

Asteroid Dragons

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Chapter 1

Before.....

The asteroid was like all other asteroids when it entered inhabited space. Just another rocky lump that came hurtling out of the deepsome darks that bordered the outermost planets of the furthest solar system of the Empire. Just another asteroid ejected from a belt of debris gyrating in a galactic ballet in the solar shoals of a distant system. Just a carbon-rich rock rolling its moss-less way onwards.

Like all other asteroids it was assessed for risk potential, its size and spectrographic signature recorded, its speed and trajectory noted. No planets were threatened by its presence. No need to call up the ships that were the first line of defence against the wanderers that drifted in from the dark void bounding the outer planets. No need to use the kinetic impact cannons mounted on satellite platforms drifting in orbit above the glittering cities. Nothing out of the ordinary, just another chunk of accreted matter to be tracked and monitored. No more than a routine annoyance on the well plied trade routes.

Just another asteroid, drifting anonymously between the planets, handed from one sector control to the next as it crossed the Imperium. A routine matter in the outer zones, a welcome distraction to the quieter ones. Perhaps a lonely astronomer wondered at how the asteroid neatly threaded its way across the Imperium without falling prey to the call of gravity, the lure of its suns. Query would have given way to wonder if they had marked the asteroid's sole inhabitant, who rode the rock silently, waiting, learning.

The asteroid finally reached the cluster of planets that marked the other side of space controlled under the auspicious banner of Xarxes, long may the Emperor reign. From here the asteroid would pass into other hands. Records were dispatched by sector management to their neighbours. Another corresponding bureau prepared take up the mantle of watcher, having quibbled satisfactorily over the jurisdiction of the two realms. But the inhabitant had calculated too. It had changed, learned, taken on new form. Ancient memories predicated a desire for more chaotic conditions, not the urbane and regulated empire that had proved so fruitful in information. It had calculated, and now the asteroid changed direction. I am a starfish, liverwort, coral it thought idly as it hunkered down to preserve what little remained of its energy.

Now.....

There was little to see outside the ship in this part of space but Lilith looked anyway. A few distant suns thrust their shine tenuously towards the ship, which, disdainful of the pitiful waves of radiation, had dispensed with all but the most cursory of shields. Even the luminous bulk of the Drake Nebula was muted and shapeless from here when back home it dominated the night sky above the planet. Pulling the usual recalcitrant strands of hair out the way she pressed

her face against the window and examined the darkness for the telltale distortions that presaged the transition to hyperspace.

A tiny tremor shook the ship and Lilith looked back into the cabin. A second larger shudder shivered the room, knocking a picture off her desk and sending the lamp into a frenzied shimmer. Please work, Lilith worried silently, her own particular nightmare involved deep space and dwindling supplies. The hyperdrive was not due for servicing till they completed this run but the Rose's engines were ancient and she would have felt happier if they had done it before they left. Still it was not as if they couldn't make it to their destination via the near terminal boredom of real space flight, eventually. God knows they had enough supplies, they were way overstocked. Lilith glared at the malevolent freight computer. Even the eighteen days it took to cross the hyperspace reef that separated the colony planet Losian III from the capitol had not been sufficient to catch up on its irregularities.

There was another miniature quake and Lilith finally felt the tiny vibrations of the hyperdrive spread reassuringly through the deck. Invisible reefs, mused Lilith as she returned her attention to the window again, watching the penumbra of ripples spread over the stars. You couldn't see them but attempting to enter hyperspace within them was invariably fatal for any biological organisms, though you could punch through an armoured message pod if you gave it plenty of power. All wise captains allowed a substantial error margin in navigating the reefs, allowing for drift. Even the most accurate 3-space map couldn't prevent you from being smeared across the interior of your ship if the reef had moved. Unless you were very rich or the military, in which case onboard transponders tracked hyperspace conditions for you. The Rose was neither and duly added an additional two days to time it took to transit the reef. No wonder the god forsaken rock had not been inhabited till now.

The stars disappeared and Lilith returned to her seat. A couple of days and they would be dropping back into normal space to the welcoming sight of sun and planet. Sighing she returned her attention to the files. The backlog of stock to be checked remained obstinately large. Damn there was another discrepancy. Lilith frowned at the screen and sighed. A gentle chime sounded and a small rectangle unfurled on her screen, frosted over and then cleared to show an image of their comm. officer, Huang, who doubled up, like most of the small crew, as freight handler in port. Lilith sighed again and tapped the image which unfroze to reveal the cheerful face of Huang seated at his console at the bridge.

"Lilith we've picked up a request from Losian III for additional medical supplies. Pirates hit their orbital med facility last cycle. They want to know if we can help them out, there are a couple of critical items they are running short on." Huang's hands swung out of view then reappeared, dragging a data icon on his fingertip. "I'm patching the list through now."

With a practised gesture Lilith dropped the list in into the ship's inventory and spliced it to search. Icons whirled as the computer started flashing up matches and discards, proffering substitutes for some items. Huang remained on screen, chatting. "Total bastards, huh. That's the fourth orbital the Tark's have taken out. I wonder if they knew it was medical?" Lilith nodded absently, concentrating on the results. "You could discount just about anything the computer said should be in hold 3. Last flight the entire electronics suite for the hold had malfunctioned leaving them unable to open the cargo door or use any of the handling systems. She still hadn't tracked all the stock shuffled between the holds or inventoried the temperature sensitive items."

Captain Fleming appeared behind Huang and leant over. "If we have those supplies Lilith then we'll save some time by jumping close to the planet. Drop them off a little earlier."

Lilith ummed and hurried through a final enquiry. "Well it looks like we have most of what they want sir but I'm going to have to go down and check on some of them in person."

The Captain frowned. "Do we have them or don't we?"

"Sorry sir, hold 3". Lilith grimaced apologetically.

"Oh bugger", the Captain's carefully composed image of distinguished trader shifted aside to show the harassed owner operator that lurked not far underneath. He rubbed at his silvery hair fitfully. "But we definitely have most of what they want, right?."

Lilith nodded happily, "At least two thirds and I think I have seen some of the other items in with the perishables in hold one." The Captain rubbed at his chin slowly, his brows lowered in thought. "In that case we'll cut the margins, Losian has offered us a good bonus if we can bring those items earlier." He turned away, issuing commands in his best gallant star ship captain style to their new and extremely pretty navigator Suroni. Huang smirked at Lilith, who poked out her tongue at him and cut the comm before he could respond.

The computer streamed off a packing manifest. Lilith threw it in the recycler and did one manually. It must be a fairly substantial bonus she gauged. Captain was normally very careful about observing safety margins with the old ship. She just hoped Suroni didn't dump them in the atmosphere or right in the planet itself. Huang reckoned the Captain was sleeping with her but gods that was some age difference. At least the Rose was fairly forgiving, if a little temperamental at times. Lilith patted the bulkhead next to her fondly. Originally built in the legendary Sol republic, the freighter had traded to the very fringes of the galactic empire. Changing hands as she grew older, moving ever lower down the ranks. Captain had bought her to ply the domestic trade route between the three systems of the Duchy. Back then the Duchy had been thriving, offering an alternative trade route to the Rogan Confederacy. That was before raids had begun.

People were genuinely worried these days. The military just couldn't be everywhere at once. All three planets had been targeted, and covering them was complicated by the reef which cut Losian off. In the last year the attacks had escalated. There was no proof but everyone knew that was how the Tark Consortium softened up its targets for inclusion in their feudal oligarchy. Few traders stopped by now, preferring the safety of the well-guarded Rogan ports, and their higher fees. They had managed to repel the few attacks on their trade planets. Locally registered vessels had been forced out into external trade missions and now only the Rose and Rajapoji's even older hauler plied the route across the reef to Losian's planets.

There was a gentle knock on the door and a lined white whiskered face leant around the doorframe. Lilith smiled, MacDunn was an old sweetheart, a contemporary of the Captain's who had worked with him for years as the drive maintenance and general all-round mechanic. Which in this old bucket made him the most important man aboard.

"I believe you will be wanting to go into hold one my dear". Lilith nodded her assent. The Rose had four cargo holds, two of which could be aired up at any one time while the remaining two were left in vacuum. Each hold acted as an air reservoir for the others, allowing them to completely open the holds to space for large deliveries. It would take roughly an hour to air up hold one, but it was a lot easier than trying to stock take in a vac suit. Behind the holds the ship stretched out in a long narrow gantry to which a few cargo pods clung before the tail terminated in the local space drive. Until the ship picked up the mass of pods from the moon mines of Losian IV the ship resembled nothing as much as a wingless dragonfly.

"Want me to rustle up Jonathon to help?" Mac Duff asked.

Lilith grimaced in mock horror then added " It's all light stuff, I'll be fine with it". Jonathon was on night watch this week and he extra muscle wasn't worth the litany of complaints that dragging the freight handler from his bed.

MacDunn finished with his usual complement on Lilith's charms, which as usual made her shake her head disbelievingly and return to her invoices. The wily mechanic lingered a moment in the doorway.

"And Lilith" he said, "the lifts are not working again."
Lilith looked up in protest but the door was empty and MacDunn halfway down the hall.

Down in the hold Lilith released the locking mechanism that attached the huge sliding rack to its neighbour behind and wheeled the rack out of the way. She had a vague idea that a couple of itinerant boxes containing some of the less perishable medicines had been pushed to the rear to make way for the cartons of local liquor variant that the Captain had insisted on hauling to the capital. They had sold surprisingly well, for what was just a neurotoxin fermented from some kind of indigenous plant species.

On the bottom shelf Lilith spied two boxes marked with the caduceus. She waved her scanner over them and permitted herself a smug smile. That would bring the order up to ninety percent filled. Pulling at the catches that held the boxes firmly to the frame of the rack Lilith started to move them to her trolley before stopping in consternation. A queasy ripple waved in front of her, upsetting her stomach. A warning bell began to ring and Lilith felt the internal lurch that presaged the shift from hyperspace back to normal space. The trouble was they shouldn't be coming out of hyper for another 30 hours or so.

Swallowing deeply to stop her lunch coming up Lilith started to comm the bridge, then stopped, perhaps it was better not to disturb them during the shift, especially if there was something wrong with the ship. Except the hyperdrive seemed to be running fine. Maybe it was raiders she thought wildly. But they didn't attack ships in transit, not when space was so vast and it was so much easier to wait at the destination. Running into pirates by accident in the middle of deep space was popular in the vids but impractical in the extreme in reality. There had to be something wrong with the ship. Lilith gritted her teeth, her mouth tasted of bile. She could feel her jaw tensing in anticipation. The drop back into regular space was always more unsettling than the transfer up.

Lilith felt her stomach knotting and the sick squeeze slid up and settled in her brain. She shut her eyes, it was bad enough feeling the transition without watching it. There was a brief moment when nothing was where it should be and then the ship dropped abruptly out of hyperspace and hit reality. The floor slammed up towards Lilith, who found herself lying breathless on her back, looking up at the unlocked rack tilting wildly on its rollers and slowly toppling towards her. With a sickening crunch, the heavy metal structure fell on her legs.

For a moment she felt nothing and then a sheet of pain settled over her and contracted. The warning bells stopped and she could hear herself whimpering. She couldn't move, the rack pinned her to the ground. Her fingers found her data wand and she gripped it tightly. Then the bells started ringing again, signalling another shift, this time back into hyperspace.

Right tibia, hairline fracture. Lacerations and extensive soft tissue trauma to both lower limbs. The automed completed its diagnosis and began to dictate treatment. It looked and felt worse than it was. The rack had pressed a deep cut into her right leg. Purple black blotches had begun to appear in pools around the injury. What wasn't blue or black was red and swollen.

Lilith couldn't bear to look at them. It was a relief when they were finally bandaged, the right leg further protected in an inflatable medicast. Just a dull ache remained, bearable if she didn't try to move too much. She felt indescribably weary.

When she woke later Captain Fleming was sitting vigil next to her bunk. "Lilith", he said simply and leaned over to help her sit up. He handed her a glass of water with two painmeds and watched approvingly as she swallowed them.

"I'm sorry about this" he said, waving at her legs. "The automed seems to think you can be up on crutches in a few days. Are you in pain now?"

Lilith answered truthfully that they were uncomfortable but not too painful. The Captain pulled the chair closer to the bed and looked at her intently, his seamed face perturbed.

"I think an explanation is due to you", he said shortly, rubbing at his chin. He stopped for a moment then continued, "soon after we entered hyperspace we received a priority message from our government. The Rose had been requisitioned under the emergency powers granted for the duration of the current crisis. We were directed to abort the flight to Losian and proceed immediately to a rendezvous within this segment space bounded by the reef. This directive was not negotiable, we were not to delay, we were not to inform Losian, we were not to deviate from the path dictated to us " the Captain said softly. "We were reminded that under the wartime securities act, to disobey is treason and", his voice rose, " the bastards threatened to impound my ship if we delayed or disobeyed". He leaned back, satisfied with Lilith's raising eyebrows.

"What on earth for?" Lilith asked.

"Apparently the Xarxes Imperium has requested our help" By his bemused expression the Captain thought this as unlikely as Lilith did. The idea of the most powerful and richest empire in this sector of the galaxy needing help from what was, if not the poorest, then at least one of the smallest consortiums, seemed peculiar.

The two kingdoms shared a border, albeit buffered by the constraints imposed by the Magellan reef, but the Imperium pretty well ignored The Duchy, despite diplomatic efforts made by the government. And why wouldn't they thought Lilith, despite the spin put on it by the press there was no incentive for Xarxes Imperium to help. Their tech base was enviable, their natural resources extensive and their culture copied around the galaxy. It was not as if the Duchy had anything to offer that the Imperium did not already possess in greater quantities.

The press, having exhausted the Imperium as saviour now mildly demonised them as selfish and arrogant. Now the same press were flirting wildly with the Rogan Confederacy, situated on the other side of the Duchy. They at least had offered to send a squadron of battleships to help with the raiders, for a few relatively unimportant trade concessions of course. Except that insider information bandied about the trade ships indicated that the concessions were somewhat more substantial than popular opinion indicated, which was why the government was stalling despite the increasing pirate casualties.

"What could we possibly do for them?" Lilith asked finally, "what could *we* do for the Xarxes Imperium?"

Captain Fletcher looked weary, "I don't know, they wouldn't tell me. I can only presume they need some cargo shifted."

By the time they had arrived at the rendezvous Huang had rigged her up an extra console, clamping it to the bunk railing. He patched her into the comm desk and gave her authorisation to access any of the feeds so that she could bring up vid from the comm channels or any of the internal cameras. At the moment the screen showed the Rose's bridge, centred in on Captain

Fletcher, who stood there solidly while Suroni brushed invisible specks off his most formal captain's coat. Lilith wondered again if they were sleeping together. At least he looked like a distinguished senator. The same could not be said for what could be seen of the Rose's bridge, which like most antiquarian ships had acquired a certain *je ne sais quoi* in its travels. It was clean and tidy but sporadic upgrades across the centuries meant that no one item matched another. The captain's desk was quite literally an antique, all wood and turned legs and discreet recessed functions. Pity that Huang was only halfway through reinstalling its comm functions, the gutful of wires spilling out spoiled its effect.

"Incoming comm request Captain" Huang called out, excitement raising his voice.

Captain Fletcher nodded, waving Suroni back and seating himself at his desk. "Connect us please, Huang, on the main screen."

A chime sounded and another view unfurled on Lilith's console. Against a background of starkly white bridge an elegant dark skinned woman of middle age bowed.

"Greetings, I am Captain Xinka" she said formally and then, more uncertainly as if she had just taken note of the Rose's eccentricities, "Captain Fletcher of the Quotidian Rose we require assistance. Your government has indicated that you will ...ah..be able to help us?"

She could hear Suroni draw a sharp breath in the background. A text from her popped up on Lilith's screen: *OMG imperial family.*

"Certainly Ma'am," Captain Fletcher replied blandly, alert to the slur on the Rose. "Our government is glad to help, how may we be of assistance?"

How do u no? Lilith typed back.

X is only for imperial saw it on Galactic Celebs.

Lilith shook her head, bemused by the sycophancy. *Shh, watch.* On the vid Captain Xinka frowned, looked briefly at someone off screen and shook her head slightly before returning her attention.

"We need immediate transport for a valuable artefact", the imperial continued. "As a research vessel we do not have sufficient hold space and the item would be lost before we could bring another ship around the hyperspace shoals. If we wait the object will pass into Tark territory and we do not wish to provoke the raiders" She stopped briefly. "Our borders with them are currently peaceful."

Huang's text comment on that was quite rude.

Captain Xinka looked slightly despairing, "Is there no other ship available?"

Back on the Rose Captain Fletcher became even blander. "I believe we are the only hyper-capable freighter this side of the reef. As long as your artefact" and he managed to make that sound somehow insulting, "is less than 100 cubic metres in size then we will be able to accommodate your request. The Rose is quite capable. May I ask where the item is?"

Captain Xinka smiled nastily. "I do not think that you are equipped for this kind of recovery." She turned and pointed to the display behind her, "My object is on that asteroid."

"Cargo shifted" the Captain muttered. Technically it had been in, rather than on the asteroid. A large statue sitting in a shallow cave on a rock no more than five kilometres in length rolling around its long axis every forty eight minutes. The technician aboard the Xarxian ship had given them the dimensions of the object they were to pick up, pinpointed its position on the asteroid with millimetre accuracy, sent over information on topography, velocity, pitch, yaw and a complete geological survey. All of which Captain Fletcher had promptly ignored.

"What in tarnation is the damn thing made of?" he had asked.

The technician had dithered and disambiguated before admitting they did hadn't really been able to find out, adding finally that it seemed to be crystalline in nature and extremely tough. The Captain had signed off without comment while the technician was still offering suggestions on how they should proceed. He had quietly asked Lilith a few questions about stock, and then collected MacDunn, for wily knowledge and cargo hand Jonathon for surly muscle.

In the end it was simple. Captain Fletcher and MacDunn had subverted the whole concept of matching velocities with the asteroid by the simple expedient of pushing the item off the asteroid and picking it up in space. A shipment of grav belts intended for the orbital market around Losian IV supplied the lift and a series of remote controlled miner's flares left over from an earlier trip gave just enough impetus to float the heavily wrapped artefact away from the asteroid. After that picking up the three metre parcel in deep space with the external cargo arms was easy. Lilith had admiringly watched the action, punctuated as it was by Jonathon's swearing, courtesy of The Rose's external camera and a feed from MacDunn's helmet. Now the camera focused at the foam swaddled package that sat on the floor of the hold, waiting for the Xarxians to lodge their ship in the emptiness of the recently fixed hold three.

Finally the Captain appeared escorting the Xarxians, Her Royal Highness Xinka strode at the front, a sour expression on her face. Two of her crewmembers openly wore large guns, their expressions calm but distrustful. Stopping next to the huge package, she scowled.

"I wish to check the item".

"Yes your highness". Fletcher sighed gently, adding the correct honorific at Suroni's urging had done little to thaw relations.

"If it has been damaged by your reckless handling" Captain Xinka hissed, leaving the threat unstated. Behind her MacDunn rolled his eyes and Huang snorted back a laugh. The Captain gestured Jonathon forward with the packing modulator. Lilith held her breath as the smart foam reacted to the electronic charge and began to shrivel up into small chunks, which Jonathon sucked up and deposited back in the portable foamer. The grav belts and exhausted flares embedded in the foam dropped noisily to the deck. Captain Xinka was stony faced. In less than a minute the statue was bare under the lights of the dock. Everyone was silent.

In the dim light of distant stars the artefact had been a dark and mysterious object. Reflections from the helmet lights had flickered on its planes like a pack of schizoid fireflies, hindering rather than revealing. Now the full power of the cargo bay lights illuminated the statue in glorious scintillating detail. It had been a monstrous statue of undefined proportions. A shadowy gargoyle waiting to pounce, hinting of wings and teeth. Now it was exquisitely revealed. It scintillated in the light, it was incredibly detailed, it was truly impossible. No one moved no one spoke, not even the Xarxians who had studied it for the long months it took to cross the reef. Finally the spell was broken by the recalcitrant Jonathon.

"Well fuck me if it isn't a dragon".