

REPTILIA DROC

SCAVENGER



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CHAPTER 1

"Oh God, we should not be here," I muttered, hastily programming the ship's tractor beams. I stood behind a freestanding consul with a white, glowing surface, which projected a two foot long hologram of the freighter below us. Manipulating the display with hand gestures, I strategically tethered the much larger vessel. I was about to lock on the final beam, when a red warning light began to flash on the interface.

I cursed aloud, "You've got to be kidding! Don't do this to me now you piece of crap."

However the computer was unsympathetic to my pleas. I looked expectantly to the short, tan furred being seated across the room from me, but he continued to simply stare at the wall, oddly disinterested.

"Just a little emergency, don't get up on my account," I grumbled and thumbed the comm in my shirt pocket, "I'm going to need another minute. The rear tractor beam shorted out again."

The captain's voice replied, "Copy that, but make it quick, Derric. We don't want to be here when a patrol shows up."

I hurried down the narrow, dimly lit hall as the handful of working lights hummed and flickered. Spotting the maintenance compartment of the faulty generator, I yanked on the wall covering, but found the damn thing had rusted shut.

Groaning, I grabbed a screwdriver from my belt and attempted to pry open the stubborn hatch. The task was proving futile, when a colossal shadow suddenly blotted out the latch. Cautiously, I peered over my shoulder to find a hulking, seven foot tall figure looming over me. It was a feline creature covered in black fur, with bristling whiskers, short pointy ears, and emerald eyes.

"Karris, damn, you scared the crap out of me," I sighed with relief.

"Need a hand with that?" he asked.

The panther-like farhi reached out with one enormous, clawed hand and easily freed the rusted panel. Haphazardly, he tossed it to the side with a thunderous clang. Next, he took hold of the generator and began to pull it out along its access track, until something got snagged inside the wall.

"Hold on a sec, let me see what it's caught on," I said.

"Nah, I got it," Karris grinned, revealing sharpened fangs, and proceeded to tug harder.

There was a tearing sound, after which the generator flew out into the corridor, nearly toppling over as it slammed into the end of the track.

"Thanks..." I winced.

"Don't mention it," he replied, giving me a slap on the back. I was knocked forward by the gesture and struggled to catch my balance as he continued down the hall, his black, barbed tail swaying behind him. I shook my head and knelt down to examine the generator. A second later my comm crackled to life.

"Derric, have you got the tractor beam running yet," Ellie's voice came over the speaker, sounding impatient as usual.

I sighed, looking down at the aged and heavily modified piece of equipment, "You do realize this damn thing is being held together with duck-tape, right? I'm moving as fast as I can."

"One tour on my ship and you'll be rich enough to retire," he says," I grumbled as the generator sparked from my prodding.

After swapping a few burned-out components, the generator sputtered to life, and I jogged back to the control console.

As I finished locking on, I reported, "Captain, the freighter is secured."

"Good work. Sauln, how's the radiation levels? Sauln?"

I looked over at the short, camel-faced being. He was still sitting in the corner, staring off into space, his golden eyes bloodshot, and his rectangular pupil's dilated.

"Sauln!" I shouted.

It shook him from whatever world he was off visiting.

"Huh? Oh yeah... the containment field is holding, radiation is within safe limits."

"Sounds like we're good to go, so can we please get the hell out of here?" I begged.

There was a pause on the other end of the line which I didn't like.

"Hang on Derric, we have company."

Great, just great.

I opened a free-floating holographic panel and navigated to the ship's outer cam. It showed a small reddish-brown battle frigate, a relic from a discontinued corporate line. It was covered in scratches and patch jobs, but still had enough gun turrets and torpedo launchers to mean business.

Opening a second holo-panel, I patched into the bridge comm system. An incoming transmission caused the screen to split. On the left was Bessourn, a blue skinned bolyen, with gill-like protrusions running along the rim of his balding head. He looked to be in his fifties with long white hair and a beard. At the bottom of the image, a tuft of Ellie's dark hair snuck into the frame, as she maned the pilot's seat in front.

On the right was a tall being with brown leathery skin, a snout-like noise, with thin whisker-like tendrils, and creepy yellow eyes. He was

dressed in a tan military uniform and red brie, donning the local regime's insignia.

"I am Captain Udal, of the Kildathie Republic," the uniform figure addressed us in a serious tone. "You are trespassing in our territory."

"Republic, huh?" Sauln laughed as he staggered over to watch. "Campaigning must be a breeze over there, with only one name on the ballet and all."

Bessourn cleared his throat and replied in an even tone, "My name is Captain Bessourn of the Pathfinder. I apologize for any intrusions, we were sent in to salvage this freighter for the Destonni Corporation. Its reactor breached and the crew was forced to abandon ship. We were told it was in open space."

"Well my friend, it may have been at the time, but right now your five hundred feet within our boarder. That makes this freighter the property of General Saggol and your crew under arrest for espionage."

My eyes went wide at the prospect of being arrested again. The conglomerate courts were harsh, but I imagined these guys would probably have us all shot.

"What a bunch of bullshit," I could hear Ellie mutter from just out of view.

I cringed and saw Bessourn shoot her an icy look.

"Captain Udal, please, this was an honest mistake. We're not spies, we're not even corporate employees; this was just a simple freelance job. I'm sure we can work out some sort of arrangement."

Udal smiled, "This is what we'll do, I will take the freighter's cargo in order to strike a blow against your corrupt masters. Then we'll search your ship, to ensure you're not carrying any contraband. If you pass inspection you can make yourselves useful by removing this radioactive heap from our territory, after making a small donation to the Republic of course."

When Udal named the amount he was expecting, Bessourn had to quickly hit the mute button to silence Ellie's colorful reaction and save us all from getting blown away.

"Captain," she argued, "If we lose the cargo, what's left of our fee won't even cover this 'donation' of his!"

"I know," Bessourn sighed. "Charge the engines, we'll have to drop the freighter and run for it."

"But, Captain..."

"Ellie, I've made my decision."

The first sensible thing I've heard all day.

Sauln laughed again, "Ellie's not going to go for that."

"What do you mean," I raised an eyebrow.

Before Sauln could answer, Udal broke in impatiently, "Captain Bessourn, I am awaiting your answer."

"I'll give him an answer," Ellie replied from off screen.

There was a mischievous tone in her voice I didn't like, neither did Bessourn from the look on his face. There was a chirp from the tractor beam consul, and I turned to see a string of text scroll over the display. It looked like Ellie was routing the controls up to the bridge.

"Ellie, what are you doing?" Bessourn asked and I wondered the same. "I'm ordering you to release the freighter and take us out of here. Ellie!"

"This is going to be great!" Sauln elbowed me with amusement and pointed to the external cam.

I watched in horror as Ellie heaved the massive freighter towards the

much smaller Kildathie frigate.

On the split screen, Udal wore an expression of panic, "Halt your tractor beam at once or we will open fire!"

A thunderous clang rang over the frigate's audio and the crew was thrown to the deck. There was a chirp as the bridge audio returned, I looked over and saw Ellie's face pop-up and fill the screen. She was in her late twenties, attractive, with tan skin and dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, though I was a bit disturbed by her malicious grin, and the glee that shined in blue eyes.

"Here's your freighter, Captain. We're going to pass on the donation this time, but give our warmest regards to the General."

As she sat back down, I could see Bessourn had slumped low in his chair and was massaging his temples. The bridge cam switched off and I nearly stumbled as the Pathfinder's over-sized thrusters suddenly roared to life. On the outer cam, the disabled frigate drifted helplessly, as it quickly shrank into the distance.

"Ouch. Derric, mind giving me a hand?" I heard Sauln call up from the deck.

#

Later, I went looking for Bessourn to discuss our contract, I was getting anxious for the big payoff he promised. I could have stayed in the Conglomerate States if I wanted to try my hand at salvaging. At least then I wouldn't be getting shot at by pirates and dictators.

As I headed for the bridge I could hear Ellie and Bessourn coming this way, apparently having their own disagreement. They emerged at a cross junction further down the hall, Ellie wore that beat-up old leather jacket she loved so much, cut off gloves and a grungy white shirt that showed off her toned stomach. Bessourn wore a tan corporate uniform stripped of any logos, along with a sleeveless yellow and green robe, traditional of the bolyen race.

They paused to finish their argument and I considered coming back later to give them some privacy. Then again, it was a public hallway, so instead I slunk behind a bulkhead and casually listened in.

"What difference does it make?" Ellie asked defensively. "We got the freighter and we got to keep the cargo."

"That's not the point," Bessourn countered, "I gave you a direct order, which you blatantly ignored. Most of us are here because we don't like to conform or taking orders, so I'm apt to let you all take a few liberties, but we still have a chain of command. You want to question my orders? Fine, it keeps me on my toes, but what you did today was reckless. That frigate could have easily shot us down if Udal had been sharper."

Ellie noticed me peering out from the other end of the hall and shot me a dirty look. I turned around and pretended to be working on a piece of exposed conduit.

"We're in the hole as it was, so I thought it was worth the risk," Ellie defended herself.

"I know you better than that, Ellie. You didn't do it for the money, this was a matter of pride. It was obvious you were trying to provoke Udal into a fight. We lost the last job to pirates and you just weren't going to stand for it again. I don't need pilot that who's willing to put the whole crew at risk just to make a point."

Ellie put her hands in her jacket pockets and looked down the corridor to avoid his gaze. No come back? He must have hit a nerve.

Bessourn's voice softened, "I'm accountable for this crew and its

safety. We take a lot of risks as it is. If I make the decision to abandon a job, it's not because I'm questioning you as a pilot. Understood?"

"Understood," Ellie grumbled before turning to leave.

Ellie glared at me as she passed.

"What?" I asked innocently, looking up from my mock examination.

Bessourn stopped next to me and watched Ellie storm down the corridor.

"She certainly keeps things exciting," I commented, plotting how to best steer the conversation towards my real topic of interest.

"She'll be the best pilot I ever had, once she stops trying to prove it."

Bessourn turned to leave himself, so I quickly blurted out, "Captain, has there been any word from Ponsauri?"

So much for subtlety.

Bessourn gave me a weary look, "As I've said before, when I get the call I'll announce it to you and the rest of the crew immediately. You're not the only one with a lot riding on this, Derric."

"I know, I know, I was just hoping maybe there had been... some sightings or something."

"Ponsauri won't risk a communication until it's the real thing. They don't want this arrangement to get traced back to them in the event anything goes wrong. Your just going to have to be patient for a while longer."

I nodded and Bessourn turned to leave. Once he was out of ear shot, I let out a groan. After all, I had been patient for six months already.

#

After I finished helping Bessourn hand over the freighter to our client and explain away the frigate-shaped dent in the hull, I headed to the galley for dinner. Karris was already seated at the table, gnawing away at a drumstick. Meanwhile, Sauln was behind the makeshift bar fixing himself a concoction of some sort. He looked up as I entered and offered to make me one.

"Yeah... Ah, no thanks. Not after last time," I held up both hands for emphasis as I walked to the food processor.

"Come on, Lorne, when are you going to let that go? It was just a little welcome aboard prank. Besides, you look like you could stand to relax a little."

"Pirates and now warlords, this is a little intense for a kid from the shipyards."

Karris laughed, "You're an ex-con; you should be used to dealing with space scum by now."

"I'm not really that kind of criminal," I reminded him.

"We just need to toughen you up, kid. The next time we land at Berrena port, I'll take you over to the Ice Pick. One bar fight in there will put some hair on your knuckles. A trip into Kildathie territory will feel like R&R."

"Yeah, that really... sounds fun," I lied.

"Didn't the owner say he'd shoot you if you ever came back?" Sauln asked as he walked over, a drink in his three fingered hand.

"Just a misunderstanding," Karris' left ear twitched.

"I seem to remember you tearing up the place and putting three guys in the hospital."

"Hey, they shouldn't start shit over me being an Alpha, not if they ain't ready to fight one." Karris flattened his ears back, "Besides, not my fault you guys break so easy."

The mental image of an Alpha tossing around humans and other Beta species made me grimace, and recall what Bessourn had said back on Ochia 3.

“So when we finally get the call from Ponsauri, what you think it’s going to be like? Seeing the aftermath I mean. Do you think Fren will be able to help the survivors?”

Sauln laughed, “What survivors? Bessourn told you, it’s not like how they spin it on the news.”

He made his voice into a parody of dramatic propaganda, “The courageous Galactic Infantry, protecting our investments and employees abroad from the savage reptilians.” Then back to his disturbingly amused tone, “No, when the corporations piss off the Reptilia Droc, they kill everything.”

I looked over at Karris, who just shrugged, “Pretty much. The wrecks we’ve snoopied through, there was nothing left but burnt shrapnel and torn-up bodies.”

“Have either of you ever seen one?” I asked.

Sauln shook his head, “Just that Dominator we scanned, which was close enough for my tastes.”

“Haven’t had the pleasure,” Karris answered, “But I’ve heard they excel at hand-to-hand combat. Doesn’t matter if you have a gun, they come right at you with these double bladed knives they fancy.”

Sauln stroked a tuft of beard at the end of his snout, “Didn’t Ellie see one?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Karris agreed, “Back when she was still flying drop ships.”

“Ellie was in the military?” I asked.

“Yeah, where do you think she learned how to fly like such a nut job?” Sauln smirked.

Karris narrowed his emerald green eyes and twitched his whiskers, “It’s called skill.”

“Whatever. So she hasn’t bored you yet with stories of how the Tydorren Corporation lost their best soldier?”

I shook my head, “Nah, Ellie hasn’t said much to me in general since she helped Bessourn talk me into this.”

“She was probably offended by your poor shooting,” Karris grinned, pointing at me with the thigh bone in his clawed hand, now picked clean. “Ellie’s the best shot there is, second to me of course, and even she couldn’t improve your crappy aim.”

“You must have been the embarrassment of your cell block,” Sauln added, shaking his head.

“I told you...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sauln cut him off. “You’re the nice kind of criminal.”

#

I was making my rounds when I spotted Ellie sitting alone in the cargo bay. She was reclining on a stack of dull, blue crates watching the starry view outside. Leaving my tool box at the door I decided to try my luck once more at winning her over. I was probably intruding, but at least she couldn’t argue she was busy this time.

I made my way across the large cargo bay, which stretched about fifty feet wide and a hundred feet long. Taking up about a third of the ship’s interior, it was dimly lit and mostly empty except for a pile of fuel rods and the stack of crates Ellie was resting on.

Her view of space was provided by an enormous holo-panel running the length of the wall and showed a Destonni battleship and a repair cruiser surrounding the recovered freighter. Behind the trio of ships, the local star

was rising over a nearby planet, casting a golden hue over the scene and into the bay.

"Nice view," I commented, stopping next to Ellie's perch.

"Yeah," Ellie replied in a dismissive tone, keeping her gaze ahead. This is going to be a challenge, but she should know by now I don't give up so easily.

"Hey, I didn't see you at dinner tonight. The re-hydrated bolnic meat and instant potatoes were just superb," I grinned. "My compliments to the food processor."

Ellie just turned and raised an eyebrow at me.

"If you're here to check more conduits, don't let me keep you," she said dryly.

I let out a nervous laugh.

"Yeah, about that... For what it's worth, I thought it was pretty awesome how you trounced that Kildathie frigate."

"Really?" she asked, sounding more interested.

"Absolutely," I lied. "They'll think twice before messing with us again."

I could already picture the death warrant being posted on our heads.

"Bessourn was pretty pissed though, defying orders and all."

I chose my next words carefully. "Well, uh, you know... It was a heated situation. You made a judgment call." All be it a bad one.

"That's exactly what I said," her eyes lit up, happy to hear her actions defended. "Besides, he usually likes when I improvise."

"Yeah, you learn to improvise fast on this old tub. Like the last time the power relays went down, I had to replace this burnt out coupling right? The only spare part we had was from a Galtta class freighter. Which is the totally wrong model, the parts aren't even close. Why did we even have it, you know? Anyway, I had custom modified the connectors to make it fit. I'll be damned though; I actually got it to work."

"Uh... huh," she said turning back to the holographic view.

Crap, you're blow'n it.

"So hey, maneuvering this clunker like that was really something, especially while towing that huge freighter. Where'd you learn to fly like that anyway?"

I waited for her usual response of 'not much to tell really', but this time it seemed to peak her interest. Maybe we had found some common ground or I had simply worn down her defenses. Either way, I took the opportunity to slide up next to her on the crates as I listened.

She told me tales of weaving a drop ship through a hail of enemy fire, out-maneuvering star fighters, flying blind through a nebula, and even deploying her team onto a floating chunk of rock in the middle of an asteroid field.

She sounded fond of her bygone career, so I had to ask, "What changed?"

Ellie hesitated for a moment before answering, "The Reptilia Droc have a way of changing your perspective on life. My unit and I were assigned to a battalion heading for the Outer Territories; our task was to retake a colony invaded by the Droc.

When we got there, it was a mess, just a wall of debris. You couldn't tell what used to be freighter from a patrol frigate. Then there were the Dominators, just sitting there waiting for us. The damn things were huge, twice as big as the Tydorren flagship! They didn't waste their time with drop ships though; it was the fighters that were a real bitch on the way down.

They call them Asps, the things pack way more punch then they should for a fighter that size. It took all my best moves, but I got my unit onto the ground in one piece.”

“So it worked out then?” I asked not sure what the problem was.

She shook her head, “Not by a long shot. The battle in space and on the ground went to hell before I could blink. The Tydorren military is one the best and I’m not just reciting propaganda. We earned that title, but the Droc just were too strong. A retreat was ordered and I headed back to the surface to evacuate my unit.

By the time I made it to the extraction point, only one of my team was left, Berskel, was his name. He ran for the shuttle while my gunner strafed the woods with cover fire. He nearly made it on board too, but a chameleon in full camo had snuck around the side of the ship.”

So Karris was right, “You actually saw one then?”

She nodded.

“What’d it look like?”

“It was huge, just towered over Berskel as it came up behind him. Cover in armor and thick scales, with a long snout full of teeth. When it roared it sounded like thunder. But it was the eyes I’ll never forget, blood red and cold as ice. After it killed Berskel it looked right at me. The damn thing even tried to jump on board before I took off. I made it back to the carrier and into hyperspace, but we lost the planet and over half our forces in that engagement.”

It began to really sink in that the success of our mission hinged on this sort of slaughter.

“So what did you do from there?” I asked, swatting at a vanta rat as it scurried by.

“I got assigned a new unit, but after that battle I couldn’t stand dropping my team into the middle of a war zone. Not while I fly off and hope there’s someone left to pick up at the end. So I put in for a transfer to the armored infantry division. I figured, let somebody else do the flying, I wanted to be on the ground and face the danger with my team.”

Sauln didn’t say anything about being in the infantry, so I assumed it didn’t work out.

She shook her head, “Nah, I passed all the firearms and hand-to-hand combat tests required for duty, but in the end it came down to policy. The Tydorren execs thought women too delicate for ground combat, obviously they never met me. I reapplied a few more times, but kept getting the same standard BS rejection letter. So eventually I said hell with them and resigned.”

“Well, you’re probably better off.” I said casually, not understanding why anyone would want to be in the military in the first place, let alone after seeing something like that. “Sounds like those poor guys got sent on a suicide mission.”

Ellie didn’t reply, but the scornful look she gave me said plenty.

Uh-oh. What’d I say?

“Yeah, well I guess an engineer wouldn’t get it.”

With that she slid down from the crates and headed for the door.

“I think that went pretty well,” I sighed to a vanta rat which had crept up next to me. Twitching its whiskers, it squeaked in reply.

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