

The Teardrop that became a Torrent

By Rachel Aukes



Drake Fender knew he'd won the Coastal Run as soon as he finished his pass. Every turn had been flawless, and the *Merganser* had performed without a glitch. He grinned all the way back to Nova Colony's space dock, knowing his and Kora's lives were about to change for the better.

He rushed through the docking sequence, hustled into the pressurization chamber, and then jogged to the Uneven Bar. The moment he entered the bustling lounge, his younger sister came running over.

Kora hugged him so hard she knocked his breath from him. Then, she took a step back and punched his arm. "You were about two millimeters away from splatting into that red asteroid in the third quadrant," she scolded, then smiled. "Wow. You looked great out there. Everyone's been talking about how some unknown guy set a new record for the Run."

He beamed. "You know what that means?"

She stood taller. "That we'll be able to move into that larger apartment on the third level."

"Hey," some guy said as he bumped into Drake, spilling his drink. "You're that guy who just made the Run. I lost a bet on you. Figured you for a goner, for sure."

Drake's brows rose. "Well, you made a stupid bet."

The guy scowled. Drake smirked.

Kora tugged her brother's arm. "C'mon, no fights. Not today. Besides, Chutt's saving our table."

Drake broke eye contact with the drunk and let his sister lead him away. They weaved through the crowded bar to a table under one of the large screens replaying the Coastal Run. As Drake took his seat, Chutt slid a glass of whiskey across the table. "Not bad flying out there," his best friend said and lifted his glass in salute. "After that race, Captain Polaski has got to offer you the pilot's seat on his ship."

"He'd better," Drake said before downing the drink in a single gulp. The alcohol burned, and tasted like sludge compared to the Terran whiskey he drank as a boy back on his home planet. Regrettably, there was no Terran whiskey out this far. Even if there was, he couldn't afford a bottle.

"Look, look." Kora elbowed Drake's arm and pointed to the screen. "They're showing your pass again."

Cameras stationed on pylons showed the *Merganser* as Drake spun her around one pylon before jackknifing through two merging pylons. The Coastal Run, an annual race through the

end-to-end Space Coast, was the most infamous race across the Collective. It was also the most dangerous, because the Space Coast was an asteroid belt. The pylons were asteroids, constantly and erratically moving.

Every year, at least sixteen percent of the racers were killed during the race, while another twenty percent limped away with damaged ships. With odds like that, it was no wonder that the Run brought gamblers in from across the Collective. If Drake wasn't flat broke, he'd have bet every last credit on himself.

"I figured you'd hustle back for your winnings."

Drake turned to find his investor, the wealthy stationmaster of Ice Port. He rose to his feet as she approached. "Vym." He held up the keycard for the space dock. "I figured you'd be waiting here for both your ship and all of my winnings."

"Only eighty percent," Vym corrected. "And, you owe me for destroying my ship last year."

Drake held up a finger. "Only *part* of the *Wren* was destroyed. I brought the rest of the ship back to you. Besides, it wasn't my fault. The pylon cracked and split."

"Hmph. At least you didn't destroy my ship again this year. If you had, I would have to reconsider investing in you again."

"What are you complaining about? My winnings this year will bring you a hundred times more credits to cover the *Wren's* expenses."

"Our winnings, young man. You may have flown the race, but it was my ship that won." Vym smirked. "If you couldn't win with the *Merganser*, you couldn't win at all. After all, she's a *Serrator* class racer. Fortunately for me, she must not be impressive enough for you to try and run off with her."

He chortled. "Oh she's impressive enough all right, but I'm nowhere near stupid enough to steal from you."

Vym poked his chest. "And, *that's* the reason why I invested in you. You may be too cocky for your own good, but you have at least some bit of intelligence, and a fair skill in the cockpit." As she finished, she turned to a man who'd approached during their conversation. "Ah, Aramis, here's the young man I wanted you to meet."

Drake narrowed his eyes. The man looked strikingly familiar, yet he couldn't place him. More likely, he was one of the many faces who passed through the Uneven Bar at some point.

The newcomer tilted his head toward Drake. "That was a fine run you made out there. Some of the best flying I've seen, especially for an eighteen-year-old."

"Almost nineteen," Drake corrected.

Vym spoke next. "Drake, I'd like you to meet Aramis, who also hails from my fringe station of Ice Port. In fact, he is like a son to me."

Drake turned his gaze from the frail white woman to the black man who stood at least a half-foot taller than her. "Funny. I don't see the resemblance."

Vym scowled. "Perhaps you recognize Aramis by his last name. Drake, I'd like you to meet Marshal Aramis Reyne."

Drake paused when he heard the name, and the familiarity became clear. He found himself staring at the face he'd seen on the video screens hundreds of times. Gray streaked his temples, but his piercing gaze revealed the fearless torrent leader he was famed to be. Drake vaguely heard Kora and Chutt whisper behind him. He snapped out his hand. "It's a real honor, Marshal. What you're doing on Terra, what with the rebellion and all, is the right thing to do. I hope you whip the CUF's *collective* ass."

Reyne's lips curled upward, and he shook the young man's hand. "I'm glad to hear you approve of the Uprising. And, you can call me Reyne. I'm not big on formalities."

"We don't have time for small talk," Vym said abruptly. "Drake, I need to hire you to fly the *Merganser* back to Ice Port, and Reyne here will be your passenger. And, I need you to head out immediately."

"She's right," Reyne said. "I received word that several CUF gun ships will be at Nova Colony's docks within the hour."

At mention of the CUF, Drake's body tensed. The reason why Kora and he had moved to Nova Colony was because it was outside the Collective's control. His jaw tightened, and he turned to Reyne. "They're coming here for you."

Reyne shook his head. "No. I heard they were going to invade Nova Colony last week. They had no idea I was coming, though they've likely found out from their spies that I'm here now."

"Why would they have spies here?" Chutt asked from behind Drake. "Nova Colony is outside the Collective. The CUF has no authority here."

"You think that matters to the CUF?" Reyne countered, and Chutt remained quiet.

Drake glanced back at Kora. Her lips were pursed — she looked as worried as he felt. He turned back to Vym. "I'm not leaving until I get my credits."

She rolled her eyes.

Drake continued. "If the CUF's coming here, who's to say how long it could be before I get paid. The CUF has a talent for mucking things up."

"You'll get your winnings plus a bonus of fifty thousand credits as soon as you dock at Ice Port," Vym said. "You have my word."

Drake's jaw dropped. Fifty thousand credits would cover Kora and his room and board for two years.

"Go already," Kora said.

He faced his sister. "But, if the CUF show up —"

"If the CUF show up," Kora interrupted, "Chutt and I lay low. Besides, it's not like they're going to mess with kids."

"You'd better lay low," Drake scolded before he turned back to Vym. "You got yourself a deal. You better have those credits ready the moment I land."

"Don't worry about that. You worry about getting Reyne and my ship safely back to Ice Port."

Drake gave a small nod, then turned around to face Kora. She stood and embraced him, and he squeezed her against him for a long second before pulling back. He eyed Chutt, unable to look at Kora without tearing up. "You keep an eye on her."

"I always do," Chutt said smugly.

"More like I have to keep an eye on him," Kora chuckled.

"Remember to lay low," Drake commanded. "Go back to the apartment until I get back."

"You know we're always careful," Kora said.

"You better be." Drake abruptly left his sister and best friend in the bar, and headed straight to the space docks alongside the infamous leader of the Uprising. He knew Kora and Chutt would be careful. The three of them were smart, but irrational doubt still nagged at his confidence.

Drake forced his mind to focus on the trip ahead. As they walked through the tunnels, most folks minded their business, as colonists tended to do. But, every twenty feet or so, someone would raise their open palm toward Reyne. It was the torrent way. Drake had grown up on a farm and had never received any attention like that his entire life. It felt surreal to be walking next to someone as famous as Reyne, but worrisome as well.

Reyne had been on the CUF's Most Wanted list for three years straight. What if the CUF showed up before they left Nova Colony? Would they believe Drake wasn't a torrent? Or, more likely, would the CUF not care, and arrest him just because he was with Reyne? They'd arrested his parents for less.

Drake sobered, and scanned for any sign of CUF dromadiers.

When they reached the *Merganser*, Drake's nerves remained on edge as they settled into the cockpit. Being back on the ship he'd just taken through a deadly race instantly soothed his stress. He was safe here. Like an old lover, he ran his hands over the instruments before entering his flight plan. Reyne didn't speak, instead allowing Drake to run through his checklists without interruption. The ship came to life with a purr, and he knew everything would be fine.

Drake taxied from the space docks a bit faster than he needed to and zoomed around the asteroids across the Space Coast because he damn well loved flying fast...and perhaps he was showing off a bit, too.

Once they emerged from the Coast and into the open blackness of space, Drake switched the controls to auto-pilot. He leaned back and turned to Reyne, who was reclined fully back in his seat and had his fingers interlaced behind his head. "Hey, Marshal?"

The other man cracked an eye open. "It's Reyne."

"Okay. Reyne. How about you tell me the real reason why Vym had me fly you back to Ice Port. Everyone knows you're a damn good pilot. You could've flown yourself. Heck, you probably have a ship sitting in the docks back at Nova Colony as we speak."

Reyne didn't deny the statement. "I needed a lift to Ice Port."

"Why didn't you ride back with Vym? She's probably only a couple hours behind us."

"She is."

When Reyne didn't say anything else, Drake grew impatient. "It's because I won the Coastal Run, isn't it? My guess is you wanted to see if I'm really the best pilot out there before you offer me some kind of job."

He chuckled. "Vym was sure right when she said you had no lack of confidence. And yes, you're right. I wanted to get a feel for you. Vym sees potential in you." Reyne paused. "I see it, too."

"Don't get me wrong, I'd love to fly for you," Drake began, "but, I can't. Flying with you means I'm a torrent, which means I'm an outlaw from the Collective's viewpoint. And, I have to lay low to take care of Kora. Once she turns eighteen, ask me again."

"I suspected that would be your response, but the Uprising needs you now, not two years from now. Terra—your home planet—could be wiped out in two years. I've seen your bio. I can't help but think you want to be back there, getting vengeance for your parents' murder."

Drake's jaw tightened. "What I want doesn't matter. Because I've got obligations. If you know that the CUF killed my parents, then you also know that I'm all Kora has left. She's already been orphaned once. She needs me."

"We have secure bases where family members can live."

Drake guffawed. "I seriously doubt any torrent base is safe."

Reyne raised a brow. "You think Nova Colony is safe?"

"It's outside the Collective. It's the safest place there is."

"Trust me, the CUF's reach is like tentacles. It's spread everywhere, even through Nova Colony. Just because you don't see dromadiers patrolling the colony doesn't mean they aren't already there."

Drake shrugged. "So what if they are? As long as I stay off their radar, I'm not worried."

"And, winning a widely broadcasted illegal race is staying off their radar?"

Drake's ire rose. "Listen—"

A ship's lights flashed on in the distance, illuminating the hull of a sleek gray ship.

"Where'd that come from?" Drake started running instrument checks.

"Don't bother. It was in stealth." Reyne scowled. "It looks like a single gunship. Yeah, it's CUF credentials are coming through comms now."

Along with its credentials came a message. *Serrator Playa-Eight-Four-Five-Seven-Kilo, this is a Collective Unified Forces gunship. You've been flagged for a dock check. Return post haste to Nova Colony and prepare for a full ship and crew inspection.*

"You think they know you're on board?" Drake asked as he stared at the gunship before them.

"No," Reyne replied bluntly. "If they knew I was on board, there'd be an entire armada out there right now. My guess is they are looking for this ship. Going after the racer that won the Coastal Run is exactly the sort of thing the CUF likes to do." He scowled. "If you return to Nova Colony, they'll arrest you, and Kora will never see you again. But without any guns of our own to even the odds, they can blow us to bits if we try to run."

Drake gritted his teeth and gripped the controls. "Viggin' CUF."

"The good news is, they haven't fired on us yet," Reyne said.

As the comms chimed with more incoming warnings, Drake considered his options. None of them looked good. He sucked in a deep breath through his nose, then flipped off the channel. The ship fell into silence.

"I have a feeling they won't like that very much," Reyne said.

A photon shot jetted above the *Merganser's* bow in response. Drake flinched. "I think you're right."

"Take us back to Nova Colony. When we dock, I can distract them so you can get away." Reyne ordered, reaching over to flip on the comms.

Drake pushed Reyne's hand away. "No."

"Why? What are you—"

"Hold on." Drake flipped off the ship's gravity and pushed full power to the engines. He corkscrewed the *Merganser* to avoid the array of shots now blasting from the gunship. The CUF gave chase as it continued firing.

Drake banked the ship to the left and then to the right, zigzagging to prevent the gunship from getting a bead on them. A blast burned too close and rocked the *Merganser*. Warning lights illuminated the instrument panel. The cockpit vibrated around them.

"You have to cut the left engine before it blows," Reyne yelled.

Drake cursed as he powered down the engine. With only one engine running, the ship veered to the left. His fingers flew over the panel as he entered commands to compensate for the loss. The CUF ship was closing the distance and still firing nonstop.

"Another close one like that, and we'll be blown straight into the eversea," Reyne cautioned.

"Tell me something I don't know," Drake muttered as he weaved through space in a madman's pattern. He took another look at the CUF ship and his lips thinned. "I've got a plan. You better tighten your seatbelt."

Reyne threw him a questioning look, but obeyed.

Drake reduced power to the engine while continuing to evade. The gunship fired fewer shots as it closed the distance, clearly confident of claiming its prey.

"What are you going to do?" Reyne asked.

Drake's lip curled upward. "I'm going to ram it."

Reyne's eyes widened. "You're what?"

Drake added power, and flew the *Merganser* in a tightening coil. By the time the CUF ship realized that its prey had become the hunter, it was too late. He leveled out the ship a split second before the left engine slammed into the CUF ship's aft photon gun.

The impact threw Drake and Reyne forward. Drake felt his hand hit the instrument panel, followed by a stabbing pain in his fingers. He heard Reyne grunt—or maybe it was himself. He couldn't tell—it took a second for him to regain his bearings. By then, new warning lights had lit up across the instrument panel.

Whiplash burned through his neck as he read through the warnings. He was more than a little surprised to discover the right engine and life support systems were undamaged, though they were about the only things left running.

Reyne winced. "Get that damn gunship back on the view panel."

"I'm working on it. She's a bit sluggish."

As he spun the *Merganser*, he expected to find the gunship hot on their tail. Instead, he found no sign of the ship.

Drake grunted. "It looks like they bugged out."

"No." Reyne pointed to debris floating in the distance. "That's all that's left of them."

Drake's jaw loosened. "That's not possible."

"It's not probable," Reyne corrected. "I have no idea how you managed to do it. My guess is that when you scraped off that left engine, the fuel left in it sparked off the photon gun." He chuckled. "I think that's the best move I've ever seen."

Drake stared out at the debris in shock. "I really didn't expect that to work."

"Well, I'm not complaining," Reyne said. "Though, we better not stick around here much longer. It won't take the CUF long to come check out why one of their gunships dropped offline."

"You don't have to tell me twice." Drake said as he reinitiated the flight path to Ice Port.

Limping on one engine, it took them four times as long to reach Playa's orbit.

When they got there, they found no sign of the CUF, which was normal for the colony farthest from the Collective. After Drake had docked and powered down the *Merganser*, he said, "Vym's not going to be too happy having a busted up ship."

Reyne unstrapped his belt and headed onto the ramp. "That's nothing compared to the CUF coming after you for blowing up one of their ships."

Drake followed him. The freezing Playan air blasted through his jacket in seconds. "You think they know who I am?"

Reyne waited for Drake to catch up. "Everyone on the Coast saw you win the Coastal Run with this ship. Yeah. It's safe to say they'll know it was you."

Drake swallowed. "I need to get back to Kora."

"It won't be safe for you on Nova Colony," Reyne said. "Same with Kora. I can help. I can have your sister brought here."

"You mean, you'd have her brought to a torrent base." Drake grimaced. "I'm trying to keep her away from trouble."

Reyne gave him a sad look. "I know you're trying to do the right thing, but the CUF's reach is growing every day. Soon, you may find it impossible to keep your sister safe."

Drake thought for a long moment. "Before they died, my parents made me promise to take Kora as far away from the CUF as possible." He shrugged. "Maybe it's not possible, but I've got to try. I made a promise." He took a breath. "Listen, you have my word that I'll join up when Kora turns eighteen. That gives me two years to save up enough credits and find a good, safe home for her."

“Good luck.” Reyne handed him a card with a comm channel scribbled across it. “You can reach me on this channel. Give it some thought. I could always use a good pilot. And, the bases are more secure than you think.”

Drake gave a small nod.

They shook hands and parted ways.

As Drake headed to find a lounge, his wrist comm chimed. He smiled when he saw it was Chutt. “Hey, you wouldn’t believe what happened. I was flying—”

“They killed her,” Chutt cut in, sobbing. “They killed Kora.”

The blood in Drake’s veins suddenly chilled to match the outside temperature. “What are you talking about?”

Chutt’s story came out in between stuttered breaths. “The CUF showed up and started arresting everyone at the bar. They didn’t even say why. They called us fringe rats! People started yelling and stuff. Someone fired off a shot, and then the CUF started shooting everyone like they really were just rats!”

Chutt’s voice cracked, and he sucked in a couple breaths before continuing. “Kora and I crawled under the tables. We almost made it to the doorway when one of them saw us. He shot at us without thinking twice about it!” He paused to breathe. “I swear, I tried to cover Kora, but the CUF guy shot her before I could move. He shot her right in the head. Oh God, there was so much blood. I tried to save her. I mean it, Drake.”

Drake would’ve said something if he could, but he couldn’t form any words. Every muscle was paralyzed, and his tongue was a leaden weight. Thoughts swirled in his brain, screaming at him that none of this was true. But, his heart drummed the truth with every hammering beat.

“I’m so sorry,” Chutt said finally. “I pulled her with me, but he shot me in the shoulder and I had to let go.” Chutt sniffled. “You ought to see my shoulder. The shot didn’t break the skin, but it burns like a gored vig. It’s going to leave a huge scar.” He sucked in a breath. “Anyway, I went back after they left the bar. I took Kora with me. I have her with me now. We’re in the vents near E5-6.”

Drake clenched his eyes shut. He forced his jaws to relax, and he fought to find words. “Stay there. I’ll get back there as soon as I can.”

“No. You can’t,” Chutt said in a rush. “They’re crawling all over the place. They’re killing or arresting everyone in Nova Colony.”

“Stay in the vents. They won’t find you there,” Drake said, in a robotic voice, thinking of how he could get back there without being caught. He wasn’t going to leave his sister behind. Chutt was still crying, and Drake realized the boy still needed his help. “It’s going to be okay,” Drake forced out. “Remember the cove by Hydraulics?”

“Yeah?” Chutt replied.

“Go there. There’s no way they can track you there.”

“But, I won’t be able to pull Kora that far.”

Agony stabbed Drake's chest as he spoke words he'd never fathomed he'd ever speak. "Leave her. I'll come back for her as soon as I can. You get yourself safe. I'm coming back for you." *And Kora.*

"They're coming back this way," Chutt whispered. "I've got to go."

Drake's comm went blank, and he stared at it for many long seconds.

"Hey man, you okay?"

Drake looked up to see a dock guard watching him.

"You don't look so good," the man said.

Drake turned and strode away. He walked through the docks and outside. Playa's icy winds could kill a person within minutes. He didn't care. Instead of freezing to death, he found himself walking down into one of the city's deep underground caverns. It was dark and cool, and smelled of civilization—reminding him of Nova Colony. He found a darkened area where a jagged rock formed a small crevice. He squeezed into the small space and leaned his head against the cool stone.

Then he wept.

He passed out, still wedged into the cold stone, at some point. When he woke, he wept again. A short time later, his tears stopped. It was as though Playa's bitter cold helped form a frozen scar over his heart, numbing him to emotion.

Resolve girded his shivering body. He wiggled out of the crevice and stood. He pulled out the card Reyne had given him and entered the numbers on his comm.

The torrent marshal answered after several seconds.

"I'm in," Drake said. "But I need a ship. I have to do something first."

Reyne didn't hesitate. "You can use mine. I'll meet you at dock G-12 in thirty minutes."

Drake hung up and headed straight back to the docks. He had a new mission.

He was going to take down the CUF once and for all.

But first, he had to put his little sister to rest.