

Carma and the Dragon

By Fiona Ayres

Carma calmly stepped into the old, run-down trading house. The air stunk like rotting fish and a week's worth of sweat. A few people whispered, others stood up and left at the sight of her, an infamous criminal. She was easily recognised by her ugly scars and burns on her left cheek. All from one battle. The one where the enemy had permanently marked her.

The only person who didn't react to her appearance was the Trade Layer. The Trade Layer that had been in the business for years, he didn't look tough, but he could settle chaos with just the authority in his voice. He was quite old for his position, though he sat in his chair, legs on the desk, proving he had no fear of Carma, nor the scars that lined her face. He raised an eyebrow and cleared his throat.

"Get outta here," He said, bringing his legs quickly to the floor, "I don't tolerate bandits in my trading house."

Carma took a few steps forward. She could slightly make out two hand-crafted knives, ready in their sheaths. She would have to be careful, and stay alert. But even if he did take a swing at her, she had her own blades. Crafted from the heart of Mt. Rangchalvag, carved from the finest metals you could find.

"You look just like the person I need." Carma tapped a photo of the Trade Layer on her belt. "I'm just looking for an item... and I suspect you know exactly what I'm talking about." She was taking steps as she spoke, smiling all the way.

Carma unlatched the screen from her thin brown belt. The Trade Layer watched as she filed through the many documents and photos. His eyes were on her two swords, wishing he could take them for his own. Pre-crafted weapons were hard to come by. During the war, all had been taken to the troops or destroyed, and lost in the rubble.

The Trade Layer put a fist on his desk and a frown on his face. He slowly shook his head. "I told you, no bandits in my trading house."

The smile on Carma's face faded. "Do you really want to die today, old man?" She growled, "I really don't think you do. So I'm staying here, and not leaving until the intel is in my hand."

Carma's screen made an unnatural noise, sensing danger outside. Just a measly set of guards, but enough to get Carma on her toes. She swore, then continued to scan through her device's documents, photos, and writing samples, her dark hands typing and scrolling. The screen's alarm fired again as the danger got closer. *Come on, come on*, Carma raced, nervously tapping her boot.

"Aha!" She lifted up the picture. "Where is *this*?" It was a blurry photo of a diamond, pieced together with eight identical triangles. The Trade Layer scratched his skin-bare chin. He had a look on his face that told Carma: "Sorry, can't tell you that. Not without something in exchange."

Carma really didn't want to pay for a treasure she was supposed to steal. Furious, Carma lifted her swords. Her scars heated and bursted into flames, causing her to look like a fire demon. The Trade Layer scooted back in his chair, his eyes were wide with fear, reflecting the flames that burned from Carma's skin.

"Give me the intel," She hissed through clenched teeth, "And I'll let you keep your limbs." Carma could tell he was scared, but still wasn't going to give in. She tried once more. "Give me the information or I will rip your ears from your head and throw them at your face."

The old man stuttered, "Here." And handed her an old drive labeled, *Sanakarth Core, 3133*. A smile crept it's way up Carma's face. She slid her swords back past her shoulders. The drive was pretty heavy for a one-inch object, holding lots of information for Carma to study. She left the Trade Layer and the bounty on her head increased in value. *Time to go*, she thought, and headed for her ship. She was too excited to notice the tracker on her sleeve, already activated.

The Trade Layer picked up his communicator. "Follow her."

The air was thick with smoke as Carma rushed to her ship. There were plenty of people to rob, people who she could pickpocket in a mere eight seconds, but she chose not to spend her time with little scraps of metal worth

nothing. There were also the patrols to avoid, and many other obstacles to waste her time.

No ship was more common than a Paraling Shuttle. Carma found herself in a crowd of them, with all of their identical lights and sensors watching her. She was looking for the unique spikes and green lettering that distinguished her's. After setting six alarms off on other Shuttles, she finally came to her own. The one that had driven her out of so many conflicts. This shuttle was more than a ship. It was her best friend. It was as close as family.

The front door clicked open, letting Carma inside. The worn-out steering bars were crusted with mold, grease, and filth. Carma loved it still, sitting in the ripped up pilot seat.

Carma opened the hand that held the drive and loaded it into her ship. When the coordinates were locked onto, she was off.

Carma zipped from star system to star system, using up all her concentrated thruster power. She crunched down chips one after another as she rode, laughing like a crazed maniac. She was going to find this Sanakarth Core before anyone else would, and she was going to do it quickly.

She prepared her ship for the planet's atmosphere, and prepared her personal space suit.

The ship shook, as it was suddenly hit by a bigger ship. Carma stumbled, and fell out of her chair, onto the floor. Her chips flew everywhere, powdering the cockpit with light orange dust. Confused, she pulled up the rearview monitor. She could see the two familiar jagged wings and pointed nose that told Carma it was one of the the Trade Layer's.

There was a massive wave of heat as a fire-ray took down her right wing. It had come from the largest cannon on the ship.

"Captain's log," Carma started, "Preparing to evacuate." She quickly suited up and pressed the button for the airlock door to open.

The next hit came so swiftly, going straight through Carma and her ship. It knocked her off of her feet, sending her flying into the control panel. She had just enough time to fire her own cannon, blasting the other ship's port engine to bits.

The explosion was overwhelming. Her ship sensors whined, spewing out smoldering debris.

Air rushed past Carma's ears as she was blown out of the safety of her cockpit, into the sky of a new planet. She fell and fell. Her parachute deployed, but it must have been damaged from the blast, for it wasn't opening completely. She continued to fall, the parachute slowing her, but not enough to land safely.

The large ship above her started to move in, ready to intercept her.

"No, no, no, no!" She screamed as she ship came into close view, it's pilots were easily recognised from the trading house.

There was no time to waste. Carma launched her grappling wire to the closest tree, it broke through the wind like an axe going through wood. It attached to the tree easily, allowing Carma to swing gracefully.

She released her parachute and her grappling wire, flipping acrobatically. She landed on the forest floor without causing a single stone to fly, but soon realized her impressive arrival didn't matter. A large shadow spread through the trees.

Run

Carma wrestled the bushes and kicked fallen tree branches, breaking a path through the forests landscape. The woods around her seemed to be fighting back, attacking her with twigs, leaves, and fallen logs. She wiped a bead of sweat away before it reached her cheek.

The shield of forest noises was broken as the humming of the ship overpowered all sounds. The pointed nose cut through the air like a dragonfly's wings, gaining on Carma as she ran. Her map was telling her that the core was close by, but all she could see was trees and dirt. Nothing that could hold the core.

The trees above started toppling over. The ship had shot down two posts that formed a force field that Carma could not go through. It would slow her down, and that was all they needed to get to her. Slow Carma, and the day was theirs.

Carma screamed. This was supposed to be easy! Go in, grab the Core, and she would come out with the most valuable natural item in the Crenta

Galaxy. But now, not only would Carma fail to get the treasure, she was going to get captured.

Thoughts were going through her head, as well as memories. Memories of times when her ship had saved her, blasted at enemies openly just to rescue it's pilot. Now that ship was gone, and there was no chance of escaping.

"Attention," called one of the Trade Layer's men, he slid down a long rope very clumsily, creating quite a scene for Carma to watch. "Please drop all of your weapons and put your hands up. We've got you surrounded." Carma scanned the woods around her. Five heavily armed figures started moving in.

"Ha," Carma taunted, "nobody has ever captured me. All of my life I have been escaping armies. If you think you can catch me, you're wrong." Carma wasn't as confident as she was pretending to be. She had only escaped those times because of her ship. She was hoping that they would back down.

The closest mercenary shook his head at her, then nodded at the person directly behind Carma. This mercenary immediately unstrapped the electric double axe from her belt and took a slow swing at Carma. Carma dodged it with ease, but had trouble dodging the tip of a sword held by a third mercenary on the other side of her.

"Thanks," she said, as she bent his arm backwards, then she sent a kick to his face causing him to loosen his grip. She took the sword for her own.

The fight was much more balanced after that, but tipping a little in favor of her attackers. Carma yelped. An arm made its way around her neck, squeezing the air out of her. She huffed and squirmed, but there was no chance of escape. Her scars caught fire again, but this time her attacker was protected by a helmet and heavy armor.

No, she thought as darkness started to cave in, there must be a way out. She gasped for air. Nothing has ever stopped me. She tore at his armor. Nothing ever will. I am Carma. The darkness was taking over. I am the greatest thief in all of the Crenta galaxy. My ship never turned away. My ship believed I was strong. Then there was nothing.

My ship believed I was worth saving.

Carma had failed to fight the darkness, and failed her mission.

From the heights of the clouds came a loud rumble. The sound of a dragon waking. It dove down, cracking the taller trees and setting fires to the smaller. The Trade Layer's men all looked up in shock, stumbling away. The one holding Carma released her and ran. The incredible beast roared again, bursting into view, shooting cannons at mercenaries. They were instantly disintegrated, their ashes being the only things left behind.

Carma stood up. The forest was silent. She looked up, and saw something she would have never expected. The spikes, the shiny armor, and the green lettering. Her ship was up in the sky, looking down upon her. Glistening in the sun.

You came back, She said.