

Sampler of Joan Delwark's Adventures

**An excerpt of an original tale around
Captain Joan Delwark**

Cover Art TBD

Written by CNSpencer

Chapter 1

MONARCH

"I am Captain Joan Delwark of the Earthen System. I am escorting these cargo freighters to Athikar," she replied.

"This is not open space, nor is it earthen, human," he said.

"I have orders from your superiors, ranrae." She waved an electronic panel in her hand. His face crinkled into a stern reluctance.

In the background, she could hear a ranrae ensign confirm its authenticity to the captain. He grumbled. "You may continue. I must escort you, however."

The surprise was written on her face. "Whose orders are these? I assume they're not yours." She could only think out two people who would command something like that. One was the ranrae captain so he could keep an eye on her, but knowing this captain's infamous disgust of humans, she figured he'd rather not stick around anymore than was needed.

"They're mine," he lied. "Not that it matters. It's going to happen either way. My people are far more efficient than yours. End transmission! Fall behi-" The ranrae Enforcer-Class ship drew past the Earthen ships, following closely the freighter convoy.

They started up again, headed to the Athikar system. Once in its orbit, the ranrae captain opened a channel to Delwark's flagship. "Now that you are at our home-world, I will leave you to your business," he said. His finger reached for the disconnect button but

stopped short, remembering the information he found whilst travelling. "Oh, maybe I should let you know..." Delwark's eyebrow ever so slightly raised. "If a lowly ranrae captain like me knows you aren't from Earth, like you say you are, then I suppose that if I were in a pleasant mood, I'd wish you luck in your doings on Athikar. I'll leave it unsaid that this may be the very system where I learned that information." And with a rumbling chuckle, his face disappeared from the screen. Captain Delwark knew that her peaceable cover was blown now, and so did her lieutenant.

"Sir?" the lieutenant awaited orders. Tim Jerar was a fine young man not too much younger than the captain herself. He had been a fighter pilot before joining her crew. Jerar was pretty good in a one-man ship, but it took him years to learn how to maneuver the captain's small flagship. She liked the spirit he kept about him and thought it was better suited for the bridge command than wasted on a flying grunt. "Captain?" he again prompted.

"Continue as planned," she ordered after a moment of consideration. "Head to the Capitol docks." They waited in orbit for an hour before the city was sighted. Captain Delwark coordinated with the freighters and the caboose so they set off together towards the ancient city. As they approached, the security towers turned to them, turret barrels trained on the flagship.

"Check our codes before transmitting. I want to keep this legal." Captain Delwark leaned in toward Jerar. He pulled up a string of numbers and letters. He scrolled to a readable series.

"We're under the name 'VULTURE,'" he reported.

"Switch with one of the others."

He typed in a code and asked the RUNNER'S commander for their codes.

"Transmission accepted," Jerar said with a faint sigh of relief. The towers rotated away and allowed the convoy to land in the field. Delwark stood and stretched a bit. "Okay. Take five, then I want that cargo unloaded!" Jerar, who had already disembarked the ship, now ran in for the captain.

"Captain! They want to see you," he said. She nodded and started out, but he lightly grabbed her arm. "Doesn't look good," he whispered close to her ear. She acknowledged and continued past.

Coming down the ramp, Delwark was met by a pair of ranrae guards marked with the royal insignia. "Ma'am, the chancellor would like to speak with you."

The chancellor of Athikar? "What's this about?"

The ranrae who had spoken glanced briefly at the other. "Just come with us, ma'am," the other guard repeated. In reality, they didn't know either.

She thought to argue but decided against it. "Alright. I'll go." One guard turned about and marched forward, followed by Delwark, then the other guard.

The palace was not too far from the docks so it only a matter of minutes before reaching its gates on foot. The guards walked Delwark up

to the throne room doors and opened them. She walked in, the doors closing behind, and saw the thrones bare before her. She only knew what she was taught in school about the ranaes' history; that they had been a powerful kingdom stretching many solar systems. Now their government was nothing more than a figurehead to keep the ranrae people fed with propaganda. To the left of the thrones were a few armchairs and a small table. A ranrae was sitting there and stood as she entered. "Welcome, Captain. I'm glad you decided to hear my proposition," the chancellor greeted. He motioned for her to sit across him.

"Is that what this is about? I don't understand why I was brought here, chancellor," she confessed.

"I know why you are here. I also know of your... disagreements with your rulers."

The captain was uneasy at the signal of her actions she had believed to be thoroughly covered up being revealed. Even after these many years working to bury her history, someone still knew.

"I admire your work, though it harms my people's welfare," the chancellor spoke.

The captain almost chuckled for relief. He wasn't referring to her dark past, but rather the smuggling she did currently. Yet, his previous line left a lingering caution. "What're you trying to butter me up for?" she asked as though she didn't suspect anything.

He smiled believing he had enticed her interest. "I believe that I have a plan which benefits the both of us." He paused for a notion to continue. "By now I'm sure you've heard of a

group of rebels, what they call themselves, the Freedom Fighters of Reml."

"Mmm-hmm..."

"I have heard reports that they are planning major attacks on human controlled planets. Now, is what I ask of you. If you can successfully infiltrate this organization and offer your fleet, then you can join the attacks and cripple your government."

"Then you come in and take total control. You promised me profit. I'm not seeing it."

"Oh, no. I do not take the role of the Emperor. That is yours."

Delwark's eyebrow did little to betray her confusion. "Me? Why would you entrust that power to me? Why not free yourself?" She questioned the bureaucracy behind his reasoning. It just didn't make sense in her mind.

"We can't rush into territory we haven't seen in generations. The anarchy that would follow such a short, radical change must be avoided as much as possible. I couldn't allow my people to enslave themselves after eluding their captors. I only ask that the fate of the ranraes be handed to me once you've assumed control."

Delwark nodded absentmindedly as she thought it through. It was an attractive plan to be sure, but she wasn't ready for it. The only thing she expected to do with that day was make a buck or two. "I'll keep it in mind," the captain said, not meaning to sound unappreciative, but inadvertently doing so. "If you will excuse me, I'm going to attend to my crew now." She stood to leave and the chancellor rose with her.

"I'm afraid you'll have to make your choice now." He looked into her eyes, hoping to see the future from her next words.

"I could refuse." It was quite honestly a real possibility, exposing a conspiracy among the highest of ranks, but an unlikely one. "I could report you to Earth, make sure you and your followers hang." The chancellor suppressed a smile, picking up on the faint tone of sarcasm. The captain paused, making sure she was ready for what could be coming. It seemed he had something urgent to get to and thus the rush to make a decision. "But I won't. What would you have me do?"

The ranrae set his hand on her shoulder. "Come, walk with me." They strolled side by side down the hall. "Today, I have invited the emperor to my palace. Of course, he will have brought his grand flagship. Your task is to steal the ship and join the rebels in their base on the Gren system. You can confide in a few moles placed in their ranks." They stopped at the entrance and he held out an electronic card. "Their files are on here, along with an entirety of my plan. Should you be discovered, it is easily dissolved in water." She grabbed the card and slid it into a hidden compartment of her boot. The chancellor looked at the heavy entry doors. "The emperor arrived only minutes ago. I will send a group of servants with you to appear as if you are tending to the ship. You can rid her of the soldiers however you may choose to. Though, survivors can be tricky to deal with." At first hear, it sounds a sadistic and heartless thing to do, but Delwark

sided with him on this matter. "Contact your crew now. Tell them to prepare to rendezvous on the neighbouring system of Neman. I must insist that this whole matter stay between only the two of us."

The captain raised her arm to her mouth and spoke into it. "Jerar."

"Hey, I'm here."

"Get the ships packed up and ready to go. I need to stay here for a bit, but I need you to head to Neman."

"Alright, chief. Will do."

Something stopped Delwark from closing the channel. "Y'know what, send me a few men, armed."

Was there going to be a fight? Jerar had seen much of that, but his duty was to follow her orders and protect his captain. "What's this about, Cap'n?"

She looked up at the ranrae questioningly, almost worried of incurring his displeasure. Through the radio Jerar noticed her hesitation and said, "If you don't mind my asking." Delwark looked back down with a solution.

"No, it's okay. I'm clearing some disputes with our codes." She knew that he would instantly back down at this normal occurrence and that she was handling herself alright. "Get ready to run at the first sign of trouble. You got the check from 'em, right?"

"Don't worry, I gotcha, cap'n. Jerar out."

She let her arm down and lifted her chin toward the chancellor. "I wish you luck," he bode. "You may leave when you are ready." The ranrae turned after a slight, informal bow and

started walking out the doors to greet his guest of honour. Once the pristine metal door shut, and the air gusted lightly through her hair, static breached the dulling silence.

"Sir, Maene reporting. We're heading your way now." The captain nodded. Derek Maene was a very capable man, but he needed directions to function. A lot of soldiers were that way, she had noticed.

"Who've you got with you?"

"I got two with me; Ella Hardy and Jason Broyard." The names didn't paint a face in Delwark's mind; not all of her crew was as intimately known to her as those such as Tim Jerar or Maene, but she did recognize the names.

"Good. I'll meet you at the emperor's ship. We're finally goin' rogue," she smirked. Behind her the ranrae servants awaited Delwark's command. "Let's head out. Find a strategic area and work there until I say to attack. Clear? Let's go clean the ship of the emperor himself." Nods answering Delwark's call of understanding started and stopped as they marched out the door with an almost radiant sense of pride. The captain fell in behind their strut.

Outside, the chancellor was still welcoming his guest. "Ah, here are my best slaves now. I have ordered them to attend to your ship," he announced. "There are more inside preparing your accommodations." Then, in a voice loud enough for Delwark to hear clearly, he said, "And my soldiers are armed and always vigilant for your safety and protection."

"Hmm, I am glad to see that you take care of your guests so well. Now, may we enter to further discuss matters?"

The inferiour ranrae bowed and allowed the emperor to enter. "Certainly, my honour." They disappeared into the palace and Delwark boarded THE MONARCH, the name of which was plastered across the side of the massive battleship. Her three-man team was jogging up to meet her.

"Sir," Maene reported.

"Take a few ranraes each and sweep the middle and lower floors." Delwark turned to the servants. "I assume you're all armed." A few nods came from the group. She pointed at some. "You two, with me." Addressing all, she said, "Let's go." Delwark jumped ahead but Maene tapped her arm with a rifle.

"For you." He held the captain's rifle out. She nodded a thanks, took it, and was back up leading the ranraes she chose.

They came across a 3-man patrol and Delwark motioned out a plan. They stopped behind a doorway before she sprinted out with the servants behind. She ran up in front of the human soldiers yelling, "Drop your weapons!" The humans resisted for a minute then realized they were surrounded and obediently set their guns down. Her ranraes took the ammunition from the guns and off the mens' belts. "Take your rifles. Lead us to the bridge. Make sure they don't shoot. 'Ey start takin' shots, I shoot you." The group was handed their unloaded rifles. "Lead on." The patrol marched as if nothing happened except the three intruders tailing them.

On the bridge, it was calm until an ensign noticed that their men were hostage to a few servants and their overseer.

"Stop! Don't shoot!" exclaimed several hostages as their fellow men were aiming at the criminals. Presumably the captain of THE MONARCH inched towards them, pistol out, but low.

"My men have cleared the rest of the ship. You're her only remaining crew members. If you're smart enough, you'll do as I ask, and live for another day," Delwark instructed. The other captain thought for a second with grey brows furrowed, deciding whether to call her bluff, if it so was.

Something in the way she spoke and the defiant look in her eyes made him think she had no such lie. Lowering his gun he asked, "What are your demands, then?"

"You will unlock all systems, then exit the ship. Try anything and I drop one of your men." Again the captain thought before handing his pistol to Delwark and signalling to the rest. As they went about unsecuring various systems from self-destruct to the plumbing gauges, the grey-browed captain turned to Delwark with a somewhat puzzled look. He appeared to have something to say but took a second to do so.

"You look just like that woman from Raalhaam," he uttered in a crusty, old voice.

Delwark's eyes stayed on his faded blue ones.

"I know."

"It has been a while since then."

She didn't bother with a reply. A console beeped at the grey-browed captain. He attended to it. When he ceased the noise, he turned back to Delwark with the same slow hesitancy.

"She was my daughter-in-law." The tone carried something of a dishonour. Yet, the retrospective aspect gave the phrase a heart-rending sadness. To the rest of the collective systems, that life of hers was dead. Delwark wasn't sure what to say but to make sure the crew stayed focused on the task at hand.

Within ten minutes the battleship was rendered in Delwark's control. She lined up the captive men and marched them down the ramp. Immediately, she and her followers rushed up to the bridge to depart. Even as the last hostage was walking off the ramp, the hydraulics hissed to pressurize the ship and retract the boarding ramp.

It didn't take long for the emperor to hear that his prized flagship had been stolen, by a human rebel and a pack of ranraes no less. He called all his fighters to capture the ship. And if they weren't able to retrieve her, they had orders to shoot down the supposedly indestructible ship. When a pilot questioned that request, the emperor simply replied, although through gritted teeth, "We'll build another." He also turned to the chancellor and questioned him about who the rebel overseer was.

"I did not know that those mercenaries had assumed control of my faithful servants and

convinced them to rebel against you, my ruler," he replied.

"Don't play games with me! Who were these mercenaries?"

The chancellor gave it a dramatic pause. "I believe it was Joan Delwark."

"I should've expected no one else. She has abused the liberties I've given her. Taking my ship whilst I stood idly by." His accusations tone played into the chancellor's suspicions about the captain.

A pilot came through the emperor's wristband. "Pardon me, sir. We couldn't catch up with THE MONARCH. She was practically gone by time we got airborne."

He never responded to the man but instead ordered the chancellor. "Put out a wanted broadcast now. Offer half a million grams. Preferably alive; I want to make an undeniable example of her myself."

They had just barely caught their breath landing on Neman when Tim Jerar marched in a rage to the disembarking captain. "What do you think you're doing, captain?" he demanded. "The entire Imperial fleet's on our heels and I'm lost as to why my captain is joyriding in the Emperor's ship!" His anger was clearly spelt out on his face.

"I did not give you permission to address me that way!" she spat back. "We may know each other but this is my ship and no one ever has the right to speak that way to any of my crew!" The captain's flash of anger was gone quickly. "Now,

I am your captain, and if you will not abuse this opportunity, you may speak your mind." The captain was typically soft-spoken, which much of her crew appreciated, but could scare away a pack of lions if her displeasure drove her to anger.

Jerar took a second himself to cool down enough to remember his manners. "I thought we had agreed not to do anything rash anymore. Will you please just tell me what we're doing?"

He thought it was only pride that the captain was swallowing in her next reply, but he would never know it was fear and guilt. "I suppose I should apologize to you. I had it in my mind to move against the earthen government and I should've informed you beforehand. But the prime opportunity presented itself. Plus, I didn't need you worrying about that just yet. Don't worry, I've thought it all through, every little bit," she lied. "For now, let's celebrate the feat of capturing this stately vessel." Her smile that poked out through some of the words, despite her trying to hide it, was nearly enough to make Jerar forget his aggressive mood. The men around them started cheering. Delwark turned to all of them. "Down with the empire!" she egged them on. "End their injustice towards all! We will be our own rulers! We are no longer monarchs; are the tank of the rebellion!" She yelled and thrust her rifle in the air. After a moment of further excitement, Delwark ran back into the bridge of THE MONARCH. Jerar followed her in and slid in the navigation seat. Delwark ceremoniously placed herself in the captain's chair as loads of soldiers piled in the room.

"In this momentous occasion, we should change something about her to claim her as our own." She looked about the room. "Well, men? We can't be running around boasting THE MONARCH, now can we? We oughta rechristen her. Come on, throw out some names."

One man shouted out, "How 'bout DESTINY?"

"I know, HER MAJESTY," suggested another. Then the names kept coming.

"I got one! AVENGER."

"DRAGON OF THE STARS!"

"PLAGUE."

"BLOODCASTER."

"GLACIER!"

"DESTROYER!"

"IRON FIST."

The captain commented on that one. "No, that's what we're working against."

A smaller woman, who, judging from her dress, was an infirmiry worker, spoke up. "Well, how about like you said, cap'n? Like a tank?"

She looked up at the others. "Well, how 'bout it?" A rise of rahs and here, heres seemed to affirm the title. "Alright, then. Jerar, rename her to THE TANK." The whole ceremony made the men proud and the captain even more. She was liking the ship more now that she had given it a feeling of her possession over the ship, but truthfully Captain Delwark preferred her smaller Inflictor-Class she called THE ARCHER. Only her crew knew her as such, since the ship went under several different aliases for... less than good-natured business. But with the awful power of THE TANK, they would certainly be accepted as the

newest participants in the freedom fighter movement. She had to admit, it would be a hard gesture to refuse; the mocking ability of using the emperor's own weapon against him for next to no risk to themselves.

An alarm burst out. The captain leaned toward Jerar and exchanged hushed inquiries. "What's that?"

"I'm not sure, but it looks like a proximity alert," he responded. The captain stood up and turned to the other soldiers there.

"Men, to your ships! Prepare for incoming! Keep in mind it could just be somethin' harmless like freighters or debris." Her voice trailed off near the end as the adrenaline and excitement wore off. Soldiers scrambled off the deck to get in their respective vessels. The objects were close enough to be recognized as ships. Whether their intentions were ill or not towards them, she'd have to find out. "Jerar, assemble a squad." He smiled with joy and hopped to the hanger bay, picking out fighters on the way to the hanger. They briskly loaded up into standard one-man ships and were sling-shotted out. This was exactly the kind of thing Jerar had been doing for his service in the imperial Alian, though he had never been in a real battle but only skirmishes with pirates and the like.

The incoming ships came around the planet's face into sight. They appeared to be a few small, unmarked scout ships, and a larger cruiser followed. There was a good chance they were the rebels.

"Maene, tap their transmissions," said the captain to Derek who had replaced Jerar again. The signals were fuzzy, but there was enough.

"...befor-...'s...MONARCH. Do we...or -terceptzzshht?"

"Yesh-..."

"No! We're -ly...too small a... Prob'ly seen us alre-."

"Spotted...-'coming 'r' us!"

"...they...hold- back." Shoulda...-ree attack?"

"...clea- with base."

It would seem that whether or not they knew it was a stolen ship or not, they didn't know what to do.

"Transmit our codes to the cruiser," the captain ordered. "Then get me her captain."

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