



**Mekel Thorne**

## **Pirates and Legends**

"Incoming ship." Mekel's voice crackled over the intercom, steady but with an undertone that made Elendril pause mid-step in the narrow corridor. His father wasn't easily rattled. "Elendril, get to the cockpit."

Elendril bolted toward the front of the ship, his boots echoing against the metal decking.

The Dragonfly was not a large vessel, and he knew every turn and ladder of her the way most boys his age knew the layout of a schoolyard. He had grown up in these corridors, had learned to read the sounds the ship made, the difference between the groan of a hull plate settling in the cold of deep space and the higher-pitched complaint of a component that needed attention. He reached the cockpit in seconds, ducking through the low hatch and dropping into the co-pilot's seat beside his father.

Mekel sat at the helm, jaw clenched, eyes fixed on the radar screen. A red blip crawled toward their position with slow, deliberate purpose.

"Pirates?" Elendril asked, his voice hushed.

Mekel nodded grimly. "Looks like it. They're coming in fast."

The word sent a cold shiver tracking down Elendril's spine. Stories of space pirates were fun when he was playing in the cargo bay, acting them out with empty crates as ships and handfuls of grain for treasure. Those were tales of daring heroes and cunning rogues, played out in the safety of his imagination, where no one ever got truly hurt and the good captain always came out ahead. The reality, he knew with a cold certainty now, was far less exciting. Pirates were desperate, dangerous, and unpredictable, and the Dragonfly was none of those things. She was a working freighter with a one-man crew and a boy, hauling sealed crates of grain and cured meat on contract routes for the Itherian supply chains. She had no weapons. She

had no speed to speak of. What she had was his father's calm, and right now, Elendril was trying to borrow as much of it as he could.

"Should we run?" Elendril asked.

"No point," Mekel said, shaking his head. "The Dragonfly isn't built for speed. They'd catch us before we could get anywhere safe." He let out a slow breath through his nose. "We'll play it smart. We've got nothing worth taking, and they'll see that soon enough."

Elendril swallowed hard. "And if they don't?"

Mekel turned from the radar long enough to give his son a firm, reassuring look. "They will. But just in case, I want you in your safe spot before they board. You know the drill. No matter what you hear, not a sound until they are gone."

Elendril nodded, but his stomach had gone tight. He stayed in the co-pilot's seat a moment longer, watching the red blip grow on the screen. The stars outside the viewport were the same as always, vast and indifferent, scattered like salt across black velvet. They didn't care about the Dragonfly. They didn't care about the pirates closing in from the port side. They just burned, quiet and ancient, the same as they always had.

Then the ship came into visual range, and Elendril stopped thinking about stars.

The pirate vessel loomed out of the dark like something dredged up from a nightmare. It was an angular craft, all hard edges and threatening silhouettes, bristling with weapons along every visible surface. The dark hull gleamed like obsidian, catching the distant starlight and throwing it back cold and colorless. Its markings, a jagged white skull painted across the forward hull, seemed to sneer at them as it approached. Elendril's heart pounded so hard he could feel it in his throat. He had seen illustrations of pirate ships in the adventure serials his father sometimes let him read on long routes, but the serials had always made them look exciting. This one didn't look exciting. It looked like a threat delivered in the language of metal and mass.

The pirate ship hailed them, and Mekel accepted the transmission without hesitation. The screen above the console flickered to life, resolving into the face of a man who looked as though he had survived too many bad decisions and learned nothing from any of them. A scar ran from his temple all the way to his jaw, a pale slash across skin weathered dark by years under ship-lamp light. His eyes were cold and calculating, the eyes of a man who had already decided the outcome of this conversation and was just letting it play out for form's sake.

"This is Captain Varek of the Marauder," the pirate said. "Power down your engines and prepare to be boarded."

Mekel's hands remained steady on the controls. "I'm a grain hauler. Nothing here worth your trouble."

Varek's lips curled into a sneer. "We'll be the judge of that."

The transmission cut, and moments later the Marauder drew alongside and docked with the Dragonfly with a heavy clang that rang through the hull like a struck bell.

Elendril went quickly to the spot they had prepared for him. It was a small crawlspace near his bunk, tucked behind a panel in the wall where the ship's conduit runs made an accidental pocket just large enough for a boy his size. His father had found it two years ago during a repair job and had looked at it for a long moment before quietly pointing it out to Elendril and explaining, in a matter-of-fact voice, what it was for. There was a narrow crack in the wall panel, not wide enough for a hand but wide enough to see a slice of the cargo bay below. He wedged himself in, pulled the panel as close to flush as he could manage, and went still. He breathed through his mouth, shallow and quiet, the way his father had taught him. Eyes to the crack. Not a sound.

The sound of boots clanging on the boarding ramp echoed up through the ship. Then voices, rough and unhurried, men who were comfortable taking what didn't belong to them.

Through the crack in the panel, Elendril watched them enter the cargo bay. They were a rough-looking crew, their clothes patched and worn, their weapons

visible and well-used. There were six of them that he could count from his angle, with more possibly back on the Marauder. Captain Varek led them, his gaze sweeping over the cargo with a disappointed scowl that deepened as he took in the rows of sealed crates stacked neatly along the bay walls. He had the look of a man who had hoped for something better and found himself once again disappointed by a universe that refused to cooperate.

"Heavy," he muttered, kicking a crate with the toe of his boot. He barely rocked it. "Grain."

"Told you," Mekel said from across the bay, his voice perfectly level. "Nothing worth your time."

Varek's eyes narrowed. He stepped closer to Mekel, moving with the slow deliberateness of a man who wanted the other man to feel the approach. "I should take something," he said, "just to make it worth my while." His gaze swept back toward his crew. "Check the other compartments. We might have missed something."

Elendril's heart thudded against the inside of the crawlspace wall. He pressed himself as far back as the conduit runs would allow and stopped breathing entirely.

The pirates split into pairs and spread out through the Dragonfly, their boots heavy on the decking. He could hear them moving through the corridor below his hiding spot, heard a hand slap against a storage locker, heard the groan of a hatch being pulled open. Every sound felt enormous. He kept his eye to the crack in the panel and watched Varek move slowly through the bay below, hands clasped behind his back, studying the cargo with the detached interest of a man pricing things he might choose to ruin.

One of the pirates came back to the cargo bay after a few minutes, his expression sour. "More crates. Meat and grain, all of it heavy." He spat on the floor near one of the stacks. "Not worth the haul."

Varek's lips twisted in frustration. He turned that cold gaze back on Mekel. "Then why does it feel like you're hiding something?" He stepped closer, his hand dropping to hover near the blaster on his belt. "People don't run quiet routes for nothing. What else are you carrying?"

Mekel met his gaze without flinching. "Only what you see. Meat and grain. We haul for Itherian supply chains. That's it."

"Itherian freight, huh." Varek let the words sit a moment. "You're sure the palace doesn't slip a little something extra into your holds? A few luxury items? Maybe a passenger?" He nodded to one of his crew. "Open a crate. Let's have a look."

From the crawlspace, Elendril clenched his fists so tight his knuckles ached. He knew those crates. He had helped his father pack them on Sareth Station three days ago, sealing each one against the vacuum-cold of transit to preserve the shipment's value all the way to Bari 4. It was slow work, careful work, the kind his father did without complaint, treating each seal like a small promise he was making to the factor who would receive the shipment at the other end. Opening them now would break the seals. The cargo would be marked as compromised on arrival. The fee would be docked, maybe refused entirely. His father's hard work, and his own, would be undone in the time it took a pirate to get bored.

The pirate wedged a tool under the lid of the nearest crate and levered it open with a crack of broken seal. The rich, savory scent of cured meat drifted up through the cargo bay. The man poked through the contents with a knuckle, muttering under his breath.

"Satisfied?" Mekel asked, his voice steady but carrying a quiet edge now.

Varek didn't respond immediately. His gaze lingered on Mekel for a long, measured moment. The kind of moment that stretched like a held breath. Elendril pressed his eye to the crack in the panel and watched, not moving, not making a sound, his whole body coiled tight against the conduit runs.

Then Varek let out a short, harsh laugh that had nothing warm in it.

"You're lucky we're in a hurry," he said. "Next time, you won't be." He turned and motioned to his crew with two fingers. "Pack it up. We're done here."

The pirates moved toward the boarding ramp, and Elendril allowed himself one long, careful exhale. Then one of the retreating crew members paused beside a free-standing crate near the bay door, looked back over his shoulder at Mekel with an

expression of pure, thoughtless contempt, and kicked it hard. The crate toppled and hit the deck with a crash. The lid buckled and grain poured out across the floor in a wide golden arc, spreading between the other crates like a slow flood.

The pirate kept walking. He didn't look back a second time.

Elendril stayed in the crawlspace, his blood singing with rage, until the last vibration of the Marauder's engines faded from the Dragonfly's hull. He counted twenty more breaths after that, the way his father had taught him. Then he heard Mekel's voice, low and close.

"Elendril. You can come out now."

He unfolded himself from the crawlspace, stiff in both body and spirit, and dropped down into the corridor. His face felt hot. He walked into the cargo bay and stood looking at the spilled grain, at the broken seal on the open crate, at the scuff mark Varek's boot had left on the side of the first crate he had kicked.

"We can't let them get away with that," Elendril said. His voice came out tighter than he intended. "They ruined our cargo. They had no right."

Mekel placed a hand on his shoulder, firm and steady. "We'll recover. The Itherian factor will dock our fee on that crate, but the rest is intact. Cargo can be replaced." He gave the shoulder a single squeeze. "Lives can't."

"But what if they come back?" Elendril asked. The words felt thin even as he said them, like they weren't quite the thing he meant. What he meant was closer to: what if this is just how it always is? What if there is no stopping people like Varek, no consequence, no recourse, just one grain hauler after another, all of them absorbing whatever damage the Marauders of the galaxy felt like handing out?

Mekel crouched down and began gathering the spilled grain with his hands, sweeping it into a container he pulled from a nearby shelf. He didn't answer right away. He had a quality Elendril had noticed more as he got older, the quality of a man who thought before he spoke and meant what he said when he got there. "Then we'll deal with it," he said at last. "Together. But right now, we've got work to do. Let's clean up and get moving. We're late enough as it is."

Elendril nodded and picked up a second container. They worked in silence for a while, sweeping and collecting, and slowly the bay floor came clean again. But Elendril's mind refused to settle. The image of Captain Varek's sneering face wouldn't leave him, and neither would the casual, almost bored way that pirate had kicked the crate over. Not for profit. Not out of necessity. Just because he could, and there was nothing anyone on the Dragonfly could do about it.

By the time the cargo bay was put back in order and the Dragonfly had pulled back onto its heading for Bari 4, Elendril had retreated to a crate near the aft wall and sat with his elbows on his knees, staring at nothing in particular.

His fingers found a loose thread on the crate's canvas wrapping and traced it back and forth.

In his mind, the story played out differently.

"Captain Elendril," a voice called across the bridge. "The Marauder is hailing us, sir."

Elendril's imagined self stood tall at the helm of a ship nothing like the Dragonfly. This was a vessel built for something more than freight runs. She was sleek and fast, her hull dark and unmarked, her engines tuned to a whisper. The bridge hummed with quiet, efficient purpose. His crew moved without being told, each one reading the situation the way they had read a hundred like it before.

He straightened his captain's coat and nodded. "Open the channel."

The screen resolved, and there was Varek. The same scar. The same cold eyes. But something had shifted in them, something that looked almost like uncertainty, as though a man who had never once expected to be surprised was confronting that possibility for the first time.

"Surrender your ship," Varek said, though his voice had lost the lazy confidence it carried in the cargo bay of the Dragonfly. "Or we'll blast you out of the sky."

Elendril tilted his head slightly. "You're making a mistake, Varek. We're not a grain hauler."

Varek's sneer flickered. "What?"

"Fire at will," Elendril said, and the words were steady and calm, because in this version of things he had earned the right to say them.

The imagined ship's cannons blazed, and the Marauder shook under the assault. Warning lights cascaded across the pirate vessel's hull. Pirates scrambled for the boarding ramp, hands up, bravado completely gone, replaced by the particular urgency of men who had chosen the wrong ship on the wrong day.

Elendril watched them go with an expression that gave away nothing. "Looks like you're not so scary after all."

The daydream dissolved as the sound of his father's footsteps crossed the cargo bay. Mekel appeared in the hatchway, a small smile sitting quietly on his lips, the kind that meant he had a fair idea what his son was thinking about.

"What are you up to?" he asked.

Elendril glanced down at his hands. "Just thinking."

Mekel leaned against the hatch frame and folded his arms. He had never been a man who pushed. "They're gone," he said after a moment. "We'll be late to port, but we're safe. That's what matters."

"I know," Elendril said, and he did know. But knowing a thing and being satisfied by it were not always the same.

Mekel pushed off from the hatch frame. "Come on. Now that we're running late, I could really use your help getting this manifest ready for when we dock at Bari 4. The Itherian factor is going to want everything accounted for before we even start unloading."

Elendril followed his father toward the forward section of the ship. As he walked the familiar corridor, he let one hand trail along the wall the way he had when he was small. The Dragonfly's hull was warm here, close to the engine section, and the metal had the texture of something that had been patched more than once. He knew this ship. He knew her sounds and her rhythms and the way she moved through space with the patience of something that had learned not to hurry. She was home, and he loved her the way you loved a thing that had always been there.

But she was not the ship in his imagination.

He pulled his hand from the wall and kept walking.

One day, he told himself. One day, things would play out differently.

When the Dragonfly finally docked at Bari 4, the transfer process took the better part of three hours. The Itherian ship waiting at the berth was everything the Dragonfly was not: polished, imposing, crewed by men and women in pressed uniforms who moved with precise efficiency. They counted every crate twice. An inspector with a handheld tablet walked the row of cargo with the deliberate attention of someone billing by thoroughness, pausing at each pallet to log its weight and condition. When she reached the broken-sealed crate, she noted it without expression, made two entries on her tablet, and moved on. The Itherian supply chain did not appear to have strong feelings about the circumstances that had compromised the seal. It simply adjusted the numbers and kept moving.

Mekel signed the adjusted transfer receipt without argument, which Elendril found harder to watch than the inspection itself. His father glanced at the figure, folded the receipt into his coat pocket, and thanked the factor's clerk by name, the way he always did, because Mekel was the kind of man who learned people's names.

Elendril kept his mouth shut. He had learned, somewhere over the past several years of watching his father work, that some battles were not worth the cost of the argument. But he also had not forgotten Varek's face, or the way that pirate had looked at his father's cargo and seen something disposable.

Once the cargo was transferred and the accounting settled, Mekel gave him a nod toward the spaceport's interior. "Come on. We need a few supplies before we head back out."

The spaceport at Bari 4 was a sprawling, low-ceilinged place that smelled of fuel and fried food and the particular kind of stale air that collected in spaces where too many people passed through and not enough windows existed. Vendors ran stalls along the main concourse, selling provisions, spare components, and goods of questionable origin. Travelers moved through in groups and alone, heading toward berths or departure gates or the clusters of tables outside the food stalls where

people sat with cups of something hot and nowhere particular to be. It was noisy and crowded and alive in the way that spaceports always were, a place where everyone was in transit, where nothing was permanent, and where the universe's business got conducted in every language at once.

While Mekel fell into negotiation with a provisions seller over the price of dried protein rations, Elendril drifted toward the edge of the concourse. A cluster of people had gathered near a support pillar, drawn by the sound of a voice telling a story. Elendril moved closer without quite deciding to.

The storyteller was old, with the kind of face that had been beaten into its current shape by decades of wind and work and the particular kind of life that leaves marks. He had one good eye, pale and sharp, and it caught the light in a way that made it seem lit from inside. He was talking to a younger man who leaned forward on a crate, arms on his knees, clearly in the grip of whatever was being said. Three or four others had stopped nearby, the way people did when they heard a voice that knew what it was doing.

Elendril stopped just at the edge of the small crowd and listened.

"They say there's a captain who vanished near the Edge," the old man murmured, dropping his voice as if the walls might be listening. His one good eye caught the light. "A ghost ship, slipping between patrols like smoke through a cracked hull. They call him Captain Drayan Orrs."

Elendril went very still.

The trader continued, and his voice had the rhythm of a man who had told this story many times and loved it just as much each time.

"They say the Whisperwind vanished into a wormhole at Vortha's Gap to escape a fleet of imperial patrols. No one's ever mapped that gap. Cartographers who've tried don't come back, or they come back wrong, talking about geometry that doesn't hold still. It's suicide to try. But somehow, Captain Orrs found a way through, and lived to tell about it."

A pause, long enough to let the image settle into the listener.

"The Relik Station's vaults were said to be impenetrable. Locked down tight with imperial codes, guarded around the clock, double-checked against a list that got reviewed every six hours. And yet one morning, the guards woke up to find the vaults empty. The patrol ships untouched. Not a scratch on the docking pylons, not a single sensor triggered. Not a soul saw the Whisperwind dock. Not a soul saw her leave."

Someone at the edge of the crowd let out a low sound that wasn't quite a laugh.

"Then there was the time Solfir Prime fell under blockade," the old man said. "Imperial navy, twelve ships, sealed off every recognized lane in or out of the system. No food in. No people out. They were going to starve them into submission." His good eye swept across the small crowd. "The Whisperwind slipped past the imperial lines anyway. Smuggled out a thousand refugees. A thousand people who had been told there was no way out. They say Captain Orrs navigated through an asteroid field so dense that the imperial patrols didn't even bother to cover it. They didn't think anything could come through without getting torn to pieces. But the Whisperwind emerged on the other side without a scratch."

The storyteller leaned back slightly, surveying the effect of his words with the quiet satisfaction of a craftsman looking at finished work.

"And then, one day, the Whisperwind just vanished. No last sighting. No distress call. No wreckage. Some say he flew too close to the Edge of the galaxy and never came back. Others say he found something out there, something the empire very much did not want him to find. Something they would have done a great deal to keep buried." He paused one final time. "And if you listen closely on a quiet run, far enough from any beacon or buoy, you might still hear the Whisperwind's engines. Slipping through the stars. Just out of reach."

The crowd dispersed gradually, the way people do when a story ends and real life reasserts itself. The young man asked the old trader something in a low voice, and they fell into quieter conversation. Two of the other bystanders exchanged a look and walked on, already on their way to wherever they had been going before the story stopped them. Elendril stood where he was for a moment longer, rooted to the

spot in a way he couldn't have explained, the name sitting in his chest like a warm coal, burning slow and steady.

He turned it over the way you turned a coin in your pocket. The Whisperwind. A ship that could navigate a gap no cartographer had mapped. A captain who could empty an impenetrable vault without leaving a mark, who could slip through a blockade twelve ships wide and come out carrying a thousand lives. A ghost and a legend and maybe something that had actually happened, out there in the places the empire thought it controlled.

Captain Drayan Orrs.

The Whisperwind.

He was still thinking about it when his father found him.

"There you are," Mekel said, his arms full of wrapped provisions. He glanced at the dispersing crowd and raised an eyebrow. "What was all that?"

"A story," Elendril said.

Mekel studied his son's face for a moment with that look he had, the one that meant he was reading something the other person hadn't said yet. Then he handed Elendril half the provisions to carry and started back toward the berth. "Must have been some story."

"Yeah," Elendril said. "It was."

Mekel glanced at him sideways as they walked, that expression of quiet assessment on his face. He didn't ask anything further, and Elendril was glad, because he wouldn't have known how to explain what the old trader's story had done to him. Some things settled into you in a way that wasn't ready to become words yet. He held it close and carried it toward the ship, and the Dragonfly waited for them at the berth like she always did, patient and practical and nothing like the Whisperwind at all.

That night, with Bari 4 shrinking in the aft viewport and the stars spreading wide and open ahead of the Dragonfly, Elendril sat alone in the cockpit. His father had gone to sleep an hour ago, leaving the ship on its logged heading with the autopilot engaged and Elendril in the co-pilot's seat to keep watch, the way he had

done dozens of times before. It was one of the things his father trusted him with, and he took it seriously. He kept his eyes moving across the instruments and the viewport in the rhythm they had developed together, checking in, checking on, making sure the Dragonfly was doing what the Dragonfly was supposed to be doing.

But tonight, between the checks, his mind kept traveling.

He sat forward, his small hands hovering above the navigation controls, his fingers moving the way they always did on these quiet watches, tracing the shapes of maneuvers he hadn't learned yet, plotting courses to places he hadn't been. The stars beyond the viewport stretched endlessly outward, each one a sun, each sun perhaps a system, each system perhaps a story waiting for the right captain to arrive and find out what was in it. The console lights cast the cockpit in soft gold.

But tonight, the Dragonfly wasn't the Dragonfly.

In his mind's eye, the ship transformed. Its worn hull became something sleeker, something quieter, built not for hauling but for moving unseen through all the places the empire thought it had covered. The engines, instead of the Dragonfly's characteristic low rumble, became something closer to a whisper. The kind of sound you only noticed by its absence when it stopped. The kind of sound that gave a ship her name.

The Whisperwind.

Elendril sat at her helm, and he was no longer a boy on a freight run. He was a captain. Not Captain Orrs, not exactly, but someone built from the same material, wearing a coat that fit properly and carrying the particular stillness of someone who knew exactly where they were going and why. Someone who had looked at men like Varek and decided, quietly and without announcing it, that the universe was going to have to make room for a different kind of answer.

"Captain," a voice came over the comms. Steady, reliable, the voice of a crew that had chosen him and would choose him again. "We've spotted an imperial patrol ahead. Orders?"

His lips curved into a smile that knew something the patrol did not. "We slip past them. They'll never catch us."

He gripped the controls and felt the ship respond like an extension of his own will, banking in perfect silence toward the deep shadow of an asteroid cluster. The patrol ship's scan beams swept the void, slow and mechanical, finding nothing but empty space where the Whisperwind had been. She moved through the dark like a held breath, like smoke, like something the universe had agreed to keep secret.

"They'll never see us coming," he murmured to the stars. "We're always one step ahead."

Outside the real viewport, the stars burned on, patient and constant, scattered across the dark in their millions. Elendril sat with his hands light on the controls of his father's grain hauler and his eyes on the endless reach of space, and thought about a captain who had navigated Vortha's Gap, emptied the vaults of Relik Station, slipped through a blockade with a thousand refugees, and then vanished at the Edge of everything.

He thought about Varek's sneer and the grain on the floor of the cargo bay and the broken seal and the docked fee and the way his father had just accepted it, because that was what you did, because lives mattered more than cargo, because sometimes the smart thing and the right thing were the same thing and you had to make peace with that.

He thought about the way the old trader's pale eye had caught the light when he dropped his voice and said that name.

The Whisperwind.

Elendril glanced once at the instrument panel, made his check, noted that the Dragonfly was doing exactly what she was supposed to be doing, running quiet and steady through the dark toward home.

Then he looked back out at the stars.

One day, he told himself, one day.