

Escape from Dinosaur Planet

By Jody Studdard

Chapter 1

Captain James Bowman sat in the command chair at the center of the Helix's main bridge. He spoke into a small audio recorder in his left hand.

“Command log, July 10, 2421. We've entered the Morna system and started our initial scans of the outer planets, none of which appear to be of much interest, scientific or otherwise. Both are typical gas giants, with numerous satellites, one with rings, and they appear to have changed little since our last survey ship came through here ten years ago. Our scans will continue for approximately two days, then we'll proceed to the system's four inner planets.”

The Helix's communications officer, an attractive, young lieutenant named Ashley Martinez, glanced up from her console, a look of surprise and disbelief on her face. She adjusted her headset to verify what she was hearing. “Captain, I'm receiving a distress call from one of the inner planets, on all channels, priority one. It's coming from Antos, the fourth planet.”

James turned off his audio recorder and set it to the side. “How is that possible? I thought Antos's natives were primitive.”

The Helix's science officer, Lieutenant S'ondra Ala Ola, answered his question from her work station at the back of the bridge. “They are, at least according to the report from the last survey. Either the report is inaccurate, or the message is coming from someone other than the natives.”

James turned to his navigations officer, a lieutenant named Curt Williams, who sat at the work station at the front of the bridge. Williams was an athletic man with dark skin, brown eyes, and a shaved head. “Any sign of other ships in the system?”

“None,” Curt responded, checking the readouts at his station closely. “However, there is a lot of interference, mostly asteroids and other debris, so it’s hard to know for sure.”

James turned to Ashley at her communications station. “Put the message on the view screen.”

An image of a man appeared on the screen at the front of the bridge. The image was badly distorted and the man was barely visible through all the interference. He was standing in a room filled with smoke.

“Can you clean it up a little?” James asked Ashley.

“I’ve tried,” she answered. “That’s the best I can do.”

The man on the screen spoke. His voice was barely audible through all the static. “Anyone out there, please send help. Our main reactor has exploded, and the suppression systems are malfunctioning. Fire is spreading throughout the base. We’re evacuating as quickly as we can, but I don’t know how much longer -- ”

The image flashed twice, then vanished completely.

“Can you get it back?” James asked.

Ashley shook her head. “It’s gone.”

James ran his fingers through his short, black hair as he contemplated his next step. He did not understand what was happening. The Morna system was located in a remote, unoccupied portion of the galaxy, at the very edge of known space. It had only

been explored once before, ten years ago, and that crew had reported the system was largely uninhabited. The only inhabitants were the ones S'ondra had mentioned earlier, the inhabitants of the fourth planet, a primitive feline race known as the Ondurans. There were no reports of any humans in the system, and no human bases, military, commercial, or otherwise, had ever been built, at least as far as James knew. As such, he didn't understand how it was possible they were now receiving a distress call from a human claiming to be on a base on Antos.

The mystery behind the message, however, was not James's only concern. The Helix was a small, deep-space exploration ship, used almost exclusively for scientific and research purposes. It was not equipped to mount a rescue, especially one that would require evacuating large numbers of refugees from a damaged base.

Regardless, James had no choice. The Helix was the only ship within light years of the Morna system, and if they didn't do something, no one would. Without another word, he turned to his navigations officer.

“Set a course for the fourth planet, Mr. Williams. Maximum speed.”

The Helix arrived at Antos within an hour. Unlike the other inner planets, which were barren, lifeless chunks of ice and rock, Antos was a beautiful sight, a small sapphire and emerald sphere floating majestically amongst a backdrop of stars. The planet was almost entirely covered with water, with a lone continent that filled the majority of its equatorial region. At least ninety percent of the continent was covered with dense, tropical foliage. The remaining ten percent, near the continent's center, was grasslands and prairies.

“The message appears to have come from the southern portion of the continent, not far from the shoreline,” Ashley said, once again adjusting her headset to hear the transmission more clearly. “I can’t lock onto its exact coordinates, though. There’s a lot of interference.”

“What kind of interference?”

She shook her head. “It appears to be some sort of jamming technology, but I can’t be absolutely certain. Since we don’t know much about this planet, it could be nothing more than an atmospheric condition of some sort. I’ll need more time to figure it out.”

“We’ll worry about that later. Can you hail the base?”

“I’ve tried. There’s no response.”

The Helix’s first officer, Commander Janine James, interrupted from her seat at James’s side. “Their communications array may have been damaged by the explosion.”

James nodded, then turned to his science officer. “Can we send someone to investigate?”

S’ondra looked up from the readouts at her station. “Antos is smaller than the average Terran-class planet, but not by much. In just about every other way it’s identical, including atmospheric conditions. There’s plenty of nitrogen and oxygen.”

James turned to his security officer, Lieutenant Steve Matthews. “Prepare a ground team. I want them ready within -- ”

“Sir,” Curt interrupted from his navigations station. “A ship has emerged in orbit. It was hiding behind the planet, where my scans couldn’t detect it.”

“What type of ship?”

“Drazi. It’s a For’cha-class warship.”

James’s eyes grew wide with alarm. He had dealt with the Drazi before, and none of his prior experiences had been good. The Drazi were a reptilian race from the fourth planet in the Dra’zanda system. They were one of the galaxy’s oldest and most nefarious races, and a huge percentage of their population had turned to lives as smugglers, mercenaries, assassins, and cutthroats. They worked for anyone that had the money to pay them and did anything that was asked, legal or not, moral or not, as long as the price was right and payment was timely. Like most races, the Drazi had many different types of ships, of varying sizes, shapes, and colors, but the most common was the For’cha-class warship, which was a relatively small ship by spacefaring standards, but it was extremely fast and armed to the teeth. For’cha-class warships were used by the Drazi primarily for smuggling, pillaging, blockade running, and interstellar terrorism.

“What’s a Drazi ship doing this far out?” James asked himself. Traditionally, the Drazi had no interest in space exploration, so their presence in this remote system was both a shock and a mystery.

“The Drazi are hailing us,” Ashley said.

“On screen,” James said.

An image of the Drazi captain appeared on the screen at the front of the bridge. Like most Drazi, he was a bulky, reptilian humanoid with deep, emerald scales, slit-pupiled eyes, and a long, forked tongue. His ego, which was immediately evident in the tone of his voice, was as large as his enormously broad shoulders.

“I’m Captain Ar’chard of the Drazi warship Wallion. Lower your shields and prepare to be boarded.”

“Excuse me?” James asked. “We’re here to investigate a distress call. Do you know anything about it?”

“The distress call was nothing more than a means to lure you here,” Ar’chard responded. “Lower your shields or we will fire.”

James did not know what to say. He still didn’t understand what was happening, and he definitely didn’t like where this conversation was heading. “We mean you no harm. We are here to offer -- ”

Ar’chard’s image vanished from the screen before James could complete his sentence.

“The Drazi ship has powered its weapons,” Steve reported as the readouts at his console sprang to life, flashing warnings of all types in his face.

“Red alert!” James shouted. “All hands to battle stations.”

Alarm klaxons sounded throughout the Helix’s corridors as the first volley of Drazi missiles arced from the Wallion’s bow. They struck the Helix’s hull and knocked the ship violently to one side.

“Sir,” Steve shouted above the wail of alert sirens. “We’re an exploration vessel. We’re no match for a Drazi warship.”

“I’m aware of that, Mr. Matthews,” James said.

A second volley hit the Helix’s belly. James, who had risen to his feet in front of his command chair, struggled to keep from falling to his knees.

“Mr. Williams, get us out of here. As fast as you can.”

Ashley called from her communications station. “What about the distress signal?”

“We don’t know if it’s real or not. Even if it is, there’s nothing we can do. We’ll come back when we have reinforcements. Send word to the fleet. We’re under attack and need assistance.”

Ashley pushed several buttons on her station, then looked up abruptly, shaking her head. “The Drazi are jamming our signals. I can’t get anything through.”

An instrument panel near the back of the bridge exploded in a shower of sparks as the ship shook violently from another blow.

“Shields are gone!” Steve called as a panel to his left burst into flames. The bridge began to fill with thick, gray smoke.

“Return fire,” James shouted. “All torpedoes. Attack pattern alpha. Maximum spread.”

On his command, a volley of torpedoes emerged from the Helix’s hull and raced toward the Wallion.

Steve looked up from his readouts. Disappointment was written all over his face. “Direct hit. Minimal damage. Their shields are too strong for our missiles.”

James did not know what to do. He had been a starship captain for over fifteen years, and he had been in several battles over the years, including a few against the Drazi. None had gone this poorly this quickly.

The Helix shook again, this time much harder than before. Ashley flew from her chair onto the floor below.

“Direct hit!” Steve called. “Our engines are crippled.”

“Sir,” Curt shouted from his navigation station, his face turning white with fear. “We’re going down.”

James's eyes grew large with fright as he recognized what was happening. The Helix was too close to Antos, and, with its engines failing, it was being pulled by the planet's gravity into the outer reaches of the atmosphere. The planet grew larger and larger in the view screen as the ship plummeted helplessly toward the surface.

James gave the order every captain feared.

"All hands," he said, "abandon ship."

The Helix was equipped with numerous escape pods, each capable of holding several members of its crew. Throughout the ship's smoke-filled hallways, crew members raced toward their assigned pods. James headed down one hallway, with the rest of the bridge crew at his heels. They stopped abruptly as a metal bulkhead collapsed in front of them, blocking their path.

"We'll never be able to make it to the escape pods now," he said, surveying the damage. "We'll have to use the shuttles. Follow me."

They headed back the way they had come, then rushed down a side corridor that led to the Helix's main landing bay. Sitting in the middle of the bay were the Helix's two shuttles, the Odyssey and the Ulysses. James, Curt, and Ashley took their places in the Ulysses's cockpit as the rest of the bridge crew followed Janine into the Odyssey.

"Engaging main systems," Curt said as the console in front of him sprang to life.

"Opening landing bay," Ashley said.

The landing bay filled with a deafening roar as its main doors slid open before them. Outside, the Helix continued to fall helplessly through the planet's upper atmosphere. Escape pods carrying other members of the Helix's crew shot from the

ship's sides and raced toward the planet's surface. James cringed as one of the escape pods hit a pocket of turbulence and was thrown violently to the side.

Ashley looked up from the readouts in front of her. "Sir, we need to get out of here now. The Helix's hull integrity is down to five percent. It's about to blow."

James turned to Curt, with more than a little urgency in his voice. "Go!" he shouted. "Go now!"

The next few seconds brought good and bad news. The good news was the shuttles cleared the landing bay before the Helix exploded. The bad news was they didn't get far enough away before it did. The ensuing shock wave struck them from behind and spun them out of control.

They fell toward the surface at an unbearable pace. James could feel his stomach in his throat and his seat straps dug into his shoulders, chafing them badly. At one point, he thought he was going to get sick from the incessant shaking and the intense pressure. The last thing he remembered before blacking out was the image of Curt, sitting in the pilot's seat next to him, fighting valiantly to level them off before they hit the ground below.

In the meantime, the Drazi captain, Ar'chard, sat calmly, triumphantly, in his command chair on the Wallion's bridge. He had carried out his orders, exactly as he had been instructed, and he was quite pleased with himself. He turned to his communications officer, a smaller, younger Drazi named P'enn. Unlike Ar'chard, P'enn's scales were auburn, bordering on yellow in places.

“Send word to the surface,” Ar’chard ordered. “Tell Wellington everything went according to plan. His prey is afoot.”