

SPACE CRAZY

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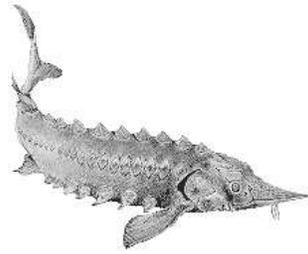
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Image of Dar drawn by Erika Brown.



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**"It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves."
— William Shakespeare**



1

“Dar? Dar? Dar Meltom, get in here!” Denrika called.

“Yeeessssss, Mmmoothhheerr,” Dar replied, teeth chattering, shrouded in the blackness of night, and watching the stars from their patio. It was the dead of winter on Erotis 3; the temperatures hovered around freezing on the semi-arid planet.

“How many times have I told you not to be out so long?”

Dar appeared in the warm glow of the patio door. “Sorry, mother; I wanted to watch the meteor shower tonight.”

“Get in here before you catch cold.”

He trudged inside, sad that he’d be missing the best part. Dar was sixteen years old, and life for him wasn’t easy. Born of a purebred Satiren mother, and the extremely unlikely crossing of an Earthling father; Dar had been picked on most of his life. He stood close to six feet tall and still had the lanky build of a youngling. “If I put a coat on, can I go back out?” he begged.

She rolled her eyes. “What is it with you? Always looking at the stars.”

“I like them, they don’t judge me.”

“Is your school work done?”

Dar nodded. “Yes, mother, I finished it a couple hours ago.” He gave her his best pleading expression.

Denrika pulled her hands through her head of lush green hair. “All right, I suppose so...But only because it’s the weekend.”

“Thank you!” He grabbed her and gave her a big kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be in by two; it should be almost over by then.” Dar dashed off to grab his coat.

“Don’t forget—tomorrow, you’re going to work with me.”

“Yes, mother,” he said, hurrying outside.

She watched him disappear into the darkness. Closing the door, Denrika put her hand on the glass. “You belong to the stars, my son.”

The Erotin settlement of Aknarra was generally a sleepy little town. It resembled many of the other small outposts that dotted the landscape. The majority of the planet was covered in a semi-desert environment. Occasionally a sand storm would blow in, leaving everything covered in a thin film of dust. Water wasn’t too much of a problem, wells were sunk deep into the planet’s crust, and the rainy season usually started in the month of Judin and ran through Optious. Lakes would form from the run-off and help support the communities through the long, dry winters. There was a large body of water, Lake Aknarra, that remained year-round.

Most towns boasted a population of a few thousand. They were well organized with a town council, schools for younglings, and commerce. For those who lived and worked there, it wasn’t a bad living. But each town could only grow so much as it battled the incursion from the desert; and finding jobs for younglings leaving school tended to be challenging.

Erotis was a refugee planet. Other species of aliens which were displaced from their planets by war, famine, or disease, would move in, set up towns, and call the planet home. Many of the settlements were fashioned after a single race of alien, their trade, education, and laws dictated by

the majority species. Trade between the outposts was common, and no one gave any thought to starting wars or squabbles, there wasn't a need.

Dar's mother worked in the general store on Main Street. She shunned the common Satiren occupation of prostitution. Instead, she wanted to raise her son in a normal upbringing, despite not having a father. The hours at the store were long, and the pay just enough to cover expenses. Denrika longed to give her son more than a meager existence. Sure, prostitution paid twenty to thirty times more than she made, but Denrika stuck to her morals. For years, she'd sought out males, hoping they would accept her as a mate. But having Dar made matters difficult. No purebred Satiren male would tolerate a half breed in his home.

Hefting a box of canned goods onto his shoulder, Dar came from the storeroom and onto the sales floor. As a half breed, he wasn't quite as big as the other males in his class, but he was fairly strong. Carefully, he set them down, and opened the box. He made quick work of stocking the shelves. Helping his mother didn't bother him. It tended to be safer than roaming the streets.

The bell above the door clanged as someone came in. Dar poked his head over the shelf to see who it was. Standing in the doorway, a large alien, one he'd never seen before. Erotis 3 also tended to be a stop-over for long haul freighters headed to the furthest reaches of the Ontarrin galaxy. It wasn't uncommon to see a variety of species passing through. Dar thought this one looked curious.

Denrika stood behind the counter. "May I help you?" she said in Universal Ontarrin. It was the common language spoken throughout the galaxy. Most species spoke their native tongue and the universal language.

"Good morning," the alien said in a deep, resonant voice. "I hope you can." His whole frame filled the door, his body clothed in what appeared to be black Catarin hide, contrasting with his tan colored skin. His head sat more on his shoulders, rather than having much of a neck. His eyes were fairly large and brown; his face heavily chiseled with age lines. He bore a few scars on his arms; Dar wondered what they were from.

The big alien carefully closed the door and approached the counter. He towered over Denrika. "My name is Gwog," he said softly. "I'm in need of some supplies."

"Certainly," she replied, picking up a piece of paper and a scribe stylus. "What can I get for you?" She felt quite intimidated by the sheer size of the alien, although he didn't give the impression he wanted to be threatening.

Gwog took a piece of paper out, laid it on the counter, and unfolded it. "Do you have three cases of Iddrian beans?"

Denrika scribbled the information down. "I'm not sure, sir. We can check."

"I'm also in need of some Priddin jerky, a couple bovidis shoulders if you have them, and maybe some game fowl."

"Sounds like you have an army to feed." She glanced up to see Dar peering over the shelf. "Dar, come here."

"Yes, mother." He hurried over. As he drew near to the giant alien, his acute sense of smell took in the deep, rich aroma of the Catarin bovidis hide clothing he wore. They looked new, and smelled wonderful. Dar wanted Catarin hide clothing too; it seemed to be the choice for those canvassing the reaches of space.

"Go in the back and see if we have all of this."

Dar grabbed the list and disappeared.

Gwog watched him leave. "He's yours?"

"Yes."

"Half breed?"

Denrika nodded. "Yes, his father was an Earthling that got sucked through the worm hole near here. They were marooned for a short while...I uh, found him quite attractive and joined with him...Didn't think a youngling could spawn from a joining like that...You know, considering he was from a different galaxy and all."

Gwog chuckled. "Mmm, you'd be surprised. My father was Ouzin, my mother, Catarin."

"Uh, yes, interesting pairing."

"He took her as spoils of war when Ouzinic and Cataris were fighting it out over space right-of-way."

"I see." Denrika fiddled with her fingers. "And you are on a freighter?"

"Yes, I'm captain of the Cunik."

"How many crew do you have?"

Gwog scratched his head. "About a dozen—most of 'em are half breeds."

"Any reason for that?"

"Those of us with mixed breeding aren't viewed upon so nicely. We're shunned in most respects, despite our intelligence and capabilities."

"Dar knows how that goes," Denrika replied.

"The youngling gets picked on?"

"Routinely."

He nodded. "A hard life for him."

She was silent for a moment. "Uh, Gwog?"

"Yes?"

"Would you by chance have need for another crew member?"

"Not particularly...Why?"

"My son has his head in the stars. Almost every night he's out watching them, studying them; and I think, secretly wishing he'd be among them."

"Being a crew member on a freighter is hard work."

"I don't think he'll mind. He works hard for me here at the store...And once he's out of school, there's not much in the way of jobs for him."

Gwog folded his arms and gave it some thought. "Perhaps...I may have need of an assistant who will help me in charting and plotting courses."

"He's done well in his astro-physics course."

"You say he's still in school?"

"He'll be done in a month."

"Hmm. Well, let me think about it. I'm making a run to Quiddes and will be back this way in just about a month."

"He's a good youngling; but I think his place is in the stars."

Dar trudged from the store room, two bovidis shoulders slung on one of his shoulders, and carrying two cases of beans. "Here's part of it. I'll get the rest." He placed everything on the counter and trotted off to get more.

"Hmm, he's a strong youngling," Gwog said, watching.

"I'd love to keep him here to help me, but the store owner won't pay us both." Denrika started tallying up the goods. "He's very bright, but smaller than the other males in his class. And because he's a half breed, I can't tell you how many fights he's been in."

"Space can be a pretty rough and tumble place, too." He picked up one of the bovidis shoulders and gave it a sniff. "I can't promise things will be any easier out there for him."

"Dar never knew his father, never had a male in his life to teach him things."

Gwog wagged a finger at her. "I will *not* fuss over him like a new youngling. He'll be part of my crew, and if it so happens I can *mentor* him, then so be it. But I'm not going to make a concerted effort."

"It's time for him to grow up."

Dar returned, juggling the rest of the supplies. "I'm sorry, sir, but we only have one case of Priddin jerky left."

"That's okay. I plan on putting in for supplies on Priddis anyways. I'll pick some up right from the source." Gwog studied Dar for a moment. "Youngling, what do you know of Priddis?"

Dar looked up, surprised at being addressed. "Uh, well, sir, I know it's in the Lambda sector. The Priddins are predominately an agrarian society; farming bovidis, hegorrians, porcinis, and a fair amount of game fowl." He paused for a moment. "They speak Priddian, a dialect of Perderian, which their ancestors spoke when they migrated from Perderius."

"Very good," Gwog said. "Can you speak any of it?"

"A little, sir. I read it better than speak it—we don't get much of it in language class."

"Any other languages you speak?"

Dar cocked his head. "Well, sir, I can speak a little Jamaraiian, Sirrixian, Guonin, Gundin, and a tiny bit of Darminian."

"Do you learn languages easily?"

"Fairly, sir."

Gwog leaned against the counter; it creaked with his weight, so he stood up. "Your mother says you're almost done with school."

"Yes, sir."

"What would you think about becoming an apprentice on my ship?"

"Ship?"

"I'm captain of the Cunik, the largest freighter in the galaxy."

Dar looked at his mother, his jaw hanging open. "Mother?"

Denrika sighed, trying to choke back a tear. "Son, you belong to the stars, and this is the only way I can think of getting you there."

"But, mother..."

"I'll be fine. You need to grow and become an adult...Please, I'm trying to give you the stars."

Dar turned to Gwog. "You'd have me as crew?"

"You must prove yourself, of course."

"When would we leave?"

"Your mother says you have a month left of school."

Dar frowned. "Unfortunately."

"I'm headed to Quiddes, and when I return, we'll see if you're ready." He took out a wad of Guonin gold strips. "How much is everything?"

Denrika finished figuring the total. "Two hundred and fifty drig."

Gwog counted the sum and laid it on the counter. "I'll have a couple of my crew come by and pick everything up."

"Thank you, sir," Denrika said, offering her hand. "Uh, my name is Denrika."

He smiled and gently took her hand. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Dar wasn't sure what to do, he was frozen in awe. This was just too good to be true; he would be *going into space!*

Gwog reached out and put his huge hand on Dar's head, messing the shock of green hair on his forehead. "I'll see you in about a month, youngling."

2

The buzzer sounded, indicating the end of the school day. The whole weekend, Dar spent in a dream world. He couldn't believe he'd be going into space. As he collected his reading tablet and several papers, his friend, Garnic, approached. "Hey, I hear Kroodus is looking for you."

Dar swallowed hard. "Shit."

"I hear he's wantin' a piece of you."

"Everyone wants a piece of me. This is 'pick on Dar' year."

Garnic stepped closer. "Come on, it's been 'pick on you' ever since you started school."

"True. But that's gonna change."

"Oh? Just how are you gonna do that?"

"I'm not gonna give 'em a target to pick on." Dar headed from the class into the hall, Garnic followed. "Soon as school is over, I'm out of here."

"Out of here, like how?"

Dar stopped. "Out of here, as in off this planet."

"What?!"

"My mother apprenticed me to a freighter captain. I'll be sailing the stars."

"You're leaving Erotis? What will I do?"

"I dunno, Garnic, your life is your own. My place is up there." He continued on outside. The sun was bright, the weather cool. "I'm tired of being treated like shit." Dar stopped short when he saw Kroodus. "Fuck."

"Well, well, looks like I get to beat on you some more, you runty half breed." Kroodus was the school bully. He'd beaten Dar up more times than he could remember.

"Look, Kroodus, there's only a couple weeks of school. Can't you leave me alone?"

The big Satiren struck an imposing stance. His short cropped green hair didn't even move in the breeze. "I'm gonna beat you every day the rest of your life."

Dar handed his things to Garnic. "I was afraid of that."

"Dar, he's gonna kill you," Garnic said, retreating to a safe distance.

Kroodus tossed his reading tablet on the grass and took a few steps toward Dar. "You have no place being here, *half breed*."

Once again sizing up his opponent, Dar calculated what Kroodus would do. "I have as much right as you do."

Kroodus shot forward and hit Dar in the face. He reeled backward and nearly had to take a knee. The pain in his jaw was exquisite. No, he couldn't let Kroodus win this fight. Getting his feet under him, Dar launched his own attack. He hit Kroodus several times in the chest; his blows had little effect. Instead, the bully only laughed. Kroodus landed a few more punches to Dar's face. The bruises were going to be nasty.

Without much thought, Dar changed tactics. Fighting was dirty business, and he knew he'd need any advantage he could get. Although considered the dirtiest attack in a fight, Dar figured it might give him the advantage. He swung his right leg back slightly and let fly, kicking Kroodus right in the crotch.

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