

OGATU

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PROLOGUE

Millennia ago, when dinosaurs walked Earth and man was just beginning to climb out of the sludge, the Scather civilization flourished. Seekers of knowledge in all its forms, the Elders, rulers of Skathia, expanded their minds as far as possible within the limited confines of their galaxy. Ever searching, they went out to other galaxies to continue their quest for knowledge. So insatiable was their thirst, so driven and focused were their minds that they began to ignore what they considered the boring and unimportant duties in life. Duties such as building cities, growing crops and processing food were suddenly unimportant. In time the Elders ceased doing all physical labor of any kind. To the Elders, the search for and attainment of knowledge was more important than anything.

So, to free themselves of these insipid responsibilities they applied some of the vast knowledge they had gathered; DNA from the far parts of the galaxy were combined and used to create a race of mindless creatures. Creatures that would do the physical labor the Scathers felt beneath them. Unconcerned by the morality of this; the Scathers rationalized that these were merely 'flesh and blood' robots. In order to be cost efficient the Scathers designed their 'robots' with the ability to procreate; thus guaranteeing that there would always be a fresh supply of workers. They called them Ogatu; and for centuries the Scathers used these workers in maintaining their society.

But, for all their super-intelligence, the Scathers failed to remember one basic truth; all living organisms grow and evolve with each generation. After sixteen hundred years under the Scather's mentoring, a portion of the Ogatu became aware and began to learn; and what they learned they did not like. Their so-called Masters were not the great beneficial Gods they had thought them to be. They were cruel emotionless slave drivers who used these poor creatures, as though they were animals. Those who understood hid themselves from the eyes of their Scather masters. They began to study them - and their spaceships. In time their eyes were opened to the world around them; and soon followed the desire to be free. Free themselves they did, to the total surprise of their masters. Insanely raging at the insolence of these 'animals', the Scathers vowed to hunt them down.

On the run for a century, the Ogatu finally found and settled on a planet two galaxies away. They lived in peace and prospered; but knowing their former masters as they did, they prepared for what they knew would come. When the Scathers finally found them they attacked with a ferocity unheard of only to find themselves on the receiving end of same. The Scathers took a terrible beating at the hands of what they considered inferior beings. Astonished and frustrated at not being able to destroy these 'animals', the Scathers took out their fury on all who had helped them - destroying planets and murdering millions in the process. These heinous and unspeakable acts were seared into the mind of every Ogatu. They fully realized the price of friendship with other worlds. To prevent a repetition of this ever occurring again they cut themselves off and refused contact with all Outsiders.

Even so, the Scather Elders' hatred went beyond all reason. They say there is a fine line between genius and insanity; the Elders sailed over this line without even the slightest thought as to whether it was right or wrong. They simply could not accept the Ogatu as sentient beings; nor would they allow them to exist.

So they began a project that would insure the total annihilation of their enemy. Taking DNA from several worlds, they combined these to make a smaller, more lethal version of Ogatu. An army of this prototype would be programmed and used to infiltrate and attack the hated Ogatu on their home world.

Fortunately their plan was never completed; for at the height of their experiment, when the fruition of all their work was about to bear fruit, a mysterious ship dropped out of hyperdrive. Larger than anything in the known universe it de-cloaked above the asteroid belt where the Scathers had hidden their secret lab. Without warning the ship obliterated the entire asteroid belt, the facility included. When the dust cleared all that was left were small boulders drifting in space.

The Scathers never again attempted to play God.

Twenty-four years later an Earth ship on a mission of discovery came upon the colorful green planet and attempted contact. After many hails the 'Earthers' received a rather curt answer from the planet telling them to leave the area; the inhabitants wanted no contact with 'Outsiders'.

The Ogatu did not know that the tenacity of the earthmen equaled their own.

A standing order was set in place by the Space Guild that any passing ships were to attempt hailing the planet. And that's the way it continued until forces came into play, which caught the attention of Commander Duncan Wayside's ship, the Phoenix.

After that everything changed.

CONTACT

Commander Duncan Wayside was a hard man to serve under. Standing 6'3" in a taut muscled frame; his tan face belied his 44 years. His reddish-brown hair was slightly graying at the temples, and he wore it long, tied at the base of the neck. He did not follow what he considered 'silly' rules and regulations onboard his ship. He did however stress discipline in performance of one's duties, and proper conduct towards one's fellow shipmate; male or female. He had a personal policy of acknowledging all in his command and could call each man or woman by name. He took great care of his crew; worked along side them, ate with them, and fought with them. On his ship, it was the united effort of all that made the difference and paid off many times over. The Phoenix was sought out by many to serve on; but only the best made it to her decks.

Once she had been the finest battle cruiser of the fleet, the Nelson. At the Battle of Regis IV she had been all but blown apart; Duncan and his crew had barely survived themselves. Their refusal to give up had won the day, but the cost had been the ship herself. Maybe it was sentimentality, but Duncan could not give her up; not after the beating she took and the way she had kept going against all odds. He and his crew had asked for and received permission to refit her and bring her back on line. Duncan considered it a small reward for saving the World and quite possibly the Galaxy.

At Duncan's direction she was transformed into something else. His engineer, Chief Swanson, had gone to work on her and done things unheard of in engineering fields. He had reconfigured her engines and reshaped her warp drive; when he was finished she worked on two distinct levels. Her laser cannons were reshaped and rewired to work on a cycling wave; thus producing a beam that could cut thru any known material. He also reworked her proton cannons and gave them an extra 'kick', as he liked to put it. She was faster than anything in the fleet, and much more maneuverable. Her shields were laid out in layers around the ship and operated on an oscillating frequency. As a result, she was impenetrable, the only ship of her kind. Duncan renamed her the Phoenix, a fitting name for the noble lady he thought, beautiful and deadly.

In the five years since being re-commissioned the Phoenix had been exploring new worlds as a representative of the Guild. Duncan and his crew had become very adept at diplomacy and all it entailed. The ship had begun a Library of sorts and he filled it with the knowledge they discovered on these journeys. Each planet was catalogued, their people and their customs, their languages, history, and technology. The work was very exciting and the crew of the Phoenix learned to expect anything on each new world they made contact with.

Sontui , a green rain-forested planet turned out to be a favorite planet of the crew; its inhabitants were a peaceful reptilian-like race that loved to party. There was always some kind of 'event' going on, and the lovely females of this world seemed to be fascinated with the 'Earthers', and their mating rituals. Needless to say, the crew was very accommodating, thus making the Phoenix always a welcomed guest. This was not always so with other visitors.

Duncan had made a strong friendship with Tua, one of the scientific leaders of Sontui. They shared a love of Rhouku, a chess-like game and he enjoyed matching strategy with her. During these games they had many discussions about the different worlds in the area. She would describe the inhabitants and their customs in great detail, and Duncan would commit all to his famous memory for later recording.

Tua was quite beautiful in her own way, and very intelligent. Her sleek blue-green skin was soft and sensual to the touch. Her form was lithe and Duncan found, very similar to Earth females. She had ample breasts and a trim waist, and a long sleek tail that could perform miracles. She was extremely sensual in everything she did.

Now to be honest, not all their time together was spent on talk. Tua was definitely interested in Duncan and made no bones about it. They joked about it on many an occasion, but one time she made an overt advance; one which Duncan knew he could not ignore. To her surprise he happily complied and 'jumped in' so to speak, sweeping her off her feet. By the time he was finished he had actually gotten her to 'sing'; a feat no other had ever accomplished. As a result many of the females sought him out and would give him no peace until Tua stepped in and declared Duncan her 'claim'. Their friendship endured right up to the present, and she still sought out his company whenever their ship returned to the planet.

In their many discussions Duncan learned that her knowledge included the Green Planet. The Sontuians had made brief contact, but were told that contact with 'Outsiders' was not wanted. Tua explained that no one had ever landed on that planet (that she knew of), and no one had ever even seen the inhabitants. The leaders of Sontui all agreed it was best to give the Green Planet a wide berth.

She did recall however, that once, about fifty years ago, there was a report of some kind of battle going on near their planet. It was very fierce and many ships were destroyed on both sides. The inhabitants of the Green Planet were fighting off an attack by Scathers, an ancient race of insect-like beings; a very unpleasant race she added. Usually the Scathers stayed in their Galaxy and did not venture beyond - except where the Green Planet was concerned. There seemed to be some kind of unholy war between the two, and no one in the Galaxy wanted to get involved in it.

She relayed that one Aquarian Captain told her of an encounter he was witness to. A Scather ship crossed paths in space with a sleek Silver ship. Reaction was swift and deadly on the part of both, but the Scather ship lost and was utterly destroyed in seconds. Other than that, no one had heard anything from either side for several years now. She often wondered if they had killed themselves off.

Eighteen months later, and well into the third week of a game of cat and mouse, Duncan was losing his patience; weary of playing. Something was showing up on their screens as a quick ‘blip’ and then disappearing. Every hour or so it would register for a nano-second and disappear just as quickly. Something was hiding out there, and it was acutely aware that it was being shadowed by the Phoenix. It had led the Phoenix to a nearby asteroid belt and quickly disappeared among the large spinning rocks.

Only four parsecs from the ‘Green World’, Duncan made the decision to ignore the standing order of ‘contact’ and forego any attempt. Yet he couldn’t help but notice the path of their ‘ghost’ ship. Duncan rose and went up to the navigation bridge and looked at the map laid out before him.

Our friend showed up here, he thought to himself as he traced the way with his finger and followed the track. Hmm... Lets see where you are headed my elusive friend.
Duncan followed the track and quickly saw that he was right, the ship was slowly making its way towards the Green Planet. Well now, isn’t this interesting?

“Sir,” his concentration was broken and he was brought back to the present. The tactical sensor navigator continued; “we have company, big company,” the last said with emphasis.

Duncan’s senses immediately went on alert. He went to the sensor display and watched the screen as a large blip appeared.

“They just came out of warp sir,” said Lt. Plummer, the sensor operator. “They’re cloaked, but not effectively so. I think they want us to see them; they appear to be very interested in our elusive quarry.”

“On screen,” ordered Duncan returning to the Captains chair.

The alien ship de-cloaked and was like nothing they had ever seen. Shaped like a series of large balls stuck together on a long sleek pipe. Reddish in color, it had a series of thick cables linking the balls together. Although bulky in appearance, it glided through the asteroid belt with surprising ease.

“Sir,” the navigation pilot asked, “do you want us to follow it in?”

“Let’s just watch for a moment Ensign Cooper,” Duncan answered, “slowly bring us about for the best advantage should things get nasty, but not close.” Duncan hit a button on his console and the comlink came on line, “Alexei, report to the bridge.”

A few minutes later the door slid open and Alexei stepped onto the bridge. Tall and wiry, his muscled frame was often overlooked. He was the ship’s Tactical & Security Officer. His sandy brown hair was worn long, often in a thick braid at the back of his neck. His chiseled Nordic features and charming wit were a favorite with the ladies; but his pretty-boy features and charming personality hid a razor-sharp mind. He was extremely intelligent and had a photographic memory; nothing got by his keen eye.

His favorite past time was Chess; he loved outsmarting the computer when they played. The A.I. was not too fond of playing him. His intuitive mind proved itself many times over in saving the Phoenix and her crew. He quickly looked around taking everything in; and then went directly to Duncan.

“Ah, I see our company has finally revealed itself,” he said surveying the screen before them. “I knew there was another ship out there; it was obvious our small ‘ghost’ was being chased.”

Duncan filled him in on all that had been taking place in the previous hours. Alexei listened to every detail and asked a few questions.

“So, what do you think?” asked Duncan knowing full well that Alexei had already made his own deductions.

Just then the large ship fired into the asteroid belt and their elusive quarry was suddenly very visible. The small ship darted between the larger asteroids trying to evade the continuing fire.

“I would say if that ship wanted to, it could destroy that puny little craft quite easily. I would also venture to guess that they are after whatever is in the smaller ship.” Alexei answered and added, “...and they want it alive.”

“I’ve been doing some calculations of my own,” began Duncan, “our friend out there hasn’t changed course. I’ve got a pretty good hunch I know where he’s headed.”

Alexei knew from experience that Duncan’s hunches were not to be ignored, “Go ahead,” he urged.

“I think that whoever or whatever is in that ship, is trying to get to the Green Planet. We’ve been following it for weeks, and in all that time it has not deviated one bit from its main direction.” Duncan watched the screen and then continued, “This might be a chance for first contact; that is if we intervene.” He looked at Alexei and grinned, “What say you?”

“It’s a risk Duncan; but the payoff, whew, it would outweigh the risk. I believe we are faster than our cloaked ‘friends’; and I would say evenly gunned.” Alexei stared at Duncan and then a smirk played its way across his face; “Only question left to be answered is, who is doing the chasing?”

Their question was answered suddenly when the large vessel hailed them.

“Sir,” called the communications officer, “they’re hailing us.”

“Shields,” ordered Duncan quickly.

“Alexei, I want you on this, listen carefully and give me your impressions. Everyone behind me move out of the viewers scan.”

“Ok, put it on screen Lt. Womack,” ordered Duncan, “narrow band on their end.” Duncan didn’t want his unknown adversary to see anymore than was necessary.

Alexei whispered quickly, “Short concise answers to their questions, Duncan.”

The being on the screen was unlike anything that the Phoenix and her crew had ever encountered. They were insectoid, Duncan guessed, similar to giant ants or termites; maybe even a close relative of the mantis, but in trimmer bodies. From what they could see, the ship had a honeycombed like interior... very unsettling. There were several of the things in the background at long consoles with flashing lights, and a screen showing the Phoenix and her interior.

“I am Commander Duncan Wayside of....” Duncan began and was interrupted almost immediately.

“Earther,” the creature spat out the word in a whisper-like voice, “we have no quarrel with you or your kind. This matter does not concern you.” There was a series of clicks and then a brisk order, “It would be wise for you to leave this area and not interfere.”

Duncan quickly replied, “Sir, we do not take lightly...” The screen went dark.

Duncan looked at Alexei who smirked and said, “Bad-guys... definitely!”

Lt. Plummer warned, “They’re powering their weapons Commander.”

A blast shot out of the ship and obliterated several of the asteroids in the belt. The small ship suddenly increased its speed and made a run for a planet on the outside of the belt. The larger ship was having difficulty following the smaller faster vessel out of the asteroid belt. They sent out several missiles and one sideswiped the smaller ship’s engines, slowing it down considerably. It began to emit black smoke as it made a beeline for a landing on the desolate planet. Two scout ships exited the large ship and pursued it.

“What planet is that,” asked Duncan quickly.

“Sir,” called Lt Skaggs, a newcomer manning the com-center, “I believe the smaller ship sent a message, sir. It was very fast, but I’m sure of it.”

“Thank-you Lt Skaggs;” Duncan looked around the bridge, “I want to know what planet that is out there... does anybody know?” he raised his voice slightly.

“R-421 sir,” said a shaky-voiced Lt. Womack.

“Calmly Lieutenant, take a breath,” Duncan said in an even voice.

“Sir, it’s a dead world sir; what’s left of a civilization that nuked itself out of existence; potentially dangerous for us. Low level radiation is still emitted from the ground; inhabited by mutants; cannibals sir.”

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