

Chapter VIII - Crossfire

Zablaron watched as far away by the lakeshore, the Knight and Steed slowly turned from the runway onto a taxiway. Above, dark storm clouds were gathering, reminiscent of swarms of Honaxee honey bees drawn to the flower gardens on planet Honax. The dense cover enveloped the spacecraft in the sky, and gloom was settling all over the spaceport. The Great Unzayi Lake was all riled up, sending spray and foam onto the asphalt runway. Beyond the fuel depot to Zablaron's right, an oil rig swayed and rocked in the water as the waves beat against its base relentlessly.

Zablaron was standing on the balcony of a VIP lounge, restricted from access to ordinary travelers. The balcony afforded a view of rows of private hangars up ahead, lining the ramp. Zablaron furrowed his eyebrows in consternation as he watched elite security officers in black suits setting up a green tarp around the entrance of a hangar, blocking it from view. The Crimson Crows, thought Zablaron. The Crimson Crows, previously known as the Blood Ravens, were a private security firm based on Karomoz notorious for their clandestine operations all over the galaxy, a lot of them allegedly unlawful. They are very serious about their smuggling, Zablaron mused.

A blue truck idled around the back of the hangar while several loaders arrived at its front. It was a private hangar, but Zablaron had no doubt the Knight and Steed was heading for it. He could no longer watch from afar. I have to find a way in, thought Zablaron. He leaped over the railing of the balcony and gently lowered himself onto the ground using steel-blue magnetic waves.

Jayrock watched from the truck cab as Gylith scaled the crane looming over the back of the hangar. Jayrock was parked nearby, next to its sidewall. The wind lashed at his face through the open cab windows, bringing along a spatter or two.

Gylith clambered onto a strut and crouched down. He aimed at some windows set high in the hangar's back wall with his sniper rifle and looked through its scope.

"What do you see, Gylith?" Jayrock spoke into his transceiver.

Jayrock watched as Gylith took a few moments with his scope. Then he put it aside and took out his transceiver. "I see the freighter spacecraft parked at the back. The crew, too, sitting against the walls and men with guns. I have never seen them before, but I think they are the Blood Ravens." Gylith's voice was shaky. "And... and bodies... I see bodies, Jayrock!"

"Bodies! Whose?" Jayrock felt stupid the moment he finished his question.

"The crew, of course. Four or five. Lying right there."

"Alright, no time to lose, then. I'll be on my way to blow up some fuel tanks. See ya. Out."

"Copy that. Out."

Jayrock set his sights on the fuel depot visible far ahead, slightly to the right, barricaded by a fence. He was about to move when a sharply dressed, silver-haired man in thick-rimmed spectacles entered Jayrock's field of vision from the right. Jayrock waited for a moment as the man crossed Jayrock's path, presumably headed for the hangar entrance. Doesn't look Karomozian, Jayrock thought. What's he got to do with it?

Once the man had cleared the way, Jayrock stepped on the accelerator and steered the truck toward the fuel depot. He lowered his cap as he rushed by the front of the hangar.

Zablaron ran a hand through his hair as he approached the Crimson Crows. He tried to figure out which one was in command. All of them were carrying amaranth blasters with deep-pink decals. I'm pretty sure these are made by my company, Zablaron mused as he observed the blasters from a distance.

"Stop right there, you!" a heavily built man with a goatee cried out as he noticed Zablaron. He was apparently in command as he had been supervising a handful of men setting up the tarp. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Are you in charge here?" asked Zablaron.

"Get out of here while you're alive." The commander trained his blaster at Zablaron.

"Look." Zablaron raised his hands up. "I'm here to make a deal. I can buy off a large share of the merchandise on that spaceship." Zablaron motioned with his head over the man's shoulder toward the Knight and Steed at the far end of the ramp, approaching like a lumbering giant.

"It's not for—"

"Name the price you are currently being paid. And name the people. I'll double whatever they're paying you for your... operation."

The commander did a double-take. "Quinn, Briar, take him inside... find out what he knows."

"You want to know why I know what I know?" Zablaron said snidely as two men started for him. "Because you are pathetic at doing your jobs. You let the custom's officer in on your little operation. Now he's trying to find the highest bidder for those weapons in there."

The men seized Zablaron by the arms. "I'm not the only one who knows. But I do know others who know," Zablaron growled.

The commander put up a hand. "Wait. Stop."

The men loosened their grip on Zablaron, who yanked his arms away.

"And oh, a truck passed us by a while ago. The worker driving it? Guess what? Not a worker," Zablaron said with a shrug. "You guys really suck at your job."

"We'll riddle him full of bolts if he dares come this way," the commander said matter-of-factly. "Now, who the heck are you, and who else knows?"

The spattering was turning into a drizzle by now. The hangar roof amplified the sound as the drizzle pelted at it while Zablaron's vision was getting hampered by the raindrops collecting on his wearisome spectacles.

"I'll tell you if you take me to whoever's payroll you are currently on. Where do you smuggle those—"

"Answer my question!" the commander lashed out as he pointed his blaster right at Zablaron's head.

I need to choose my words carefully, Zablaron thought as he pushed the water back from his hair.

Jayrock turned on the wipers on the windshield. It was becoming increasingly difficult to see through the gloom and the rainfall with the headlights turned off for discretion.

As the wipers rhythmically rubbed against the screen, Jayrock felt his transceiver vibrate again. He took it out and pressed a button.

"Heads up, Captain." Gylith's voice came from the other end. "There's another spacecraft bound for the hangar. Stop wherever you are."

Jayrock applied the brakes, and the truck screeched to a halt. "What?"

"It's coming this way, and if they park it in front of our freighter, we won't be able to get it out of the hangar. We need to wait until it leaves, Jayrock."

"Wait? They have killed innocent people, Gylith! They will kill more if we wait any longer. Besides, they still haven't let our freighter go. Who knows how long they will keep this one? We don't have time. We can be discovered at any moment."

"Well then, what else can we do? If you blow up the fuel tanks now, it will be useless if the freighter is trapped."

Jayrock banged his fist against the steering wheel in frustration. The truck let out a deafening honk. He sat still for a moment in the cabin, gazing into the rain. Sandywick means for me to fail or to die after succeeding, Jayrock thought. I can't let him have the pleasure of seeing me fail.

"I need you to listen to me, Gylith."

"I'm listening... but I don't think I'll like what you're going to say."

"Probably not, but listen to me all the same. We can still complete this mission," Jayrock said resolutely.

The commander was now fondling his goatee. Zablaron continued. "I can provide some invaluable information about other parties planning to wrest all that weaponry away from your employers. And then you can thwart all attempts by those parties. I bet that would

look great on a security firm's portfolio, wouldn't it? On the other hand, your reputation would be ruined if something were to happen to your cargo."

"Provide that information to us."

"I would, but then you would have no use for me. Trust me, your employers will be very grateful to you if you bring me to them," Zablaron said coyly.

The commander considered Zablaron for a moment. "You think you are clever," the commander replied. "You assume we don't have methods for forcing information out of you. I think it's time you were taught a lesson in humility."

"Oh, I know your methods," Zablaron said wearily, eyeing the two men by his sides, ready to drag him away. "What I assume is that you have the mental capacity to—"

"Crows, shoot!" the commander yelled at the top of his voice.

No, no, no! Zablaron watched in horror as the men raised their blasters in unison. He put up his left arm just in time to form a light-salmon, metal shield as amaranth energy bolts sailed past him, lighting the raindrops on their path red. He braced for impact against his shield, but none came.

Then, through the unceasing splash of the rain and the discharge of the blasters, he heard an ominous howling emanating from somewhere behind him. Zablaron retracted his shield and turned around. He glimpsed a deep-saffron sandstorm charging toward him alarmingly fast. In seconds, it was upon him, blinding him and filling his lungs. He bent forward while his throat burned and coughed violently, clutching at his chest. He lost his spectacles, and when he tried to open his eyes, it hurt too much. Another scum of the galaxy after my weapons. Zablaron's mind was racing. I must stop them. Just when he thought he would die of choking, the sand began to clear, and he gulped in some fresh air.

Jayrock looked in the side mirror as he left the Crimson Crows and the silver-haired VIP coughing in his wake. His one hand was on the steering wheel while the other was outstretched through the window into the air. It was churning out sand in a vicious, swirling vortex that almost completely shrouded the front of the truck. On his eyes, he had materialized translucent, amethyst gemstones to protect them from the sand — not that Grebrik eyes needed much protection.

Satisfied, Jayrock pulled his hand back in and took out his transceiver. "Gylith, go!"

"On it!" came Gylith's reply.

Jayrock let the transceiver fall into his lap and grabbed the steering wheel with both hands. He focused his eyes back on the windshield, looking out through the downpour. He felt an adrenaline rush as he took in the specter awaiting him. The oncoming, giant spacecraft with its jet-black hull dwarfed his truck by a hundred times, and yet Jayrock could hear the sweet sound of its massive tires grinding against the wet asphalt, frantically trying to bring it to a halt. Jayrock let the throttle go a bit. He suddenly heard something clanging against the back of the truck, something small. He looked in the side mirror again and felt his eyes widening at yet another strange sight.

Zablaron struggled to maintain his grip on the cable extending from his palm as the scum driving the truck made it sway wildly from side to side. He was skimming above the ground, riding magnetic waves, desperately holding on to it. The rain hammered at his face, making it hard to see.

He had shot the cable from his hand at the fleeing truck just in time, managing to snag the bumper in its claw. As he lurched from side to side, being pulled on by the truck, he reeled the cable back into his hand, closing the distance. When he was upon the vehicle, he grabbed the handles on the back doors and began climbing onto the roof. He hoisted himself up and lay on his stomach, clinging on for dear life. Then he saw the monstrous shadow ahead about to trample the truck to oblivion.

Jayrock spun the wheel to the right as fast as he could. His elbow slammed against the door as the truck veered sideways to meet the decelerating spacecraft. He covered his entire body in deep-saffron rock and braced for impact. The spacecraft smashed through the

truck's side, tipping it to the other one. Jayrock was flung inside the cabin to the opposite door, sending him crashing through its glass window. All his senses were knocked out except an excruciating pain that filled his very being. He felt himself hitting the ground and rolling along before finally coming to a stop, face down. Somewhere, through the void, he heard Cliff's voice calling onto him.

Zablaron grabbed his pounding head as he lay soaking in the rain. When he had been knocked off the roof of the truck, and the ground had rushed up to meet him, he had dampened the fall with magnetic waves, but they had not been nearly enough to prevent the air from being knocked out of his body. Gradually, the chilly rain brought him back to his senses. A particularly irritating voice was crackling somewhere, assailing his ears and making his headache worse.

He pushed himself onto his hands and knees and swiveled his neck around him. Behind him, the mammoth Knight and Steed was standing idle, its engines letting out a low hum. Its hull showed chipped paint and dents where it had collided. The truck itself lay totaled, its trailer detached, looking like a child's toy cast angrily away.

Zablaron looked ahead. The brown-haired driver lay on his face motionless, his cap flung a distance away, his vest an absolute tangle. Is he dead? A radio lay next to him, emitting the frantic voice that had been driving at his head.

"Jayrock, answer me!" someone bellowed through it.

Who the heck is he? Zablaron wondered as he stood up straight. Who sent him? Did Ferrina double-cross me? Or is he just another one after my weapons? But what would a Grebrik want with them? Grebros had long stopped taking part in any galactic conflicts.

"Titanium Knight!" cried Zablaron.

A glow came out of his pocket where his VBP lay before a one-handed, light-salmon spear with a steel-blue grip materialized in his hand.

He then staggered cautiously toward the Grebrik. He prodded him with the tip of his spear.

"Jayrock! You need to get up! We need to go! Now!" the voice boomed through the radio again.

The Grebrik blinked his eyes. Soon, he turned his neck from side to side. Zablaron's spear was at his throat as soon as he rolled onto his back.

"Who the heck are you?" Zablaron demanded.

Jayrock opened his eyes and felt the rain assailing his face, soaking him to the bone. He looked at the weapon pointed at him, then back at its wielder. He felt light-headed, and his world swum before him. Somewhere in the sky, lightning cracked and lit the world for just a moment, and a heartbeat later, deafening thunder shook the very ground.

Suddenly, something caught the silver-haired man's attention in the far distance, and Jayrock heard a fusillade. Jayrock lifted his right foot covered in dense rock and dizzily jammed it into the chin of the other man. He staggered back in pain as Jayrock let his leg fall back down.

"Gem Saber!" Jayrock let out a hoarse cry.

The VBP concealed in the pocket of his inner shirt glowed, and a deep-saffron saber with an amethyst hilt materialized in his right hand. As the spear's point came bearing down again, he blocked the shaft with his sword and deflected the spear. Then he rolled back to sit up straight, deflecting yet another jab from the spear.

The Grebrik was no pushover. Dazed as he was, he was still parrying all of Zablaron's blows. That was saying something, considering Zablaron had been trained in the explosive, elbow-and-fist-driven Metalloy martial art of Shinyiri by his parents at a very young age. Guess he is trained too, Zablaron thought.

The air was filled with the clangor of the clashing weapons just as the rain beat down mercilessly on them, making the ground dangerously slippery.

"What do you want with my weapons?!" Zablaron grunted as he furiously swiped the Titanium Knight in a wide arc. And just then, he realized his mistake — in the heat of the battle, he had given up his disguise.

"What weapons? Walk away and leave me alone!" Jayrock cried as he arched his back and leaped away from the slicing spear.

He doesn't know about the weapons. And he doesn't know me. What was he doing, then? Zablaron thought as he ducked under a slash from his foe. Zablaron saw his opening as the Grebrik was still recovering from his attack. Zablaron grabbed his foe's left wrist and pulled him toward himself, then rammed his shoulder and elbow into the Grebrik's chest. As the latter reeled, Zablaron formed a light-salmon sledgehammer head in his left palm, lunged forward, and drove it once again into the same spot. The Grebrik winced and gasped as his sword fell from his grip. Quick as lightning, Zablaron stabbed at his staggering target with all his might.

To his surprise, his foe grabbed his spear with both hands covered in rock, the point just inches away from its target. Zablaron lashed out with a foot to drive the Grebrik away and wrenched his spear from his grasp.

Jayrock leaped in the air, used the spear's shaft as a launching pad, and delivered three rock-covered kicks, while spinning 360 degrees, into the gray-eyed man's face. His foe abandoned the offensive and covered his face in pain. Jayrock landed on the ground, delivering a hard ax kick that sent out amethyst seismic waves. His foe stumbled backward uncontrollably, struggling to maintain his balance on the rain-soaked concrete. Somehow, it felt great deploying his Grebrik, kick-oriented Aluirador after a long time — he had seen little close combat lately. He actually felt awake now.

Jayrock reached into his shirt to press the screen on his VBP. In a glow, his sword disappeared from the concrete behind him. "Gem Saber!" he yelled, and it materialized again in his hand.

His Metalloy foe, as Jayrock now judged from his elemental powers, regained his composure and ran a hand through his wet hair. They rushed toward each other, and again, their weapons met, ringing in protest every time a blow was exchanged. They danced around each other, parried, stabbed, slashed, and dodged — Jayrock's arms had begun to ache by now, especially his right shoulder.

"You're with the Crimson Crows, aren't you?" Jayrock demanded angrily, as their weapons were interlocked in a struggle — the blade of his saber against the shaft of the Metalloy's spear.

Zablaron seethed at the insolence. He planted his foot into the slick ground and forced the shaft of his spear upward with such tremendous force that both weapons smashed into the Grebrik's face. "No, I'm not!" Zablaron grunted. "And you are going to regret coming in my way!" He swiped his spear across the Grebrik's torso that tore through his shirt. Deep-saffron enertrons began to seep from the skin beneath. He again lunged at his mark. This time, however, the Grebrik slumped down, and Zablaron stabbed the air.

Jayrock lay down on his back and shot his legs upward to trap the silver-haired man's wrist between his feet. He spun violently around his torso and sent the Metalloy rolling to the ground, this time the latter being the one to lose his weapon. In that moment of respite, Jayrock clutched at his chest, at the gash that hurt like mad. Yet strangely, Jayrock was almost relieved to feel pain anywhere other than in his right shoulder.

Zablaron pulled himself up and picked up his spear. Am I wasting time? I came here to get information, and this dumb fool has no idea about my weapons. Zablaron poised with his spear menacingly. It was then that his attention was again diverted to the firefight going on behind him. He spied the Grebrik, still clutching at his wound. Then he turned back to look in the distance.

Even bulkier and somewhat ungainlier than the Knight and Steed, another spacecraft rolled in their direction on an adjacent runway. A ramp in its side was open, grating against the concrete, producing sparks as the spacecraft rumbled on. Far away, some sirens wailed.

Red energy bolts tinted the rain in their color as they shot toward the open doorway in the spacecraft. The figures were mere shadows shifting in the rain from this distance, but Zablaron could still make out the Crimson Crows, their faces lit red by the energy bolts leaving their blasters. When the spacecraft drew nearer, Zablaron could make out a lone figure standing in the doorway, clutching a long firearm. He could not see any projectile leaving the weapon, nor could he hear any noise made by it. But to his horror, as he glanced back at the Crimson Crows, now and then he could see a figure falling. Slowly, one by one, their numbers were dwindling. I need information, and these buffoons are bungling that up, Zablaron thought angrily.

"Jayrock, this is your chance, get your butt in here!" the voice blared again from the nearby transceiver.

Gylith did it! And he's alive! Jayrock limped over to the transceiver, still clutching his chest with one hand. He clumsily scooped it up with his other hand, with which he also grasped the sword, and pressed a button.

"On my way, Gylith," Jayrock said.

And as soon as that, the spearpoint was upon him again. Jayrock ducked under the point and swept the ground with a rock-covered roundhouse kick. He tripped the Metalloy, but the latter regained his balance with the help of some magnetic waves. Jayrock chucked sand at his foe's eyes, but it was blocked by a metal shield.

"Tell him to stop, or I slay you... Jayrock!" the silver-haired man spoke almost in a whisper.

"So, you really are with the Crimson Crows," Jayrock jeered as he stood up straight.

The spacecraft was now rumbling past them on the adjacent runway. Behind it, the Crimson Crows were hopelessly giving chase on foot, still shooting. They were down to half a dozen now, and another fell even just as Jayrock glanced at them.

"Jayrock, now or never!" Gylith shouted through the transceiver.

Suddenly, the red energy bolts changed course and came sailing right at them. Jayrock and the Metalloy both ducked and rolled out of the way. Jayrock half-hopped, half-ran to take cover behind the wreck of the truck. He watched as the Metalloy peered around a nearby hangar he had hidden behind. To his dismay, all the energy bolts were still directed at Jayrock, hammering at the truck.

"Jayrock, where the heck are you? We are almost taking off!" Gylith was frantic now.

Ahead, beyond the Knight and Steed, the spacecraft was now near the end of the runway, mere yards from the stormy, dark waters of the Great Unzayi Lake all around the island. Should I tell Gylith to wait for me? Jayrock knew by now that Gylith would do precisely that if Jayrock told him so, but he could not ask Gylith to stop now. He had to take the spaceship back to Grebros at any cost. Gylith would be back alive, and Jayrock's mission would be completed, and Sandywick would perhaps give him credit for the first time. Eh, who am I kidding with that last one?

"Gylith, go! Our mission is done. Give my regards to the Colonel."

"Jayrock, wha—"

With that, Jayrock set his transceiver to silent and put the vibrating transceiver back in his pocket. Then he pressed the screen on his VBP, and the Gem Saber disappeared. "Pebble Revolver!" he cried, and his trusty, six-barreled machine gun materialized in his hands.

He peeked out from his cover and returned fire. The pebbles sailed past the Crimson Crows, and Jayrock ducked back down just as an energy bolt shot past his face. The spacecraft had

taken off by now and flew over the lake out into space. Several ferries were rocking in the choppy waters, trying to make their way across. That was strange — the pier was far away on the landside. Passengers were always shuttled from the runways to the pier to board the ferries.

Jayrock heard the wailing of sirens and saw the red and blue lights of spaceport security vehicles approaching. Even they are afraid of dealing with the Crimson Crows. Jayrock once again returned fire from his cover, backing up toward the edge of the island. Then he ran at full sprint, keeping the Knight and Steed between him and his pursuers. Soon, he made it to the shore and dove into the freezing cold, angry waters of the Great Unzayi Lake.

Zablaron snatched the wounded Crimson Crow from the ground and dragged him behind the hangar wall. Shoving the Crow against the wall, Zablaron put the spearpoint against his gut from where amaranth enertrons seeped out, courtesy of the Grebrik's sniper ally. Spaceport security was surrounding the area, and the other Crimson Crows were out in the open, yelling at them.

"Where do the smuggled weapons go?" Zablaron demanded. "Right now, or I will see how deep my spear goes."

"Malorawa Forest... through the tunnel... there is an entrance... in the hangar where the Knight and Steed... was supposed to..." the Crow groaned between shallow breaths.

That was good enough. Zablaron let go of the Crimson Crow and made his way in the cover of the hangars back to the one where it all started. He entered, and after a bit of a search, found a well-concealed trapdoor. He pulled it open and started down the ramp that stretched beyond. The ramp was lit well enough, so he pulled out his journal and pen from his pocket. Mom, Dad, he wrote. Your son is going to set everything right. Everyone will soon remember you as you deserve to be remembered.

...

Heraclark clutched at the railing of the ferry as it rocked and lurched in the water. The captain had practically begged him to go back inside the cabin but relented after Heraclark

vomited for the third time. His stomach was in knots, and his head was spinning, and he hated the rain.

He had been told that terrorists had infiltrated the spaceport, and it was too dangerous for passengers to be shuttled from spacecraft to ferries. Therefore, the boats had been made available at the runways to pick up passengers right as they alighted from the spacecraft. All the ferries were now circling around the island to make their way back to the mainland.

Heraclark thought he saw a hand in the lake. Great, now I am seeing things. He pulled his life jacket tighter around himself and wondered how much longer it would take to reach the mainland. Now, he thought he saw an entire arm... then two arms... lashing at the water. Soon enough, a brown head appeared between the arms.

Heraclark shot a dark-orchid, wispy tendril at the disembodied arms and head. The tendrils wrapped around them like a snake coiling around its prey. Then, Heraclark pulled with all his might. The tendrils pulled out an entire man, soaking and shivering. The man grasped the railing and vaulted over to lie down flat on his back.

Heraclark watched as the man whipped up sand all over his body to dry himself. A Grebrik. It's raining, what is the point of drying himself? Heraclark mused.

"Are you alright?" Heraclark asked as he bent over the man.

"No... but thanks! I am Jayrock. From Grebros," the Grebrik said as he held out an arm.

Heraclark pulled at Jayrock's arm and stood him up. "I am Heraclark, from Loogmor, and you owe me one."

"I could have swum to the ferry."

"Maybe, because you do look like a military type. You owe me one because I am not going to out you as one of the terrorists... for now."

"Oh... then I do owe you one," Jayrock replied.

Do give me your feedback about this chapter, and if you enjoyed it, please consider dropping a vote. Have a great day!