

Reptilia Droc

Encounter at Sakora

by
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The funnel of light outside the porthole window scattered back into a normal star field as the shuttle exited hyperspace. Melean always enjoyed getting a view of hyperspace when her work called for her to travel. While the initial jump took her stomach some getting used too, it was worth it for the beautiful display of color that made up the sub-dimensional conduit.

But now she had arrived at her destination, the Sakora system. The medium sized passenger shuttle would continue on to the system's second planet. Brushing a purple strand of hair from her face, she looked around the rest of the cabin. It was a two level shuttle and both floors were filled with passengers. A handful were human like herself, the majority were beta species which followed in a similar evolutionary path as her own kind, but differed in the fine details. Then there were a few, more exotic species, boasting scales, feathers, and chitinous exteriors.

She noted from their uniforms that most of her fellow passengers were miners or support staff, along with some engineers, and low level managers. The mix of workers puzzled her. Sakora was only in its initial surveying phase for the mining operation. Melean expected to see surveying crews, mineral researchers, and construction crews. Why was the Gal Zinge Corporation already sending its second phase crews?

She would ask her new supervisor about it after she landed and had a chance to settle in, she decided, and turned back to the view of space. They must have exited hyperspace towards the middle of the system, she could already begin to make out Sakora. It looked like a beautiful planet from space. A bright blue and green globe with swirling clouds, not unlike the long forgotten home world her ancestors called "Earth". But from the stories she recalled, Earth only had one moon. Where as Sakora had three turquoise colored satellites of various size orbiting around it.

As the shuttle drew closer she also noticed the cluster of Gal Zinge battle ships standing guard over the corporation's new acquisition. At first it seemed like overkill, but then she remembered, this was the Outer Rim. There were dangers here she wasn't used to living in the sheltered atmosphere of the Core Worlds. She heard stories about space pirates, and insect-like creatures migrating from another galaxy. The worst stories were about a race called, the Reptilia Droc.

She assumed most of it was just rumors though. None of these fantastic clashes ever got reported in any mainstream news sources. Most articles described the Droc as primitive, barbaric creatures that still fought with their bare claws. Little more than a nuisance to the polished and heavily armed soldiers of the Conglomerate States. The holo-zines even portrayed them as comical characters, like a dumb pet next-door that kept getting into trouble. But by the look of the fire power Gal Zinge

kept on hand, there must be something to the rumors.

After the intense heat of reentry faded, and layers of cloud were parted by the shuttle's decent, Melean got her first look at the surface of Sakora. The landscape was diverse with oddly curving hills and narrow snaking valleys. She could view for miles, and it was amazing to see such a vast area of open space. On most of the Core Worlds the terrain had been flattened, and paved over to make room for the ever increasing population. Views like this could only be seen in preserves, and even then not nearly as impressive as this.

Her real interest, of course, was the vegetation and judging from the dense forest that blanketed the terrain, she would have plenty of specimens to occupy her research. As she tried to pick out some of the larger specimens from the Sea of Fauna, she hoped the shuttle would land soon so she could get a closer look.

But as the shuttle passed over a mountain, her enthusiasm gave way to surprise. In the next valley, the forest she had been admiring was being wrenched free of the landscape by a group of enormous machines. Melean recognized the machine as excavators, five hundred foot long hovering platforms which used tractor beams to inhale the terrain beneath it into storage bays where the more useful resources could be sorted through at a later time.

Why had they already started sending out excavators, she wondered? But as the shuttle pressed onward, she saw that the mining operation had already been established. Levelers were flattening the terrain, while huge earth movers stripped away rock in a spiral shaped pattern. Extractors and ore processing stations lined the perimeter, waiting for the first minerals to be brought to the surface.

The shuttle passed the mining site and proceeded to the command compound. Melean had expected a small station with a landing pad and a couple two level complexes. What she saw out the shuttle's view port was a circular complex the size of a small city. It was clear the Sakora operation was well beyond the surveying stage and was near full operation. This is all wrong, she thought, shaking her head. Melean didn't know what had changed since she received her original orders, but she intended to find out.

Melean exited the shuttle with the flow of other passengers. With the shuttle bay doors still open Sakora's atmosphere filled the hanger. The first thing Melean noticed was humidity, she was already beginning to sweat a little in the long sleeves of her light blue uniform. She surveyed the hanger, it was an enormous structure with several open docking pens designed for passenger and cargo shuttles. Further in the bay were several smaller patrol crafts and transports.

As she crossed the boarding ramp onto the main platform, she took in the bustle of workers and other personnel. Some were boarding crafts, unloading cargo, and others were milling about the small supply shops and stands along the hanger's back wall. She also watched with concern as a platoon of green armored soldiers marched by shouldering high-powered plasma rifles. She was beginning to wonder just how dangerous things were on the Outer Rim.

She searched the crowds for the nearest information kiosk. She needed to scan her transfer code and find out where to report to. She spotted one over by a support beam, but before she reached it she noticed someone walking towards her waving. It was a Belarian, a human-like species with earlobes that extended seamlessly into their jaw. He carried a data-pad and was wearing a Gal Zinge uniform, but with the dress shirt slung over his shoulder.

As he drew near he looked down at his data pad and then back at her.

"Hi, you're Dr. Melean Tass? Our new botanist," he asked?

Melean smiled and nodded.

“Are you with Mr. Kirsc's environmental analysis team?” she asked in return.

The Belarian smirked when she mentioned the analysis team, she was curious what was meant by that.

“Yeah, the analysis team, that would be me. I'm Bradic Al'zern, zoologist. Just call me Bradic,” he replied and shook her hand. “Well, let me show you to your quarters. Once the droids drop off your luggage and you have a chance to get settled, I'll give you the grand tour.”

A few hours later, Melean and Bradic strode down the halls of the complex. It was getting late in the day and the soft reddish glow of sunset shown through the corridor's floor-to-ceiling glass plate walls. Melean glanced out the window as they passed, the warm light gave her short purple hair a pinkish hue. The view was beautiful despite the destructive spires of mining equipment and processor stations piercing the foreground.

“Here we are,” Bradic announced stopping in front of the next door. “This is where you'll be working.”

Pulling his ID badge from his pocket, the door's electronic eye scanned it before granting them access. Melean followed him into a medium sized lab. Everything expressed its new and unused status with a sleek metallic shine. The room would have been impressive if it wasn't so bare. Being unused there were no personal effects and no specimens. There wasn't even much equipment, the corporation having been too cheap or uninterested in her work she thought.

One item stood out however.

“What's this?” she asked pointing to a small potted plant with a sad brownish tint.

“It's a *Manolya* flower.” When I heard the corporation was sending a botanist, I figured it'd make a good lab warming gift.

“Bradic, that's so sweet of... oh,” Melean trailed as she touched the flower and several petals fell to the table.

“Sorry about that, guess I forgot to water it.”

“Well it's the thought that counts,” she smiled.

“Hey, how about I show you my lab. It's right next door.”

The two walked over to the next hatch. When Bradic opened the door, Melean jumped and let out an “eep” of surprise as a foot long red lizard came charging out the hatch and down the hall.

“Damn. There goes my polyciranthuss,” Bradic remarked with mild disappointment.

“That was one of your specimens?” Melean inquired.

“Yeah, but but it's alright. They're pretty common around here”

“Oh good,” Melean remarked sarcasm.

The pair stepped into the lab. Bradic turned to face Melean and gestured with his arms to introduce the room. “Well this it, my den of science.”

Melean looked around the lab, eyebrows raised. Bradic's lab was as cluttered and worn as Melean's was empty and polished. Everywhere she looked, Melean saw boxes on the floor half buried equipment, scattered papers, and data-disks. Meanwhile, the shelves were lined with small cages housing strange animals, some of which Melean had never seen the likes of.

“It's very... homey,” Melean tried to think of something positive to say.

“And that concludes our tour. We hope you enjoy the rest of your stay here at the Sakora mining

operation,” he joked and grabbed a stool.

“But wait, what about the other researchers?” Melean asked with a confused look on her slender face.

“All present, and accounted for,” he smirked.

“It's just the two of us? I know we're not high on the corporation's priority list. But they can't expect the two of us to do an analysis of the whole planet.” she countered.

Bradic simply shrugged.

“Well who did the initial study? I mean they're already digging out the first mine. I thought they were still taking core samples? We should have been brought in the same time as the scanner crew.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “They like to give the scanners time to do an unfettered assessment. The core samples determine whether the directors care what we have to say.”

Melean shook her head, “I'm going to need to talk to Kirsc right away. They need to halt clearing until we have time to map out habitat preserves.”

Bradic's smile faded, “Unfortunately the bollerite samples came back off the chart. They've already decided to strip the entire planet. Our job has been switched from zoning preserves to extracting specimens for conservation and research.

Melean's confusion boiled into anger, “This is unacceptable. Which way is Kirsc's office? I'm going to talk to him right now.”

“You can't. Kirsc... already returned to the Core Worlds.”

“He what? Then who are we reporting to?”

“Each other?” he shrugged again. “He said to extract samples, have them sent to the research center on Monessa Prime. That and don't make any trouble for the digging teams.”

Melean plopped down on a stool next to Bradic, a look of bewilderment, and defeat on her face.

“I don't believe this crite.”

“You haven't worked in the Outer Rim before I take it? They pull this crap in the Core Worlds too, but they're subtler about it because it's in the public eye. Here they're more blunt about what they want.”

“Well, if they wanted a botanist that would just roll over and sign off on a blank report, they picked the wrong woman. I'm not going to let an entire planet's ecosystem get destroyed without any one even knowing it existed. You and I are going to proceed with our research as planned and we're going to make as much noise as it takes to make the directors see what they're doing here.” Melean replied with determination.

“That... might not go over so well,” Bradic groaned, but Melean was no longer listening.

The following day, Melean met Bradic in the transport bay. She traded in the long sleeves and skirt of her dress uniform for a purple tank top, gray shorts, and tan vest. She also wore a backpack, sturdy boots, and a utility belt. She was uneasy about being required to carry a plasma handgun, but Bradic informed her it was a regulation that any personnel going outside the compound wear one.

As they strode past the shuttles, Bradic continued, “Now, we're being given a security escort. His species is... a little different from what your used too. So try not to overreact when you meet him.”

Melean gave him an annoyed look. She had met plenty of non-humanoid species working for Gal Zinge. What did he think she would do, faint? Just because their escort had three eyes or what not.

As they turned the corner though, Melean's eyes went wide. Her view was obscured by a seven foot tall mound of muscle covered in fur.

“Melean, this security officer, Set'Cul Nath.” Bradic gestured towards the enormous creature. Set'Cul stood upright and had a vaguely humanoid build, but had long double jointed legs ending in

paws. He had short white fur, with a stripe of black running down his back. His head had canine features with a long snout, and pointed ears, and black fur around piercing yellow eyes. His clothes were Security issue, but modified for his build. He wore army fatigues that ended before the second joint in his legs, a tank top, and vest. He carried a sidearm, as well as few non-corporate issued items such as a pair of beaded necklaces, an arm band with a tribal design on it, and a long curved knife sheathed at the back of his utility belt.

“He'll be keeping us out of trouble while we're out in the woods.” Bradic continued. “Set'Cul, this is Dr. Melean Tass, our new botanist.”

“Welcome to Sakora, Dr. Tass,” the large wolf-like being greeted her and held out a clawed hand.

Melean hesitated when first she saw Set'Cul's long talons, but the security officer's deep, smooth voice had a gentle calming quality that eased her concerns. She took Set'Cul's massive hand and replied “Just Melean, please.”

“Do you mind if I ask what your species is called,” she asked?

“My people are the Lycral, from the Bassorian system.”

Melean nodded, but the name didn't sound familiar.

Bradic added, “He's an alpha. I think it's what Melean was really wondering. She's from the core worlds, and most of the betas back at the home office don't have your... presence. Isn't that right, Melean? ...Melean?”

“Huh? I mean, yes,” Melean had stopped listening and had been unconsciously staring at Set'cul. She had never been one to care about her coworkers appearance, but seeing an alpha in person took some getting used too. Most betas had a familiar humanoid appearance to them, even the more exotic species with feathers or scales followed a similar evolutionary path. But alphas developed along an entirely different trajectory.

It wasn't just their size, either. From what Melean recalled from her undergrad biology classes, they possessed preternatural strength, speed and agility. As well as accelerated healing, and predatory senses. They evolved a sentient intelligence, while maintaining all the specialized skills of their animal ancestors. Being in the presence of something that could kill you so easily was simultaneously exciting and intimidating.

“Well,” Bradic continued. “Now that introductions are out of the way, I think we better get started. We have a whole planet to catalog and those excavators aren't going to wait.”

A short time later, Melean, Bradic and Set'Cul took off in a small, low-altitude transport about 12 feet long. Just large enough to carry the three of them and their equipment. Melean glanced out the window as they passed over the mining installation. They had lost so much time already, she thought as she looked over the barren trenches cleared away by the corporation.

She turned to Bradic who was piloting the craft, “So, Bradic, being required to carry a sidearm and having Set'Cul with us,” she glanced at the alpha squeezed into the back seat. “Are Sakora's forests really that dangerous?”

“There are a few predators large enough to attack beta-size prey. And being a previously uninhabited planet, they don't have any fear of the workers. At least, not until the diggers arrive. But the big predators are nocturnal and we'll only be out during the day. So, it's really just a precaution,” he assured her.

“I would disagree,” Set'Cul interjected. “We had four men go missing from the surveying teams. Plus there are the serpents.”

This caught Melean's attention.

“Serpents,” she asked nervously?

“There have been sightings of strange glowing snakes that swim through the air. My people believe in spirits resembling these creatures. They were the messengers of the gods. Perhaps they are angry over the destruction being done to this planet.”

Bradic rolled his eyes, “Set’Cul, that’s just superstition and you know it.”

Their transport had passed the mine and was now flying over Sakora’s lush forest. It was a much closer view than what Melean had on the shuttle the day before. She was trying to note specimens for further study, but Set’Cul’s story was sticking in her head.

“Still, that’s pretty odd. Don’t you think?” Melean asked. “I looked through your catalog of recorded species, I don’t remember seeing anything like that. You’re the zoologist, but this doesn’t seem like the right environment for that kind of physiology.”

“You’re right, but that just means they’re probably an invasive species. They could have stowed away on a transport from another world or it could be a rival corporation trying to sabotage the operation,” he replied as he started to bring the transport down in a clearing.

Bradic pulled the transport into a parking position a foot over the ground and powered down the engine. He was about to hop out when Melean took hold of his arm.

“Sabotage?” she asked thinking back to the platoons of soldiers and fleet of battle ships in orbit.

“You didn’t think Gal Zinge was the only one interested in this planet did you? They were just the ones who took it first.”

Melean knew the twelve corporations making up the Conglomerate States were no allies, but she didn’t think they’d stoop to that. Melean was starting to realize she had to come to the Outer Rim to learn how the galaxy really worked.

Melean followed Bradic and Set’Cul out of the transport. When she stepped down from the hovering vehicle, her feet sunk down into the dirt slightly. It had sort of a sponge-like quality. The air was hot and humid, but she had dressed for that. Sounds of chirping and croaking from the native animals filled the background. Then, there was the vegetation finally, she had a chance to see it up close. It was unlike anything she had seen before. It had qualities resembling more of sea plant life than anything normally found on most worlds’ land ecosystems. She could make a career on studying this planet alone. She only hoped that her research would be enough to win its preservation.

A few days later, Melean’s fascination with the Sakora’s unique ecosystem had only increased. Here, the plant’s process of photosynthesis and reproduction were totally different from the standard model found on most life bearing planets. It was interesting working with Bradic as well, and comparing the relationship of the herbivores he was studying with the plant specimens. Bradic’s odd sense of humor kept their excursions interesting as well.

She had forwarded their result so far to director Kirsc, hoping the data would make him reconsider setting up the preserves. But his only reply was repeating his orders to send all specimens to Monessa and stay out of the digging teams’ way. She wondered if he even looked at the data. Bradic suggested that she appeal more to Kirsc’s sensibilities. Focus on finding specimens that would profit the corporation, like medicinal properties for Gal Zinge’s pharmaceutical branch.

She glanced back at Set’Cul, he was leaning against an orange sprial of a tree, arms folded across his broad chest. He was patient and polite the entire time, but Melean could tell that under this placid exterior he was bored and restless. The alpha stayed vigilant and investigated every rustle and snapping branch, but their days were quiet as Bradic promised.

Melean left the plant she was scanning and walked over to the security officer.

“Set’Cul, you know I feel safer having you with us. But I was wondering how you got assigned

to us? The corporation doesn't seem to care about our operation. I'm surprised with your strength and skills, your not guarding the survey teams or the digging crew.”

“The chief of security doesn't trust alphas. He prefers to keep me out sight and out mind.”

Melean was surprised by his answer.

“With all of the different species working under Gal Zinge, he holding that against you?”

“I'm sure you've heard the stories about alphas. That we're killers, feral animals. To a lot of people, just being an alpha makes me the same as the Reptilia Droc.”

“Yes, I've heard people say those things,” she sighed. Even after nine hundred years, the war against the Reptilia Droc left a deep distrust of all alphas.

“But how can anyone believe that crap once they've met you.”

“Some people only see what they want to see. The corporations have taken advantage of that in more than one way.”

“What do mean,” she asked?

But before Set'Cul could answer, a rustling from a near by bush caught his attention.

Melean assumed it was just another one of those red lizards scurrying around. But Set'Cul sniffed the air and didn't like whatever he smelled. He flattened back his ears and pulled back his lips in a snarl. Melean unbuttoned the snap on her sidearm holster and took a step back from the bush. She looked around for Bradic, but he seemed to have wondered away from the group.

Set'Cul crept stealthy towards the bush. He reached behind and drew a long curved knife that had been sheathed to the back of his belt. With a spring of action he leapt through the air and into the bush. Melean tensed, but almost as soon as Set'Cul disappeared into the brush, the thing he smelled came flying out in his place. The creature flew through the air propelled by a serpentine motion, and was coming directly at Melean. She drew her weapon, but by the time she could take aim, it darted off in another direction and disappeared. As Set'Cul burst back into view, the last thing Melean could see of the creature was the eerie blue glow of its tail.

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