

"Well, then," Orretz said, trying to mask his nervousness at the bizarre surroundings, "we should probably be getting back to the ship about now, right, sir?"

"Hmph, aliens," Rankev snorted, "all I've seen so far is a hallway, and I don't buy this four billion years ago crite. If I'm going to hold up production while we wait for some research team to fly out here, I'm going to need some real proof before we head up. Come on, this way."

Rankev pushed passed Orretz, and the group hesitated a moment before shuffling after their foreman. As the group trudged down the long curving hall, they passed by an increasing number of unreadable symbols and murals depicting the tall, red-skinned aliens.

"Do you think these are the beings who built this place?" Zeri asked, running a gloved hand over one of the scenes. The artwork seemed to illustrate the twin-tailed race exploring the galaxy and forming colonies on distant worlds.

"If this is supposed to be their history, they look like violent buggers," Orretz

commented. He was examining another mural further down which showed the aliens dressed in armor as they stood looking over a burning city, while in the background another race was being led off in chains.

"I wouldn't put too much stock in these doodles," Rankev scuffed. "Some of these look awfully embellished." He pointed towards a series of paintings where the slender aliens waged wars against an assortment of strange creatures, from spiky, multi-limbed insectoids to sharp-toothed, predatory reptilians. Orretz lingered on the scaly adversaries for a moment, thinking they bore a resemblance to certain dangerous species that still roamed the Outer Territories today. However, he dismissed the idea as he realized he was falling behind and hurried to catch up to the others.

After the last set of murals, Orretz and Zeri began to converse over a private COMM channel, debating on when they should insist on turning around. Settling on sooner rather than later, Orretz cleared his throat and was about to address Rankev, when the group came up to a T-intersection. It was the first opening they had encountered in the otherwise closed ring, and it led deeper inside the structure. The new passage was lined on both sides with impressive, ten-foot high statues of the alien race, dressed in elaborate armor and holding staffs which glowed blue at the tips.

"Now this looks interesting," Rankev remarked.

"Personally, I don't need any more convincing," Zeri said, holding up her gloved hands. "I've seen enough creepy alien art for one day; I'm heading back. Is anyone coming with me?"

Rankev was beginning to reconsider when a golden gleam from the other end of the corridor caught his eye. Without another word, the foreman started to walk briskly past the row of tall, aliens statues cast in bronze. The three workers were all in agreement to return, but knew they couldn't do so without their boss. So Orretz and the others grudgingly chased after Rankev, pleading for him to stop as they did so. However, the debate ceased once they reached the end of the passageway.

The miners stood at the brink of a great chamber, two hundred feet long and half that in height. A bridge, extending from the doorway to a platform in the center of the room, was surrounded on all sides by a sea of shimmering metallic liquid. The substance resembled liquid mercury but was given a golden hue by the chamber walls.

Beyond the platform was another dark, bronze statue of the builder race. Unlike the figures in the passage, this statue stood forty feet high and was atop of a twenty foot base. Instead of armor, the icon was dressed in a much more regal fashion, with flowing robes, a headdress, and elaborate jewelry.

For a moment, all four miners stood in stunned silence, taking in the strange surroundings. Then, a glint of light from the platform caught Rankev's attention, and he went racing across the bridge. The abrupt movement snapped Orretz and the others back to reality, and they chased after the foreman, ready to physically drag him back to the ship if need be.

"Sir, we shouldn't be here," Benzo protested. "There's no question now this is an

alien structure! We need to seal off this area and call the home office.”

Rankev ignored the engineer; his attention was locked onto something rectangular atop the platform, between them and the statue. As the group reached the top of a short flight of steps, they discovered that the large block of stone was an elaborately decorated sarcophagus, adorned with gold and gemstones. Carved into the tomb’s lid was another alien portrait; from its regal dress, it appeared to depict the same being as the great statue.

“This is starting to make sense,” Zeri said, studying the sarcophagus. “I think this place is a tomb for the leader of these aliens. A lot of ancient civilization would hide their kings’ burial sites.”

While the others considered what Zeri was saying, Rankev remained focused on the red glint that had caught his eye from the doorway. It was cast by a light reflecting off a giant crimson gem resting in the sculpted hands of the funerary box. To the dismay of the others, Rankev began prying at the crystal.

“Sir, what are you doing?” Orretz asked, fear seeping into his voice. “You can’t take that.”

“Why not? He won’t be needing it,” Rankev grinned. “Besides, there’s plenty here for the research team, I’m simply taking this as my finder’s fee. If you three play ball, I’ll cut you all in for a percentage.” One more yank, and the gem came free of the sculpture’s grasp, causing the foreman to stumble backwards. Rankev held the stone up to the light and smiled greedily at his prize.

“You should really put that back, boss,” Orretz objected. “In the movies, there’s always a curse on a dead being’s treasure.”

“Don’t be stupid, Orretz, there’s no such thing as a...” Rankev stopped in mid-sentence, his expression changing from one of annoyance, to one of horror.

The miners and engineer looked on with confusion as Rankev’s terrified gaze rose higher and higher. As a shadow fell over the group, they turned to see for themselves and instantly regretted doing so.

The pool of what seemed like liquid mercury had congealed and was now rising into the air like a giant tentacle. As the reflective material twisted to face the miners, the tip split opened into four petal-like jaws, lined with rows and rows of teeth.

Zeri screamed, Orrets raised his arms, and Benzo tried to run, while Renkev simply gripped his treasure in silent horror. The monstrous tendril reared back, then came crashing down on the platform, engulfing the miners like a tidal wave.

Upon impact with the structure, the tentacle seemed to lose its solidity and began to flow back into a pool, merging with the main body of the liquid metal. After a moment, the platform was completely clear of the metallic substance, as well as any sign of the mining crew. All four members were gone without a trace, and the red gem was once again resting peacefully in the sculpted hands of the sarcophagus.



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