

# Sullivan's Travels

d. p. murphy

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All the characters in this book are fictitious,  
and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,  
is purely coincidental.

For Eddie and Evelyn

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## Sullivan's Travels



Book One

The End Run





# Chapter One

The Bogart limped through space, spinning gently in a dance of death with the alien ship. Bright tongues of flame leaped from her damaged plasma generators, arcing between the two vessels as they slowly fell towards the incandescent surface of the sun. Round and round they danced, exploding goutts of hydraulic fluid driving the waltz faster and faster as they erupted from the torn hull.

Sullivan stared at the Bogart from the alien ship, powerless to do anything but watch as his own ship slowly lost the last of its precious lifeblood. There could only be a few minutes of life support left on his old cargo ship – after that the Bogart would become a tomb for the last crewman left aboard. And there was nothing that Sullivan could do.

He ran his bloody hand down the section of transparent hull that protected him from the cold vacuum of space, leaving an ugly smear across the otherwise invisible material. It seemed fitting that his last sight of the Bogart should be stained with blood somehow. A captain was supposed to go down with his ship, not watch it slowly burn up in the fires of the sun. His only consolation was that he didn't think the alien ship could survive for much longer in this decaying orbit either, so Sullivan wouldn't long outlive the Bogart.

This wasn't the first time that Sullivan had faced death, but somehow he had never felt so utterly defeated. He rested his back against the cool hull of the alien ship and slid down to the floor, his wounds shrieking as he lowered himself to the deck. His mind drifted back through the previous few days. Where had he gone wrong? What else could he have done? His crew had relied on him, had trusted him with their lives, and he had failed them.

A loud thump from the bowels of the alien ship startled him. He couldn't be sure where it had come from – whether it was the ship's systems degrading under the fearsome assault of the sun, or that thing coming to finish him off. He listened intently for a few seconds, trying to identify the source of the sound. There was only silence, save for the gentle, unnatural hum of the alien ship.

This was supposed to have been a routine voyage. A little risky, maybe, but it wasn't as if they hadn't pulled off an End Run before - Sullivan was a very experienced skipper. This was his sixteenth as captain of the Bogart, and he had crossed almost every inch of the solar system in the Navy. And in all those years he had never seen anything like this alien ship. This was something he had never even dreamed of.

Three days earlier, Sullivan had sat in the cramped confines of the brain, trying to compose a rather delicate message. He was a man of medium height, and what there was of his athletic frame was toned and muscular. His dark hair was permanently tousled, the locks falling across a face that looked like it had seen a lot of miles. Some might have said his features were too angular, or that his blue-green eyes were too close together, but nonetheless it was a face that many had found attractive. At that very moment, his face wore a disgruntled expression.

The Bogart had shipped out of Tereshkova, above the Sea of Tranquillity, two days late. The delay had been caused by problems with the drive section, but Yoshi had managed to pull off a minor miracle and get them under way. Unfortunately, the delay also meant that they had to plot a new course, and no matter how fast they flew, they would not reach Mercury until a week after they were due.

So before they entered the low orbit of the sun, and lost all communications, Sullivan had to try to placate the angry contractor who would be waiting for his shipment of machine parts. He leaned over to the comms control panel and tapped a few keys.

"Mr. Yutani," said Sullivan. "This is Captain Jack Sullivan of the Merchant Vessel Bogart, en route to Aldrin Outpost. We hit a few snags in Tereshkova, so I'm not going to be there when I said." Sullivan made a face, unsure of what to say. "We should be there by the twelfth - I can assure you my crew and I are doing everything we can to make up for lost time." Sullivan frowned again, and then leaned over and tapped the send key.

To hell with it, he thought. It would take almost an hour for the signal to be relayed by satellites around the solar system, and by then the Bogart would be too deep inside the Sun's photosphere for any communication to reach them. Once on the End Run, it would be six weeks before they could receive signals again.

The End Run was a well-known route amongst merchants. Depending on the time of the solar year, the alignments of the various planets had a way of making some of the mining outposts difficult to reach. Aldrin Outpost was one, lying right on the terminator of Mercury - the hottest, most god-forsaken world in the system. Sometimes the

traditional straight route could take up to seven months, when Earth and Mercury headed in opposite directions, and at times like those the quickest way was to go the long way round the sun, using the additional sling-shot acceleration and fearsome solar currents to get there sooner rather than later. In business, time was money. The long and lonely route round the back of the sun was left to the more experienced captains, such was the difficulty and peril of the trip. Sullivan knew the route well, and until two years earlier had held the fastest crossing record for a hauler. The Bogart was an aging ship, but Sullivan had every faith in her ability to make the trip safely at least a couple of more times - as long as all her systems were up and running.

Sullivan looked around the status displays from the ship's various systems. The drive section and the Eye were reading all green, but there were no signals coming from the systems bay. Sullivan reached down and tapped the comms panel again.

"Cardinale?"

"What's up, Skip?" came the reply from the Bogart's systems engineer.

"What's up? What's up, is that I'm getting a flatline from the sensor nets – need I remind you we are due for a maximum burn in less than twenty minutes?"

"Don't worry, Skip, I'll have them up and running. Don't worry, okay?"

This was only Theo Cardinale's fourth trip out as the systems engineer on the Bogart. He had been one of the dock engineers in Tereshkova, and when the Bogart's old engineer had quit to get married, Theo had been first in line for the job. Vic and Yoshi hadn't been sure, but Sullivan thought he saw something in the kid. He was scrawny and unkempt, with plenty of bad habits – not the least of which were a passion for strong drink and gambling. But he was also a hotshot engineer, with supreme confidence in his own abilities. He had already pulled off one or two miraculous repairs to the Bogart's decrepit systems bay. Sullivan had seen in his kind many times before, especially in his days in the Navy. They were always so cocky, so arrogant, they would never think twice before taking action. Which often meant they were amongst the first to get killed, or to make a mistake that got someone else killed. Maybe it was something of himself that Sullivan saw in the kid. Whatever it was, they were now a long way from anywhere, and their lives rested in Theo's hands.

"Of course I won't worry, Theo," said Sullivan through clenched teeth. "Just get the damned thing running!"

He slammed his hand down on the console, closing the channel. The panel cracked, fell from its housing and crashed onto the floor. Sullivan unbuckled himself and bent down to reach it. He stared through the fractured plastex and placed it gingerly upon the comms console. It flashed and came to life again.

“Control, Engineering – we are reading green on all systems. Ready for go signal.”

“That’s great, Yoshi,” Sullivan replied. “Now if we can get our nets running in the next few minutes, maybe I can give that go signal.”

Yoshi was the best drive engineer that ever served aboard the Bogart. He could do things with the ancient engines that its designers could never have dreamed of. Trouble was, he wasn’t the easiest man to track down once they were in dock.

A slight, cheerful oriental man in his mid-forties, Yoshi had been married no less than five times. And all of his wives actively pursued him for a cut of his meagre merchant earnings, so that Yoshi had taken to hiding out in detention cells when he wasn’t on board. Sullivan had found him in the local jail again, only two days before they were due to launch. Yoshi laughed it off. As he was often heard to remark himself, he was a great engineer, but a lousy husband.

Sullivan rose from his chair and made his way out of the brain and back through the twisting confines of the ship’s access corridors. He headed for the systems bay, where he found Theo, wrapped in miles of fibre-optic, the systems boards strewn around the bay. With less than twenty minutes until the Bogart began its maximum burn, it was not a sight that many captains would relish.

“Just what the hell are you doing, Theo?” enquired Sullivan.

“We have a glitch in the forward array. Somewhere near the image recognition core.”

“What kind of a glitch?” Sullivan’s impatience was evident, but Theo was blissfully unaware.

“I’m not sure. It might affect the CPU’s ability to recognise certain objects.”

“Which ones?”

“I’m not sure about that, either.” Theo looked up and smiled. Sullivan leaned over and grabbed him gently by the lapels of his overalls.

“You have ten minutes to reassemble the nets, and get whatever’s left working,” Sullivan said flatly, “or I will personally hurl you out of the airlock myself!”

He dropped Theo back into the morass of cables on the floor, and then turned and stormed out the door. Theo groaned and stared around him. He paused for a few seconds, and began to grab great handfuls of cabling and stuff them back into access panels. Goddamn fool, Theo thought to himself. Has he no idea that this is a delicate science? The cables wouldn’t fit back in the access bay that they had come out of. Theo used his foot to wedge them in while he manoeuvred the panel back into place.

Sullivan continued through the bowels of the ship and looked in on Yoshi in the drive section. This section of the Bogart was strictly zero gee, and Yoshi generally spent

most of his time suspended in the centre of the bay, which had machinery on every side, requiring no walkways like conventional sections. Sullivan poked his head in through the door. Because of the spin factor of the Bogart, the whole engineering section appeared to rotate slowly in front of Sullivan. In the centre, tethered in three axes, Yoshi floated head down, smiling broadly at his captain.

“We ready to go yet Sully?” he shouted over the hum of the engines on the pre-burn cycle.

“Not yet Yoshi.” Sullivan, too, had to shout over the din of the engines. “Fifteen minutes, maybe a little more.”

“Yes, a little more if wonderboy can’t get sensors back together.” He laughed a huge booming laugh, one that was out of character for his slight oriental frame.

“Yeah.” Sullivan ducked back through the hatch and headed back up the central spine. Pre launch tours had long been a naval tradition, but Sullivan didn’t believe that many captains made the trip just to make sure that all the parts of their ship were still there. The eye was one of the most crucial parts of the ship, and the only other section to be bereft of spin. Some of the more modern merchants had overcome the spin problem, but back when the Bogart was built, the only way to build a decent sensor net was to source the equipment from a static part of a vessel. Hence the long, uncomfortable climb through the zero gee central spine to the eye.

The Bogart had been constructed in a traditional turn of the century design. The aft section was given over to the engines and sail generators, forming a bulbous end to the craft. There was very little room for crewmembers back in the zero gee drive section, and none of the ship’s habitat stretched back this far, but there was a labyrinth of interconnecting crawlspaces and access hatches. Only Yoshi ever came back here, but he had often remarked that he preferred spending time in zero gee. It was hard to get him to spend the prerequisite time in spun gravity on any long haul.

While most engineers relied on the complicated diagnostic computers to isolate problems, Yoshi was somewhat old school. His father had described himself as a grease monkey until his death, and Yoshi felt close to his roots when he was dragging himself through a crawlspace. “Sometimes, you just have to feel things for yourself,” he would say. “A diagnostic can’t tell you everything.”

The drive section was connected to the rest of the ship by the spine, a long narrow crawlspace that ran up the centre of the ship, which passed through the first rotating sleeve that made up the cargo bay. Many cargoes did not enjoy the effects of weightlessness, so, like the habitat section, the cargo bay took the form of a thick sheath, rotating around the spine. The rotation could be stopped to make loading easier, but

once under way, and with everything secured, the bay was usually spun up to half or two thirds standard gravity.

Directly fore of the cargo bay was another, smaller sheath, which housed the crew habitat. This spun at all times except in dock, giving the crew a chance to work for long periods under normal conditions. All spacers were familiar with the horror stories of the pioneer days, when Russians would spend years at a time weightless. No one wanted to return home an emaciated, weakened skeleton unable to survive in normal gravity.

The two spinning sheaths around a central spine made the Bogart somewhat less than responsive when it came to sailing her. The momentum of the spin had to be constantly countered, to prevent the lateral acceleration from pulling the ship off course. The design was tried and tested, and over the years Sullivan and his ilk had become used to piloting what amounted to lopsided juggernauts. Besides, no one ever needed to steer one through the eye of a needle.

Beyond the habitat was the fore section of the ship, containing the eye. Also without spin, fixed to the central spine of the craft, it contained the retrieval section of Bogart's sensor nets. Sullivan pulled himself through the narrow spine, his stomach churning in weightlessness. Moving around the ship had a tendency to cause all kinds of churning. For most of the trip, Sullivan would try to remain as close to the brain as possible. The hatch to the eye was open, and he could see Vic floating, her back turned to him. He hollered up the spine.

Victoria Styles was one of the finest operational specialists in the merchant service. She had served under Sullivan at the massacre on Ganymede, and had been called as a witness in his defence at his subsequent court martial. They had never really spoken while she served under him, but her brave testimony on his behalf had ensured their friendship through the following fifteen years. It had also ensured her rapid dismissal from the service.

In her late fifties, she had clocked more miles than most skippers that Sullivan knew, and he hated to leave dry-dock without her. She was a stout, matronly woman, and many a spacer had made the mistake of assuming she was someone's wife. Sullivan knew different, well aware of how her appearance masked the iron spirit beneath. She heard the captain's shout and turned to face him as he reached the hatch.

"You tell that incompetent junkie to get these damn nets realigned or I am going to bury this in him." She held up a wicked looking magnetic screwdriver.

"Nice to see you too, Vic," Sullivan replied.

"Sorry, Sully." She released the screwdriver and it floated to the tool pad on the wall, fixing itself to the magnetic surface. "But we can't fly blind."

“I have no intention of flying blind. We have forty minutes before we burn, and Theo assures me all the nets will be up and running by that point.” Sullivan pulled himself the rest of the way through the hatch. “And if he doesn’t, then you can bury whatever you like in him.”

Sullivan anchored one of his feet in a harness and pulled a pad from the wall, skimming through the status reports from the various systems in the eye. The road looked clear enough ahead. Vic was responsible for navigating the Bogart, and as usual, her charts were way beyond the standard required in the merchant service. Naval training died hard, it would seem.

The Bogart would position itself in a high orbit around the sun, and await the approach of a particular solar flare. As this mass of electromagnetic energy surged towards the Bogart, it would burn its engines on maximum, accelerating towards its rendezvous. Once close to the eddy, it would unfurl its plasma sail gradually, allowing the flare to accelerate the ship to tremendous velocities. The engines would be powered down, and from there on in, it was just plain sailing. Vic had completed many an End Run, and Sullivan didn’t really have to examine her work so closely. Maybe she wasn’t the only one with old habits.

The engineer turned to Sullivan. “I know you have a lot of faith in Theo. But I don’t trust him, Sully.”

“What’s not to trust? So, he likes to party – we all did when we were young. He still gets the job done.”

“We’re a long way from home to be screwing up.” Vic floated over, close to Sullivan. “I don’t want to finish my - “

An explosion of noise from the comm system cut her off. It was Theo, whooping, “Goddamn, I don’t believe it! Folks, we are back online and ready to rock.”

Sullivan turned to Vic and grinned. “What did I tell you?”

Fifteen minutes later the Bogart screamed from her high orbit into a lower one. As it descended, the plasma generators on either side of the ship began to unfurl the charged cloud of gas that would form the sail. It flashed brightly when solar particles collided with it, forming a glittering cascade of light that ran over its surface. The crew were locked into their acceleration couches, protected from the intense g-force. They were essentially passengers for the initial burn, as only Sullivan had any control over the ship - a kill button on the console of his chair. It would require a great deal of his strength to activate, but it would instantly shut down the engines.

Seeing as this was the only action that could be taken without destroying the ship, it was the only button needed to fly the ship during a burn. The complex computer

systems took care of the rest of the ship's functions – keeping the crew alive, deploying the sail, utilising the eye's sensor nets to examine the environment around it.

The craft shuddered as the engines reached maximum, the roar echoing around the bulkheads of the craft. Every time the Bogart pushed like this, Sullivan could feel her giving. Afterwards, whenever he had her checked out in dry dock, she was fine. Still, he could feel the strain trips like this were putting on her. The burn would continue for almost an hour, subjecting the crew to the kind of punishment rare for spacers these days. Any crewman who could think straight after sixty-six minutes in a max-burn situation was to be valued.

First trips out, most greenhorns just fainted when the gees eased off. They fell from their acceleration bays, vomiting and thanking whoever they were still alive. The Bogart's crew were of sterner stuff. Sullivan had known occasion to find Yoshi sleeping after a burn, lulled off by the heaviness of his eyelids. For something to go wrong during a burn would be disastrous. The response of the crew would be slow, and their ship destroyed for sure. Captains had nightmares about what could go wrong.

A craft could suffer a partial engine loss, crashing it into a spin with the full force of the burn. The crew would be whisked into a frappe before they could even react. Or the engines could shut down and the crew emerge from their boltholes before the computer restarted the engines, spreading the crew to about an inch thick over the back of the craft.

Much to Sullivan's relief, none of these things happened. He always told himself that these things never happened to careful crews, and that accidents only befell the sloppy and incompetent.

The Bogart had roared into the eddy just fine, and accelerated to a speed that would have it in port ahead of the longest odds that the Gentleman Spacers club had laid. When the crew were released from their g-couches, they made a full examination of the ship. They were cruising at full velocity, just about as fast as the fastest Martian bootlegger, and were due to make their rendezvous well within their three-week window. Nothing turned up, and the crew quickly descended into their high-velocity cruise mode, which consisted largely of playing games and occasionally checking to see if the ship had sustained damage. The orbits near the Sun contained a multitude of junk objects, both natural and artificial. The plasma sail shrouded the craft, and its billowing incandescent folds would destroy anything that approached the craft. This was no accident of design. The Bogart was unable to stop or even turn at speed, so the sail was the only thing standing between the crew and instant destruction.



Vic sat at her post. She didn't participate as much as the rest of the crew in the idle pastimes that filled their days. The computer watched the horizon through the nets - electronic eyes that saw farther than any human eye could. Vic could monitor the displays from anywhere on the craft, but felt comforted by the view through the composite pane. She passed the time spotting stars, trying to identify constellations, some of which were only known as rumour. There were almost mythical places in the solar system, places where old spacers would murmur that the most elusive of star formations were visible. Vic thought that she had seen one or two of these, but kept quiet about it. No one wanted to be seen in the same light as those old cranks - the ones that drank too much and told stories about invisible constellations, ghost ships or weird wormholes in space. Some of the greenies would hang on every word, wanting to somehow let the veterans' experience rub off on them.

A warning signal caught her attention - the nets had picked up an unidentifiable object. The message flashed twice, and then disappeared. Vic began to call up data on the object, assuming it was a small chunk of debris, destroyed in the sail before the system had time to read its composition.

She scanned through the data and frowned, her brow furrowing. Whatever it had been, it hadn't been anywhere close to ship. Which would mean it was very big, and very far away. But it had disappeared like a phantom.

The message began to flash again. The object was there for longer, but disappeared before the system could get a fix on its position. She began to run diagnostics on the nets. If they weren't working perfectly, she should get a warning - an alarm sensitive to the slightest problem. She touched her comms.

"Theo?"

It was a few seconds before Theo found his own pad, roused from a deep slumber.

"What?" he groaned, his voice slurred.

"Can you run a diagnostic on the nets diagnostic systems?"

"Run a diagnostic on the diagnostic - what are you talking about, Vic?" Theo mumbled.

"I have an intermittent reading from an object that could be in our path. The nets appear to be functioning, but if the diagnostics are down, I wouldn't know. And I really need to know everything is working."

"Can't this wait? I was sleeping." He yawned for effect.

"No - it can't. Now get your ass out of bed."

Vic returned to her consoles. She cast her eyes down the streams of data being extrapolated from the brief moment the object had registered - if it had really been there.

So far, there was nothing to lead her to believe either conclusion. But Sully would want to know about this.

She was about to rouse the captain but hesitated. No one ever wanted to be woken for a system glitch. She rubbed her eyes and sighed, floating away from her workstation. She gazed out the viewport and pressed her hand against the warm polymer. Seeing things in the darkness, panicking over some rock crashing into the sail, that was all. The usual daydreams of long-haul spacers.

She smiled to herself and pushed back to the workstation. Still in mid-air, her senses were assaulted with the master alarms firing all over the ship. The klaxon roared as she clipped herself into her harness.

“Vic!” Theo was roaring across the comm. “Sensor net diagnostics are down! I repeat – all sensor diagnostics are down!”

“So what do I have?” Vic frantically scanned the limited data Theo was feeding her.

“Cardinale?” Sullivan’s voice cut through the din of the master alarm. “Try to use the main systems diagnostics to find out what might be up with the sensor nets. Vic – why is the master alarm firing?”

“We have a possible object in our path.” She could hear the immediate reaction in the crew quarters and she knew that she had said the one thing guaranteed to get an instant reaction.

“Stand-by.”

Sullivan crashed through the hatch from the crew quarters and hauled himself through to the brain. He set about hooking himself in and firing up all his main display systems. He was fastening his harness just as the last of his consoles came to life.

“Vic, Theo – status?”

Vic was the first one to respond.

“Zero-one-one-five hours: detected possible object in flight path. Object appeared, and then disappeared immediately. First classified as insignificant object destroyed in sail. Object reappeared, and has made two successive appearances and disappearances.”

Vic stopped, breaking from the formality of the status report. “Sully, I’ve never seen anything like this. One minute it’s there, next it’s not. Could just be a sensor glitch. Might not.”

“Theo – what have you got for me?” said Sullivan.

“We have failure in main sensor diagnostic system. I have no way to know if the sensors are functioning or not. It might be there, but it might be a ghost, too.”

“What about the main system diagnostics?”

“The data is just coming through. Everything checks out so far, but it’s slow.”

“Too damn slow,” muttered Sullivan to himself. He stared out the fore viewport. With heavy filters down to protect against the sun’s glare, it was hard to make out anything at all. He drummed his fingers on the console.

“Yoshi? You getting this?”

The engineer responded instantly.

“Course, Sully. We’re all ready down here, waiting for the word.”

The engineer always referred to himself in the plural. He liked to tell the crew how the engineer was part of his engines – one big happy family, because they always pulled together to pull one another through. He had also been looking at Vic’s data.

“If this is an object of any size, then it’s gonna be getting close pretty soon. You gotta call this one, Sully.”

“I know, Yoshi, I know. Theo –“

“Captain, this data is still coming through from the nets. They appear to be just fine.”

“How is that possible?”

If the nets were fine, then that meant the object was reappearing and disappearing for real - and that it was really there, whether they could see it or not. He screamed into the comms.

“Hard to port! Port!” cried Sullivan. “Brace! Brace!”

Yoshi slammed the directional thrusters to full power, trying to break free of the solar wind. He fumbled with his harness, reconfiguring the magnetic field of the plasma sail hand with his free hand. He gave up, and used both his hands to make the adjustments to the sail. He screamed above the whine of the thrusters.

“The injectors are going to fry!”

Vic secured her zero-gee harness and stared out the viewport. She touched a control removing some of the filters, filling the eye with blinding sunlight. She squinted, trying to see into the inferno.

Ever since the early days of flying, the need for a viewport of some sort had become traditional. The first pilots had used them to fly their atmospheric craft at walking speed, but by the time they reached supersonic flight, viewports were a luxury. They were fine to see things that were enormous and didn’t move, but anything that flew would grow from a speck in the sky to filling your viewport in an instant. Vic never really saw it coming, but in the blink of an eye it was there, a black foreboding shape just off the starboard bow. Then all hell broke loose.

The Bogart was breaking out of the fast core of the solar flow; its giant sail deforming as it pulled itself slowly through the torrent. The object struck the sail about eight hundred metres from the Bogart and had an immediate, catastrophic effect. The sail disappeared, leaving only a blinding arc of energy between the Bogart and the object. The ship rocked violently, thrashing about as the directional thrusters battled against the additional mass.

The thrusters cut out, leaving the Bogart in silence. Systems had crashed throughout the ship. Sullivan glanced around at his displays. Most of them were dark, just a few critical systems still patching through to his control. No hull damage – all environmental systems online.

“Okay, people, talk to me.”

Nothing. Comms could be out, maybe something worse. His hands drifted over the controls, searching for a clue as to the status of his systems. What was showing through was good - power was still on, environmental systems were still good. Rotation had stopped, but the crew weren’t going to be sleeping anytime soon. He released the emergency bulkheads and the hatches slipped open throughout the ship. He couldn’t remember them coming down. Maybe he’d blacked out. He called out down the ship.

“People! We still in one piece?”

“Sensors offline! Flying blind, captain,” called Theo. “What the hell was that?”

“No idea.” He shouted louder, trying to reach the eye. “Vic!”

He snarled and undid his harness. He pushed himself out of the command chamber and into the main passageway. As he passed the access level for the main systems bay he called to Theo.

“I need comms back on line, Theo. Fast.”

“Gotcha, Skip.”

Sullivan pushed himself out of earshot.

“I told you not to call me Skip,” he muttered to himself. He made his way up the spine, heading for the eye. Vic appeared in the hatch before he was halfway there.

“Sully! You have got to see this.” She turned and moved back inside without saying a word.

Sullivan duly followed, worried now at what might he might find. Whatever had hit them, it hadn’t been that hard. The sail was knocked out, but there were a couple of things that could do that. Yoshi could deal with them. He was totally unprepared for what awaited him through the main view port. It was not something that Yoshi could deal with.

The object sat about eight hundred yards off the starboard stern, thirty degrees below the Bogart's artificial horizon, a blinding torrent of energy flowing beneath it and the starboard plasma emitter. Vic was busy at one of the lens set-ups, and Sullivan just sat and stared open-mouthed at the dark shape. Even at this distance, it clearly wasn't an asteroid.

It was about a hundred and fifty metres long, thick at one end and tapered to a fine point at the other, like an impossibly elongated teardrop. It had none of the protuberances of traditional construction, but there could be no doubt - it was not a naturally occurring object.

Vic moved aside from her lenses and motioned to Sullivan. She said nothing, the expression on her face belying everything. Sullivan peered through the viewer. The object was indeed some one fifty-three metres in length, and seventy-eight from top to bottom at the thick end. The surface seemed mostly smooth at this distance, but there were suggestions of grooves, or markings, on the otherwise featureless obsidian surface. The energy arc was touching the craft just aft of the tip on the topside. Sullivan pushed himself away from the viewer.

"What the hell is that?" he asked quietly.

"I have no idea, Sully. Not in twenty-six years have I ever seen anything like that."

"It can't be natural, can it?"

"I don't think so. It looks almost perfectly geometric, so unless it's some kind of massive crystal, it has to be man-made. And it appears to be conducting plasma energy somehow, so it has to have conductive properties." She trailed off, lost in thought.

"Which makes it?"

"Baffling."

"Thanks, Vic. You're a lot of help." Sullivan turned back to the viewer.

"Sorry. We need sensors back online."

"Then I'd better go see how Theo is doing. Keep me posted, okay?"

Sullivan pulled himself back through the hatch and made his way to the systems bay. Only the lower half of Theo's body was visible – the rest of him had disappeared behind one of the many access panels. There were warning lights flashing all over the bay and several of the crucial displays were showing nothing but static.

"Forget the comms, Theo. We've got bigger problems."

Theo emerged and looked up at his captain. He wiped a few beads of sweat from his brow.

"What do you mean?"

"We've hit something. At least, the sail seems to have snagged something."

“You’re kidding me.”

“Whatever it is, it seems to be acting like a giant conductor for the energy flow. We have to find out what the hell is going on out there.”

Theo immediately moved to a panel in the opposite bulkhead. He pulled the release catches and the panel came away, releasing a shower of pyrotechnics. He howled in alarm and reached for a fire suppressor. Once the gas from the suppressor had cleared, he peered into the mass of cabling and the system core.

“The damage doesn’t seem too bad.”

Sullivan was relieved to hear the assessment, and moved in behind Theo to get a better look. One of the super-capacitance nodes had overheated to the point of melting almost completely.

“It’ll take me a few minutes to cut the damaged node out,” said Theo, as he wiped his brow with a grubby rag. “Then I should have the nets up and running again.”

“Brilliant. I’ll be aft with Yoshi. Comms are out, but I’ll know you’re done when the nets come online.”

Sullivan moved back out through the hatch and back towards the drive section. For the safety of the entire ship, the section was self-contained and sealed with a double set of doors. If the aft hull integrity was compromised then the doors would seal it off. Sullivan pushed the release for the first set of doors and moved into the airlock. As he waited for the outer doors to seal, he peered through the porthole in the inner door. He could see Yoshi, floating in the centre of the bay, attached by an umbilical to the various bulkheads. By controlling the tension on the umbilicals, Yoshi could move freely around the main cavity of the drive section. The inner door opened and Sullivan pulled himself through.

“Comms are down, Yoshi. The sails have snagged something. Theo’s trying to get the nets back online to find out what’s out there, but please,” said Sullivan, looking imploringly at Yoshi. “I need some good news.”

“It’s pretty bad, Sully. Plasma output is normal, but the magnetic field generators are fused. Whatever it is, it’s sucking up a hell of a lot of power. And I can’t shut down the plasma generators without getting the mag-gen system back up. It could feed back into the fuel cells.”

“That would be bad,” said Sullivan.

“That would be very bad. But right now, things are holding up. I’m gonna try to get one of the field generators back.” Yoshi pushed back towards the far bulkhead with a chuckle. “Just try not to give me too many bumps, okay?”

“Gotcha. Soon as comms are back, let me know how it goes.” Sullivan moved back into the airlock. “I’ve got to get back to Vic.”

Sullivan pulled himself through into the spine. He took the direct route to the eye, travelling straight up the zero gee central access spine. It took him only half a minute to traverse the length of the Bogart and into the blinding confines of the eye, where Vic was still glued to one of the viewing arrays. Some sensor data was beginning to filter through on a couple of displays.

“Any news?” Sullivan’s voice was hopeful. Vic’s answer crushed any hope he had.

“We have a very big problem.” She turned, and Sullivan thought for a minute that he could see the fear in her eyes.

“What is it, Vic?”

She motioned for him to join her at one of the viewing arrays, indicating a display containing data of the object caught in the sails.

“The plasma stream is acting like a magnet, Sully. That thing out there is closing, and it’s accelerating.”

Sullivan stared blankly at her. “How long?” he almost whispered.

“The closer it moves, the faster it accelerates, but without accurate sensor data, I can only guess.”

Sullivan stared at her. “How long, Vic?”

“Three minutes, maybe less.”

There was a long moment as Vic and Sullivan stared at each other. They both knew the gravity of the situation. At the velocity the two objects were travelling, the delta-vee necessary to avoid the other ship would probably tear the Bogart apart. The silence was broken when the systems engineer restored the comms system.

“Back in action, Skip!” screamed Theo.

Sullivan’s only response was to hit the master alarm. He roared into the comms.

“All hands – brace for impact.” He moved out of the eye, speeding back to the brain. “I repeat – all hands brace for impact.”

He was counting the seconds as he moved back through the ship, trying to keep track of time. He wasn’t sure of whether or not the Bogart could survive the impact. His gut feeling was that the old sloop couldn’t, but he was never one to lose hope. Or so he told himself. After what seemed an age, he was finally in the cramped confines of the brain. Only some of the displays were functioning, but Vic had managed to route some telemetry to one of the screens. He strapped in and linked with the drive section.

“You getting this, Yoshi?”

The little engineer appeared on one of the displays, hanging upside-down in the distance. He was securing access panels and shutting down as many non-critical systems as he could.

“I have an idea, Sully!” he yelled, over the screaming klaxon. He moved closer to the screen, still inverted.

“We can’t use the main drive – the plasma flows too erratic for that. But we still have manoeuvring thrusters.”

Sullivan shook his head.

“Yoshi, thrusters aren’t going to give us enough to alter our course.”

“I know, Sully. Like pissing into a hurricane, no?” Yoshi’s colourful metaphors had always given his captain cause to smile. “But they might be able to turn the Bogart enough to avoid that – thing.” Yoshi stopped and looked at the screen, smiling wryly.

Sullivan took strength from the fact that his crew could smile in the face of such adversity.

“Give me all you got, Yoshi.”

He ran his eyes over the systems he did have functioning. Most of the critical ones were updating every few seconds, but the navigation console was the one he focused on. The unknown object was closing even faster than Vic had anticipated.

“I want all crew in their crash suits – now.”

Sully reached above him on the console. There was a red handle, nestled in amongst the haphazardly arranged consoles. He tugged sharply on it and a small hatch popped open on the decking beneath him. Reaching inside, he removed a small silver package, tugging away the protective tags on the front. It began to unfold, and Sully began to hurry it by pulling on it.

“Come on people, suits on!” he shouted into the comms.

He opened the overalls and pulled them on roughly over his own rumpled jumpsuit. He sealed them up and fastened the hood over his head. It had a clear faceplate, surrounded by the ribbed fabric of the crash suit. He leaned over and plugged the umbilical cable into the outlet set inside the suit’s storage locker, then opened the small emergency valve. Hydraulic fluid raced through the microtubules in the suit, creating a rigid shell. The crash suit was designed to protect crew in the event of a catastrophic hull breach, but Sullivan had never really tested one out. In theory, they had enough emergency oxygen and heat to allow repairs to be made to the vessel, but the suit was far too cumbersome for the close confines of a ship like the Bogart.

Sully checked the seals on his suit once more and then returned to his seat to secure himself. He yelled into the open comms system.



“How we doing, people?”

“Secure, Captain,” responded Vic. “Estimated time to impact seventy-eight seconds.”

Theo was the next to check in. “Secure!”

Sullivan waited for a few seconds, then called out to Yoshi again, glancing down at his display. Yoshi wasn’t suited up. He was frantically moving power couplings from one side of the bay to the auxiliary systems on the other side.

“Yoshi, what are you doing? Get your suit on now!” shouted Sullivan.

“Hang on, Sully – I’ve got to get more power to the manoeuvring thrusters. We might be able to get out of the way of this thing!”

“Negative. Yoshi, you need to secure for a possible breach, do you understand?”

Yoshi ignored his captain, shifting his slim frame effortlessly back and forth across the engine bay. He tugged the last coupling free, and kicked off the wall. He plunged it into the last thruster inlet, feeling the hum of the energy surge through the bulky cable. Then he used the handholds to make his way to the bottom of the bay, his fingers seeking the crash suit release handle. He popped the hatch and pulled the suit free. He still had to disengage his own umbilicals before getting into the suit, wasting valuable seconds. He had both legs into the crash-suit when a sharp crack attracted his attention.

One of the power couplings had fused completely, overwhelmed by the energy that coursed through it. Yoshi thought for a moment, and then made the call. He pulled his legs out of the crash suit and pushed off the floor, speeding toward the spare power couplings.

Fore of the engine bay, Vic made her final preparations. The object had by now turned completely to face the Bogart. It was huge, at least the size of the old cargo ship, maybe bigger. The plasma stream was directed right to the sharp pointed tip, pulling the dark teardrop shape towards the Bogart at an ever-increasing pace. Even without the more powerful sensing systems, the optical viewer gave her all the information she needed.

At the objects current relative velocity, any direct collision would more than likely tear the Bogart apart. She said a few silent prayers, then stared down at the proximity alert system.

“Twenty seconds to impact!” Her voice was dry, her nerves evident.

In the Sensor Bay, Theo cursed the polymer of the thick crash suit gloves. He was busily trying to lock down the last few sensitive systems that did function. He didn’t want a random power surge to wreck them as well. The thick fabric was preventing him

from doing the job as quick as he needed to. He made a few adjustments, and then settled back to secure himself for the impact.

“I’m sending you the basic telemetry, Skip.” He locked himself down, closing his eyes and waiting for the inevitable. “We are in big goddamned trouble!”

Sullivan stared at the data coming through from Theo. His systems officer was right. The object was approaching nose first off the starboard bow, aiming to strike the Bogart amidships. There was no way the aging vessel could survive the impact. Sullivan had run out of options. He glanced at the drive section link. Yoshi was still working with the power couplings. He slammed the last one into place and locked it down. There was a moment, when Sully was sure Yoshi looked up at him, and then the engineer moved to the manual thruster controls. The object was only seconds away. The comms came to life one more time.

“Here goes nothing, Sully.” Yoshi’s voice came through loud and clear. “Firing thrusters – now!”

The Bogart’s manoeuvring thrusters came to life, jolting the ship violently and turning it hard to starboard. The superstructure howled in protest, straining against forces it was not designed to withstand. Off the starboard bow, the object drew closer, silhouetted against the impossibly bright fire of the sun. The Bogart turned ever more, edging sluggishly out of the other’s path. The plasma arc was blinding, a river of blue fire flowing across empty space. It pulled at the other, turning it ever so slightly. The Bogart could not escape.

Sullivan watched the display as the deadly dance came to a close. Every alarm that still functioned was screaming now, systems overloading as the terrible power of the plasma arc fed back into the Bogart. Oblivious to everything around him, he concentrated on the navigation data.

In a moment of sudden calm, Sullivan realised that there would be no escape. There were a few seconds of serenity - what seemed like an age - and then a screaming, tearing noise. After that, there was nothing.

## Chapter Two

Sullivan craned his neck, pressing his face against the glass, trying to get a better view of the Bogart through the transparent hull. The two ships orbited each other slowly, the dance of death played out right before the eyes of the Bogart's captain. Sounds came from the bowels of the alien vessel, carried on the stale atmosphere, ringing through the bulkheads. There was no way back to his ship, and in any event the old cargo sloop was useless. Powerless, and with the damage suffered in the collision she was all but finished.

Sullivan considered his options. The wound in his leg had stopped bleeding. He could with some difficulty put his weight on it; and with considerable agony could manage a quick hobble. He checked his weapon. Charge was low, and he was fresh out of power cells. Ten, maybe twelve shots before it was spent. The only entrance was barricaded and the chamber was secure.

Sullivan was sure he could hold out here almost indefinitely, but he wasn't sure why he should bother. The orbits of the entangled ships would sink them deep into the sun's photosphere before very long. There was no rescue on the way. They had had no chance to get off a mayday before the transmission array was smashed. They wouldn't be overdue for a month, and after that there was a trillion cubic miles of space to search.

If he saved one charge for himself, then he wouldn't worry about having to be rescued. That meant there were at least nine or ten shots left for that thing out there. It was big, it was bad, and it wouldn't rest until Sullivan was dead. There was little to do but wait.

Sullivan slid slowly back down to the floor, trying to protect his wounded body. No sound came from the bowels of the alien ship, and the captain of the Bogart was left alone with his thoughts. He thought about Yoshi, and Vic, and even Theo, who was still trapped on the Bogart. They had entrusted him with their lives, as they did on every voyage, and he had failed them in the worst way.

It wasn't the first time Sullivan had questioned his own ability. There had been another time, many years ago, when he had sat on a cold metal floor and stared at the

blood of others on his hands. That had been the first time he had met Vic. She had served under him in the Navy, and had been there on that fateful day on Ganymede.

As he sat on the unnaturally warm deck of the alien ship, his blood slowly congealing under his tattered overalls, Sullivan's mind drifted back to that black day – the last time he had faced his own failings, and stared death in the eye.

It was the first time that the young Lieutenant Sullivan had been given sole command of a tactical land engagement. The local populace had overrun the garrison on Ganymede's principal mining colony, so the United Naval Vessel Genghis Khan, with Captain Orlat commanding, had been entrusted with the task of putting down the rebellion.

As he waited for the inevitable, trapped inside the alien vessel, Sullivan found he could remember the incident as if it was yesterday. Maybe that was why it had plagued his sleep for the best part of fifteen years.

Lieutenant Sullivan stared in the mirror, inspecting his uniform for any irregularities. It wasn't as if the Ranger boys would be looking for an epaulette out of place, but Captain Orlat was a stickler for regulations, and Sullivan knew he would be observing the briefing through the battleship's video systems. He wanted to impress his captain, conscious of the responsibility that had been placed upon him.

His mouth was dry and his palms sweaty as he made his way to the briefing room. Awaiting him were the senior non-comms of the rangers, the elite unit that was garrisoned on board the UNV Genghis Khan, and while they did not expect much trouble from a gang of unruly miners, Sullivan really wanted the whole mission to go like clockwork. Orlat would not give him a second chance, that was for sure.

The briefing room was announced by the volume of conversation resounding through the metal bulkheads of the battleship. It disappeared as soon as Sullivan appeared in the doorway.

"Officer on deck!" announced the chief warrant officer.

The rest of the non-comms stood to attention. Sullivan looked across the faces as he took his place at the front of the spacious briefing room. Most of them were a good deal older than their fresh-faced lieutenant, and it served to reinforce Sullivan's belief that this first mission would be crucial to getting the men to trust him.

Sullivan outlined the battle plan, his voice cracking as he spoke. Four of the Genghis Khan's hogs, each carrying two platoons of the rangers, would touch down at opposite corners of the facility. Two of the platoons would each occupy the rear loading bays, while the third hog would land at the auxiliary entry bay, dropping one platoon and taking the remaining one to the main access bay. Sullivan's hog would land right in

front of the main entrance, and rendezvous with the spare platoon. The idea was to try to subdue the miners with a show of force, and minimise the bloodshed.

The enlisted men seemed pleased enough with the plan. Vic had been there too, serving as a sergeant with one of the platoons, but Sullivan hadn't even noticed her. He was too busy trying to appear confident to the rangers.

The plan had proceeded perfectly, right up to the point that Sullivan had mustered the three platoons inside the main access bay. He had expected to meet some sporadic resistance, but there was no sign of life. He could see the blast doors that led to the rest of the facility at the other end of the bay. In between, all manner of haphazard barricades had been thrown up. They had looked deserted, and it wasn't until he had given the order to move forward did he hear it. There was singing, coming from somewhere else in the facility. It was being carried through the ventilation system, and Sullivan could see his rangers slowing in their advance, unsure of what to expect. Then the blast doors had opened, and the main force of the miners had charged the Navy troops.

The battle had been brief and bloody. By the time it was over, Sullivan had lost half of his rangers, while most of the miner's shattered corpses were strewn over the barricades they had rushed to defend. Sullivan had been wounded slightly, but took no notice as he walked across the smoke-filled battlefield. Everywhere, the dead and dying lay, sharing the same blood-stained ground. The sight of so much bloodshed had filled Sullivan with revulsion that day.

And now, once again, Sullivan had been responsible for the death of those that had trusted him. So, the Bogart's captain waited, uncertain of his fate, but determined that it would be with the dignity that it deserved. His mind drifted back to before he had set foot on the alien ship.

Sullivan had no idea how long he had been out. He opened his eyes, staring out through the blood-smeared faceplate of the crash suit. His head pounded, rebelling when he tried to shake it to clear the fog. He looked around, first to the environmental sensors. The small system ran on its own batteries, isolated from the rest of the ship. It gave Sullivan readings of normal atmospheric data in the brain, so he undid the bindings of his chair and depressurised his crash suit.

He fumbled with the hood and faceplate, stabbing a finger out at the comms control. There was no response. He glanced across the rest of the displays. A surprising number of systems were still functioning. The emergency seals had come down throughout the ship. There was oxygen pressure in almost all the compartments.

Somehow, the power surge had even restarted the main sheath rotation. But his heart sank when he saw the data coming from the engine bay. It had been depressurised completely. Yoshi was gone. He felt numb for a moment, and sat staring at the red indicators before remembering that he still had two more crewmembers to worry about.

He moved towards the back of the brain, punching in his access code to release the emergency seal. There was only partial lighting in the narrow walkway beyond. Sullivan made his way towards the sensor bay, only to find Theo already outside, rerouting vital systems around damaged areas.

“Power core still active, Skip - but we’re only drawing thirty or forty percent, so I don’t know what kind of state it’s in for sure.”

Sullivan’s reply was somewhat muted.

“See if you can get some of the main nets back on line, Theo. We need to get an idea of what kind of shape we’re in.”

“Wilco, Skip.”

Sullivan didn’t have the heart to pull Theo up on formality.

“We lost the engine bay, Theo.”

“What do you mean?” The systems engineer looked puzzled.

“Not too sure yet. Looks like the bay depressurised completely. That – thing must have hit our tail.”

“And Yoshi?” Theo asked hesitantly. Sullivan just shook his head in answer.

“I don’t think he made it into his suit. He was trying to get us out of the way. He might have just saved our asses yet.” Sullivan turned and made his way aft. “I’ve got to get to Vic. Try and get us as much information on our situation as possible.”

Theo waved his hand in acknowledgement and returned to what he had been doing, still numb from the shock of losing a friend. Old hands like Sullivan and Vic might have lost crewmen, but Theo had never had anybody he knew die before. It chilled him to the bone.

Sullivan paused briefly outside the emergency seal to the drive section. No access code would open this door. The vacuum on the other side of the seal would have killed Yoshi instantly on impact. Assuming he had survived the collision. Sullivan groaned at the loss of his old friend. No time for mourning now, he thought, as he made his way up the crawlspace to the eye.

When he reached the top, he found that the seal was still in place. Sure that the reading on the bridge had indicated that there was full integrity in the eye, he gingerly tapped his access code onto the panel. The seal sprang open with a jolt, and he let out a sigh of relief.

“Vic?”

Sullivan pulled himself through the hatch. Blinding sunlight filled the eye, but he could still make out Vic’s shadow. He kicked off the wall and joined her on the starboard side of the transparent bubble.

“My God, Sully,” she whispered. “Have you ever seen the like?”

Sullivan stared in amazement, shocked at the terrible reality of what had occurred. The object had impacted directly into the starboard side of the Bogart near its stern. Its pointed nose had pierced the flimsy hull surrounding the drive section. The tremendous energy involved had fused the hull plating around where they met. What really took Vic’s breath away was not so much the damage done to the Bogart, but rather what she could see of the giant black object. It was like nothing she had ever seen.

Shaped like a sharpened teardrop that seemed to pour from the Bogart’s wound, it was almost perfectly symmetrical. Thick grooves crawled lengthways over the entire surface of the object, breaking up the smooth, almost obsidian surface. If it was a vessel, it had no visible means of propulsion or communication, or indeed any practical use. There was little evidence of any damage to it – the Bogart had suffered the brunt of the impact.

“What is it?” said Vic.

Sullivan had no idea whether or not Vic was aware she was whispering, and when he answered, he was surprised to find himself speaking in hushed tones also.

“I’m not sure, Vic. But it has to be a ship of some sort. It can’t be anything else”

“I’ve been from one end of the system to the other, Sully, but in twenty-eight years, I have never seen anything like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

Vic turned to Sullivan, still whispering. “Nobody makes ships like this. Not those Martian nut jobs, not the Lunar Faction – not now, and not ever. Hell, Sully - not even the Southern Bloc ever made anything like this! And they tried some pretty outlandish designs, remember?”

Sullivan nodded. Vic had been in the service longer, and actually been involved in the last major system war, when the Southern Bloc had experimented with some bizarre ship designs, trying to overcome the numerical advantage of the Northern Bloc. It had failed, hastening their ultimate demise. Occasionally, old spacers in a bar somewhere would relate the tale of how he had come across an old Southern Bloc relic. It would be running on autopilot, impervious to nets, bristling with old weapons and ultimately cause some routine accident that would otherwise be attributed to a spacer’s foolishness.

“So what exactly are you trying to say?” he asked.

“Whatever that is, I don’t think it was built by human hand.” It took a few seconds for Vic’s words to sink in.

“Little green men?”

“This is hardly the time to be joking, Sully.”

“Sorry.”

“I know how crazy it sounds. But the fact remains – I don’t think anyone has ever seen a ship like that. If it even is a ship.” She turned back to face her captain.

“In three hundred years of space travel, no-one has ever reported contact with an alien ship. Or an alien civilisation. In all the exploration of the solar system – not a trace of intelligent life. But that thing out there – it doesn’t come from anywhere round here. This could be one of the most significant finds in humanity’s history.”

“Great, Vic. If we make it out of this, you can be famous.” He stared out at the object. “But we’ve got bigger problems right now.”

He pushed back from the transparent laminate.

“We need to know how badly we’ve been hurt. The engine bay’s been compromised.”

Vic turned to Sullivan. “Yoshi?”

Sullivan could see from her face that she knew the answer to her question. He just shook his head. “He didn’t make it.”

Vic laid a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Sully.” She hung her head, the grief plain on her face now, in the whole shape of her body.

“I know. But we’ve got to take care of ourselves now.” He moved back towards the access hatch. “I’ve got to get to the auxiliary systems bay. Theo’s working to reroute as many of the damaged systems as he can, but I need to see what else we’ve got left.

“Make a full damage report of all your systems. And then I need you to sense for other ships. It’s a long shot, but there might be another ship in range. Then turn the nets on that thing out there. We need to know as much as we can. Comms are out, so we’ll all meet in the galley in fifteen.”

“Understood, Captain.”

Sullivan hurried down the spine and back into the spun gravity of the crew section. He found Theo and gave him the same orders.

“I don’t know, Skip. These systems have taken a hell of a pounding.”

“Just do what you can, Theo,” said Sullivan, turning towards the auxiliary systems bay. “And don’t call me Skip.”



Fifteen minutes later, Sullivan entered the galley to find Theo and Vic waiting for him around the table. Theo was drinking from one of the juice packs, while Vic pored over some data on her PCD. Sullivan went straight for the hot drinks and took a cup of strong coffee, then joined his crew around the table.

“Okay people. What’ve you got? Theo?”

The Bogart’s systems engineer shifted in his seat, sucking his juice loudly.

“The damage isn’t as extensive as I thought, although our comms have been completely destroyed. There may have been a secondary arc from that thing, but whatever happened, it fried the main transmission array, and the back-up. I mean it totally melted it. Fused it onto the hull. And the overload totally destroyed the internal comms, too.

“But the sensing systems and internal diagnostics aren’t too badly damaged. Maybe because they were off-line during the impact, I’m not sure, but I’ve managed to get the short-range nets back up and running. And I should be able to get the diagnostics back in about thirty minutes or so.”

Sullivan sipped his coffee, the bitter liquid cutting through the stale taste of the ship’s recycled air.

“Maybe I can save you some time on that. The drive systems are completely shot, as well as the sail generators. I’ve just spent the last ten minutes digging through what’s left of the auxiliary systems but damage is pretty bad. We’re not going anywhere.”

There was silence in the galley as the impact of this news sank in. Vic and Theo had known the damage was bad, but the enormity of the situation was quickly dawning on them. The blood drained from Theo’s face.

“Most of the starboard generator was vaporised by the plasma flux,” continued the Bogart’s captain. “And the port generator didn’t fare much better. Without comms, or the sail, our options are very limited.”

He looked over to his navigator.

“What have you got for me, Vic?”

Vic’s complexion was ashen as she gave her report.

“It’s not good,” she replied, tapping the control panel. Various monitors around the galley sprang into life, depicting the Bogart and the strange object, locked together and slowly spinning. The wicked tip protruded from the port side of the Bogart’s drive section, demonstrating the extent of the crew’s plight.

“The other – “ Vic stopped. Then she continued, her voice wavering slightly. “The other ship has become fused to parts of the aft hull plating. I’m not confident of our chances of even separating the two. And we have another problem.”

She tapped the controls, switching the displays to a navigational plotter. The two craft's orbits angled sharply towards the sun's photosphere.

"The impact has pulled the Bogart from the eddy we were hitched to. We also lost some of our inertia, so our orbit has begun to decay. At the rate we're descending, the outer hull will melt in less than twenty-four hours."

Again, silence filled the galley. Every spacer who had ever flown was familiar with the nightmare scenario of a decaying orbit. The mass of the sun posed added problems – the huge gravitational forces could quickly become inescapable, sentencing hapless crews to a fiery death. So for a few long moments, no one spoke.

"What about the escape pods?" Theo asked.

"Maybe," answered his captain. "Maybe they have enough power to get to a higher orbit, but this is no place to go wandering in an escape pod. Chances of being recovered by a passing vessel in this sector are millions to one."

"Billions," said Vic. "I set the nets out as far as they'd go. There isn't another ship for a million kilometres. So it's simple. We get the Bogart back up and running somehow. We find a way to separate the two ships, and get the sail repaired." She sounded nervous, edgy; something that Sullivan couldn't remember.

"Sorry, Vic," he replied. "I've had a good look at them, remember? They are beyond any repair. Hell, the starboard generator's a stream of molten slag across that thing's hull! This old girl's done for."

Vic's head dropped. Her captain continued. "But maybe we're missing something."

Vic and Theo stared at him.

"I mean, we're sure the Bogart is finished, right?" he asked them. They looked at each other, and then back to their captain, puzzled looks on their faces. "Vic – bring up a display of that thing. As many close ups as you can manage. I want to get a really good look it."

Vic tapped a few keys, bringing up a sequence of high-resolution displays of the object. The surface bore no visible insignia or designation. It was almost completely smooth, save for a series of shallow grooves that wound back and forth over its entirety. At first glance, there was no pattern to what they could see. Sullivan pored over the images for several minutes before he found what he was looking for. He used the controls to enlarge a small area just aft of where the object emerged from the Bogart, on its starboard side.

"What are we looking at?" asked Vic.

"I think," replied Sullivan, "it's an access hatch."

When Vic looked closer, she saw what he was getting at. The grooves seemed to meet in a pattern, isolating a small section of the hull about two metres square. She couldn't see any controls, or any real indication that it really was a hatch.

Sullivan turned to Theo. "Is the docking arm still functioning?"

Theo thought for a moment, and then shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess so. It was stowed when we were hit, so most of the systems should have been isolated from the flux."

"Sully," interrupted Vic. "You're not really thinking –"

"I need to get a better look at that hatch, Vic. The Bogart's not going anywhere. So whatever that thing is, it may be our only chance." He drained the last of his coffee.

"Way I see it is this: somebody had to build that thing. Chances are it's some kind of forgotten prototype, or experimental vessel. Which means there has to be a way to fly it, too. So there has to be a way into it. And maybe its systems are in better condition than ours."

There was no answer from his crew. For all her experience, not even Vic had ever anticipated a situation like this. Sullivan stood and turned to Theo.

"I need you to deploy the collar. Test its systems, and then see if you can make a seal with the other ship. If you can, we may not need to use the EVA suits. Vic, I need you to use the nets to try and find out if that is a hatch. I want detailed scans – see if you can penetrate the hull. Then meet me by the docking hatch in ten minutes."

Theo and Vic sat numbly, their eyes transfixed on Sullivan.

"Well, come on people – we're against the clock here!"

His raised voice jarred them into action. Once they had left the galley, Sullivan turned and made his way to his own quarters. He opened the hatch, and then knelt by his bunk. He reached underneath and pressed a series of release catches. A panel in the floor slid open, and Sullivan hauled a storage crate out of the floor. He tapped in his access code, and then began to rummage through the contents of the crate.

There was a plastic display case containing two medals, untarnished in the protective vacuum. He stared at them for a moment. Both bore a series of campaign ribbons, and underneath were tiny plaques that told their tales. The first was a routine award, the kind given out for being wounded in combat. The second medal was far from routine. It was the Lunar Cross, and it was one of the highest honours the Navy could bestow. Sullivan had been awarded it when he was honourably discharged from the Navy. An award for conspicuous valour, it served more as a reminder of the blood that stained Sullivan's hands, and it was part of the reason he kept this stuff locked away out of sight. Another part of the reason came to his hand from the bottom of the case.

Moving his dress uniform and ceremonial sword out of the way, he removed a belt and holster, closing his other hand around the grip of his service pistol. He checked the weapon closely, activating its built in diagnostic systems. A small display on the side of the pistol flashed into life, indicating the weapon was functional and ready for use.

The Ingram .50 field-loading pistol was standard issue in the Navy. It used magnetic propulsion to fire molten heavy metals, which would tear through flesh, but were unable to puncture hull plating. This made it a suitable weapon for use on space vessels. Boarding an enemy vessel was a risky enough business without having to worry about destroying the ship you were trying to capture.

Sullivan stopped. He had never dreamed he would do anything like this. Boarding a damaged vessel wasn't unheard of, but boarding an unknown relic in the middle of the most deserted region of space – the thought sent his stomach plummeting. He stood up and opened another locker set into the bulkhead. He removed three emergency comms units, and then grabbed his flight jacket. Then he turned and made his way back through the crew quarters to the zero gee docking section.

Theo and Vic were only minutes behind him. When they joined him, he gave each of them one of the emergency comms units.

"We should be able to keep in touch with these."

Sullivan removed the emergency cutting gear from its housing by the docking hatch. "Theo, I need you to get to the brain and keep monitoring the situation. If there's any change, I'm going to need to know about it pretty quick. Did you manage to mate the collar to that thing's hull?"

"No problems. She's sealed pretty good, too."

"Good," replied Sullivan, turning to his navigator. "Vic, I'm going to need you with me."

Vic smiled at him. "I'm with you, Sully."

Sullivan nodded to Theo, who turned without saying another word and made his way to the brain. Vic opened a locker containing the emergency respirators. She took out two and then looked at Sullivan, her eyes flicking down to his pistol.

"You ready for this?" she asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be, I guess." Sullivan checked the power levels on his cutting gear, and then punched the access code for the exit hatch.

The docking collar was only part of the sophisticated docking rig. It was mounted on the end of a circular umbilical arm, almost four metres in diameter. At full extension, it reached almost thirty metres from the Bogart's hull, supported by hydraulic armatures. The collar consisted of a variety of magnetic locking systems and armoured clamps, and

was capable of forming an airtight seal with a variety of surfaces. In the Bogart's case, the collar was so old, it had actually been designed with more variety in mind, and Sullivan could see that it formed a seal with the surface of the mysterious object quite easily.

He pulled himself along the umbilical, cutting gear in one hand, Vic only a few metres behind. Sullivan could see the strange surface of the other ship in the cold light of the docking collar. The grooves seemed larger in life, almost wide enough to fit the width of his hand. Moisture in the umbilical's atmosphere had condensed and begun to freeze upon the cold hull. He stretched his hand out gingerly, afraid of getting his fingers frozen to the surface. That wouldn't be a good start.

Sullivan reached into the pocket of his jacket and removed a pair of thick thermal gloves. Once his hands were protected, he began to scrape the ice from some of the grooves. He was looking for a seal of some sort – some indication that this was really some kind of access hatch. It took him several minutes to clear an area around the inside edge of the docking collar. Vic floated just behind him, removing objects from the bays dotted around the corridor and securing them about her person.

“You think we're going to have to cut through?” she asked.

“Not sure yet.”

Several of the grooves turned in towards the central part of the hull section framed by the docking collar. The ice was thickest here, and Sullivan couldn't manage to dislodge it with his hands.

“Vic, hand me that cutting torch, will you?”

He took the tool from his navigator and fiddled with the controls for a moment. He set the torch to the lowest setting, and set about trying to melt the ice. It began to steam, obscuring Sullivan's vision for a moment. He moved the flame back and forth, trying not to linger too long on any spot. When the water vapour became too thick for him to continue, he stopped to let the air clear. He was sweating, the heat from his torch turning the umbilical into a sauna. Once the water vapour had cleared, Sullivan knocked the last few pieces of ice from the hull.

In the centre of the area was an indentation quite unlike any of the grooves on the hull. A clear impression was set about five centimetres into the surface. It was still partly filled by ice, but from what Sullivan could see, it was clearly a human hand.

“What the hell is that?” Vic had moved to get a closer look, floating up over Sullivan's shoulder.

“No idea,” he replied. “Maybe it's some kind of insignia.”

“So small?” His navigator laughed. “What’s the point of having an insignia if you have to be next to the thing to see it?”

Sullivan didn’t answer. He reached out towards the indent, scraping the last of the ice from it. There were no other marks, not inside the impression of the hand or anywhere around it. He very delicately placed his gloved hand inside it. Nothing happened.

“What are you thinking, Sully?” Vic asked.

“If it’s not some kind of insignia, then maybe it’s something else.” Sullivan pulled one of the gloves off, and then stretched out his hand towards the surface of the other vessel.

“Sully!” Vic reached out and grabbed his arm. “You don’t want to leave a couple of layers of skin on it now, do you?”

“Should be warm enough now.”

His navigator frowned at him, releasing her grip on his arm. “Well, it’s your skin,” she mumbled.

Sullivan placed his hand inside the indentation. Far from feeling cold, the strange surface felt warm to the touch. He placed the flat of his palm against the warm metal and stretched his fingers out to fill the indentation. It was ever so slightly larger than his hand, but still fitted quite nicely. He held his breath, and then pressed down slightly. Vic must have been holding her breath too, because there was no other sound audible when they heard the faintest of clicks, followed by a gentle, distant hum.

Beneath Sullivan’s hand, the indentation grew warmer, and then began to emit a gentle golden light. He jerked his arm back as though he had been burned. The light began to fade almost immediately, but not before some of the grooves leading to the indentation also began to glow. He looked at Vic. She stared back at him, her expression a mix of surprise and puzzlement.

“Did I just see what I think I saw?” she asked.

Sullivan put his gloved hand to his lips, signalling her to be silent. The gentle hum had also ceased.

“Maybe this is some sort of hatch control,” he said.

“And maybe it’s not. We have no idea where this thing might have come from, much less what it does,” said Vic, gesturing towards the intricate patterns on the exposed hull.

“I guess there’s only one way to find out.”

Sullivan reached out once more, not so gingerly this time. He placed his hand in the indentation and pressed down firmly. Again, the golden light began to emerge from

beneath his palm. It grew brighter and brighter, the light spreading into the grooves spiralling outward on the hull. He kept his hand pressed to the surface, watching as the light flowed like molten gold through the complicated series of grooves. It began to accelerate, the light growing in intensity, but still the surface felt only warm beneath Sullivan's bare hand. The hum had started again, and was growing louder, and he was sure he could feel the vibrations travelling up his arm. The light grew brighter still, and the grooves it flowed through began to outline a circular shape on the hull. The hum grew louder, and then, as the golden light became so intense that Sullivan was forced to squint, it stopped abruptly.

There was silence for a moment. The two humans floated, eyes locked on the dazzling, intricate pattern carved out on the surface before them. Sullivan pulled his arm back, but this time the light did not fade. Instead, there was a loud hiss as the entire glowing section of hull suddenly dropped away from them. It swung upward, tilting back out of view, leaving an opening in the hull about two metres in diameter. Inside, they could make out only inky blackness.

They hung there for what seemed like an age, trying to see into the darkness. The edges of the hole still retained some of the golden light, but it was quickly fading.

"Sully!" gasped Vic.

Sullivan knew exactly what his navigator meant. He had never encountered technology like this. He reached over to one of the storage lockers and removed a large torch. Vic did the same, and they pointed the beams into the darkness, revealing the facing wall of a chamber about six metres away. It was smooth, much like the outer surface of the vessel, and flowed seamlessly into the floor. This appeared to be made of a similar material, except that it was covered with a symmetrical pattern. There was no way to see either side of the chamber from where they floated, and they could just make out the section of hull that had been withdrawn from the hatch.

"No equalisation," said Sullivan. "This thing has an atmosphere."

Vic looked down at the respirators she was holding in her hand. "Well, I guess we aren't going to be needing these." She moved to stow them in a locker by her head.

Sullivan sniffed the air cautiously. If it had been toxic, Vic and he would be dead already. If it had been a vacuum, the umbilical would have depressurised with the same result. He moved closer to the opening, sniffing again.

"A bit stale. Otherwise, it seems fine." He turned to face Vic. "Smells of something, though. Can't quite put my finger on it."

He pointed his torch in through the hatch, straining to see more. He could make out another set of bulkheads, either side, but they were quite unlike those on the Bogart.

They flowed seamlessly from one to another, with no sign of how they were joined together. Over to the right, Sullivan thought he could see an opening in the bulkhead, but he couldn't quite make it out. He pushed back from the hatch, leaving Vic staring into the darkness, and then reached for his comms unit.

"You getting any of this, Theo?"

"I'm seeing, but I'm not believing," came the reply. "What's the plan?"

"Can you get any readings from inside this thing? With the hatch open, you should be getting something."

"Not much. Umbilical sensors are reading a standard atmosphere, no known pathogens. A little oxygen rich, though. As to the composition of the hull, or anything inside it, we're still getting nothing."

"How about power readings?" Vic asked.

"No," came the reply. "We have isolated spikes, but nothing I can make out. Whatever it is, sensors just don't seem to be able to penetrate it."

Sullivan sighed. "I guess there's nothing else for it, then."

"You're not thinking of going in there, are you?" asked Vic.

"I don't see that we've much choice." He stared into the darkness, cutting through it with the beam of his torch. "The Bogart isn't going anywhere, except straight into the sun. We might escape orbit in escape pods, but we'd die of starvation or lack of oxygen before anyone found us. If there is any way for us to get home, then it probably lies in here." He indicated the hatch. "Somewhere. You with me?"

Vic took a deep breath, and then smiled at her captain. "After you, sir!" She emphasised the last word, trying to muster some naval courage.

Sullivan picked up one of the general emergency packs and checked the pistol at his hip. He fastened the pack over his shoulder, gripped the edge of the opening with both hands, and with a sharp tug pulled himself through. As he crossed the threshold, he suddenly became quite dizzy. He felt himself falling forward, and the next sensation he had was of a sudden weight all over his body, followed by the impact of his body against a hard surface. He lay there for a moment and then lifted himself up on his forearms, taking a moment to look around him. Of all the things he might have expected when charging onto an unknown ship, he hadn't expected this.

Gravity.



## Chapter Three

Vic watched as Sullivan moved through the opening and gasped as he suddenly plummeted from view. She heard the dull thud as his body hit the floor, and could not stop herself from shouting out.

“Sully!” She moved right up to the opening, careful not to stick her head through. “You okay there, Sully?”

Sullivan groaned.

“Yeah.” He sat up, looking around him. “Wasn’t really expecting that.”

He got to his feet and surveyed the chamber around him, trying to get a feel for his newfound weight. He knew that the ship was not rotating, so what he was experiencing was something that, to the best of his knowledge, no ship builder had ever achieved. He stared back through the hatch towards Vic, who floated in mid-air in the umbilical.

“Artificial gravity.” He smiled, and hopped from one foot to the other. “Feels like about one gee, too.”

“How is that possible?” Vic asked. “Can you see any kind of power source?”

Sullivan played his torchlight across the ceiling of the chamber. It was unlike any thing he had ever seen, with featureless smooth surfaces that curved gently from the deck to the arched ceiling. There was another opening in the bulkhead to the right of the entry hatch. Sullivan could now see that it led to a corridor that headed towards the bow, which was lodged deep in the drive section of the Bogart. He reached for his comms.

“Theo?”

“Gotcha, Skip.” The transmission was breaking up. “We’re getting a little interference from somewhere.”

“You getting any readings yet?”

“Some sort of power spikes. What just happened?”

“There seems to be some kind of artificial gravity field. We need to know how it’s being generated.”

“Understood. I’ll get on it.”

Sullivan turned to Vic.

“Come on in. But be careful, okay?”

Vic angled her body carefully towards the hatch. All spacers were used to moving from zero-gee areas to the parts of the ship that used spun gravity, but then most ships were designed to make the transition as safe as possible. This was something she had never tried before. She swung legs first over the threshold, and then cried out in alarm as the gravity field suddenly added weight to her mass. She released her grip on the upper edge of the hatch, allowing her momentum to carry her through and landed square on her feet inside the ship.

Sullivan half-laughed.

“Not bad, Vic.”

Vic performed a curtsey, wobbling slightly under her new weight.

“You should have seen me in my day, Sully.”

They took in their surroundings. The chamber was roughly square, and constructed of a similar material to the outer hull, from the smooth bulkheads to the patterned deck. There was only the one opening in the otherwise featureless bulkheads, the one that Sullivan had noted earlier. The hatch they had come through was suspended from overhead by a long, coiling, black armature. It looked almost organic, like a massive human arm stripped of its skin. The armature disappeared through the featureless ceiling, leaving no gaps around its coiling black length, and with no obvious means of control or locomotion.

“At least now we know it’s a ship,” said Sullivan dryly.

“So why doesn’t it have an airlock? I mean, who would build a ship without one?” asked his engineer.

Sullivan just looked at his navigator.

“I have no idea. But that was a human hand on the outside of that hatch. And whoever built this breathes the same air as we do. So this has to be the work of humans.”

“But this technology, Sully! And the gravity field?” She looked Sullivan straight in the eye. “I’ve never heard of anything like this. Ever.”

“I hear you.” He shone his torchlight towards the corridor that led towards the bow of the ship. “But the Bogart’s finished. At least this thing has power. We might yet find a way to get it moving.”

He activated his comms again.

“Theo, you read me?”

“Transmission’s still weak, but coming through.”

“You got any data on the gravity field yet? Any power readings from inside?”

“That’s a negative, skip. The spikes are all over the scale. I can’t make any sense of it.”

Sullivan sighed, and then looked at Vic.

“Okay, looks like we go forward in the dark. Theo – keep trying to get data. If there’s any change in the readings, I want to know right away. And make sure that the Bogart’s systems are still stable. We can’t afford any more disasters, okay?”

“Sure thing, Skip. Cardinale out.” The comms fell silent.

“I wish he wouldn’t call me that,” said Sullivan.

He moved through the opening into the corridor beyond, casting his bright torchlight before him. Vic followed closely behind, trying to illuminate as much of the corridor around them, finding only metre after metre of gently rippling bulkhead. She ran her hand along one of the walls. It was faintly warm to the touch.

The corridor opened out beyond the opening. It was some five metres wide, and roughly oval in shape. It stretched at least forty metres in to the distance, curving around to port out of Sullivan’s view. They stopped, flashing their lights around the bulkheads of the corridor. Something suddenly caught Sullivan’s eye.

“Vic!”

She followed the beam of Sullivan’s light. There were markings on the wall. It was a design of some sort, carved into a flat panel on the bulkhead. In the centre was a pyramid shape, flanked on either side by some sort of winged creatures. Below was what looked like some kind of writing – a feathery, flowing script that was broken up into even sections. The whole design was bordered by a very narrow carved flourished border.

“Do you recognise it?” asked Sullivan

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” Vic ran her fingers over it, half-expecting the design to burst into light. Nothing happened.

“It looks like some sort of insignia.” He flashed his light up the corridor to see if there were any more of them. “Maybe this was left by the builders. To let wandering space travellers know where they had trespassed.”

Vic was not amused by Sullivan’s humour. She frowned.

“Come on. Let’s find out where this leads,” said Sullivan.

They continued, scanning the smooth bulkheads with their bright torchlight. As they rounded the curve, they saw that the corridor terminated sharply in another hatch. In the centre of the hatch was another hand shaped indentation. Like the one on the outside of the ship, it was surrounded by a series of narrow grooves. Sullivan walked directly up to it and moved to place his hand in the indentation.

“Wait, Sully!” cried Vic. “There was no airlock on the way in - what if that hatch just leads back into space?”

Sullivan glanced back down the corridor, trying to gauge the distance they had covered. It was difficult in the darkness.

“No,” he answered. “It has got to lead somewhere. Otherwise this whole chamber would have no function.”

“Need I remind you, Sully,” said Vic. “That we have no idea who built this, much less what they were thinking?”

“Still,” said Sullivan, placing his hand in the indentation. “They had hands, didn’t they?”

A powerful golden light emerged from beneath his hand and leaked into the grooves, carving out the outline of a large hatch. There was a loud hum, and then the hatch flew backwards and upwards away from Sullivan. He looked carefully into the space beyond. They were standing just outside some sort of chamber, but unlike the others they had seen. They moved inside to get a better look, using their torches to illuminate their surroundings.

The chamber was triangular in shape, and the hatch they had come through was set into the starboard side of the aft bulkhead. In the centre of the chamber was a raised dais, oval in shape, and upon it was a chair. It was roughly human size, and had a high back, curving ever straighter as it rose from the base and the wide flared arms. Either side of the dais were deep wells in the floor, each containing a chair like the one above, but smaller in size. There also appeared to be a control panel of some sort set into each of the wells.

“Wow,” said Sullivan.

He flashed his light around the rest of the chamber. It was all constructed of the same material – the same dull metal that had made up the rest of the ship. He made his way onto the raised dais, playing his light over the chair. The flared arms were smooth, but they flared towards the front. There were a number of small protrusions; bumps that rose from the flush surface. Sullivan sat in the chair.

“What are you doing?” asked Vic.

“If we’re going to find out if this thing still works, we’re going to have to take a few risks.”

His navigator stared at him.

“Okay, so what do I do?” she asked.

Sullivan nodded towards the starboard well. “Jump down and see if you can get any joy out of one of those control panels.”

Sullivan gently pressed down on the largest protrusion with his index finger. For an instant, there was no response, and then abruptly sections all around the bulkheads burst into life, filling the entire chamber with a gentle golden light. Sullivan could hear Vic gasping in surprise beneath him.

The featureless console was now covered with moving symbols and flowing script. She held her hands above the console in alarm.

“I didn’t touch anything!” she cried.

“I think that was me,” answered Sullivan. “Can you make any sense of it?”

Vic stared down at the console. She watched for a few moments, trying to make some sense of the swirling chaos.

“Don’t think so. There must be some kind of pattern, but I don’t see it.”

Sullivan reached for his comms and tried to raise Theo. There was no response.

“The hull must be blocking the signal,” he said. He stood up, replacing the comms in his pocket. “Get back to the entry hatch, Vic. I want you to try and raise Theo, and then give him an update on our situation. Tell him we’ve managed to get some power to the ship, and we need to know if he can detect a drive system of some sort.”

Vic climbed out of the well in the floor of the chamber, nodding her assent. She disappeared back through the hatch they had come through. Sullivan touched another of the protrusions, expecting something to happen, but nothing occurred. He hit another one, and the sloping bulkhead before him suddenly disappeared.

For a brief second, Sullivan anxiously thought he had opened the vessel to the vacuum of space; then he realised that the bulkhead had not disappeared, but merely become transparent. He was staring at the drive section of the Bogart, directly ahead of him. The hull plating had been impacted like aluminium foil. He could see almost no damage to the other ship – only some scoring where the sharp stern had pierced the Bogart. He moved out of the chair, trying to see how the view port worked. He could reach it with his hand, and did so, surprised to find that it felt just like the rest of the hull under his fingers. This was technology he could never dream of. Sullivan had served on some of the most advanced Navy vessels ever built, some of them even experimental, but this was beyond any of his experience.

He moved back to examine the aft bulkhead. There was an elaborate series of grooves, and another indentation right in the centre. The grooves seemed to form another hatch, but one much more extensive than any of the others. He ran his fingers through the narrow channels and then stepped back, scanning the other bulkheads for any other hand-shaped indentations that might indicate other exits. Sure enough, there

was another in the port side of the aft bulkhead, roughly corresponding to the starboard hatch Vic and he had come through.

His navigator returned.

“Theo still can’t get much of anything from the sensor nets. He’s sure that they’re functioning, so there must be something in the hull that’s blocking the power emissions.”

She stared at the aft bulkhead in front of Sullivan.

“Makes sense,” answered Sullivan. “We’re just going to have keep doubling back to update him.”

“What have you found?” asked Vic.

“It looks like another hatch, but it’s bigger than the others.”

“Maybe it leads somewhere more important.”

Sullivan looked at her, raising an eyebrow. “The drive section?”

Vic shrugged.

Sullivan turned back to the bulkhead. “Maybe it just leads to the head.”

Vic didn’t laugh, but looked sternly at her captain. He paid her no heed, raising his hand to the indentation.

“Only one way to find out,” he said softly. He laid his hand in the indentation, and was greeted by the now almost familiar golden light as it flowed through the grooves. The hatch that was carved out by the light extended some four metres either side of Sullivan, when the light was at its most intense, the outlined sections of the bulkhead swung backwards, splitting exactly in the centre. The two halves receded either side of the bulkhead, revealing another chamber beyond, different again from the ones they had seen before.

Where the others had been barren and featureless, this was positively cluttered by comparison. Sullivan and Vic moved into the chamber, examining the objects arranged around them.

The facing bulkhead bore another indentation in the centre of another large hatch, while each of the flanking bulkheads bore a larger version of the crest that they had seen in the corridor. Beneath the crests, on both sides, were a variety of odd-looking objects. Some of them were totally alien, but others seemed all too familiar. Sullivan had seen similar objects, many years before. It had been in one of the Naval museums that cadets often found themselves dragged to.

There was an elaborate suit of armour, arranged upon a stand. It was constructed of a series of overlapping plates, each one of a different colour, but as Sullivan moved, the colours shifted across the glistening metal. Above the suit there sat a helm, full-faced and alike in construction to the armour. To one side there lay an ornamental belt,

encrusted with jewels, while propped above it was a similarly adorned scabbard. There was an assortment of ceramics of various shapes and sizes – pots, cups and plates. Some of them plain and unadorned clay, others were far more elaborate in their shape and colour.

On the other side of the chamber, lying on a plinth, was an enormous sword. The hilt was long enough to accommodate both of a man's hands, and like so much else in the chamber, adorned with jewels and edged with glistening metal. The blade, unlike the glistening steel that Sullivan had seen in the museums as a young cadet, looked as though it had been carved from an enormous diamond as black as night.

Neither of the Bogart's crew spoke, but each was thinking the same thing. These were not the objects one expected to find on a ship, drifting in space.

For a long time, they just stood and stared. Finally, Vic broke the silence.

"Sully, what the hell is going on here?"

"I don't know." He touched the blade of the sword. It was warm to the touch, vibrating almost imperceptibly under his fingertips. "This just gets stranger and stranger."

"I don't understand," Vic said. "What kind of ship is this?"

"I'm not sure. But the hand prints on the hatches - and now the sword, and the suit of armour." Sullivan scratched his head, and laid a hand on the grip of his pistol. "This ship has to have been built by human hand. How else can you explain all this?"

"But the artificial gravity? And the material it's made from? It isn't any kind of alloy I've ever seen."

"I know," sighed Sullivan. "It cut through the Bogart with barely a scratch. And I've never seen anything like this gravity field either. But which is more likely? That we built this? Or that there are aliens out there, ones that breathe the same air, whose hands are the same as ours?"

Vic had no answer. She just looked around the chamber, her eyes finally falling on the hand impression on the aft bulkhead.

"Where do you think that leads, Sully?"

Sullivan looked at his navigator. She seemed ill at ease.

"No way to know," he said. "And only one way to find out."

"Maybe we should head back to Theo," said Vic. "Check in with him again."

Sullivan shook his head. "We've got to find the drive section, see if there's any way of getting this thing moving. Otherwise there's no point in going back to Theo."

Sullivan placed his hand in the indentation, ready for the sensation of warmth that accompanied the golden light. The newly formed hatch receded before them, revealing the most extensive chamber they had seen yet.

From what Sullivan could guess, this chamber occupied most of the central core of the ship. Golden light poured from the high arched ceiling, which sloped down to meet the deck at the far end of the chamber, some forty metres away. The bulkheads here seemed to follow the teardrop shape of the outer hull, but they were broken every few metres with huge buttresses. Sullivan couldn't shake the feeling he was standing inside a giant ribcage.

"This isn't the drive section," he said.

He was staring at the centre of the chamber. There was a ring of golden light carved into the floor, about ten metres wide, enclosing a huge rectangular object. Evenly spaced around the ring were poles that seemed to have grown out of the floor, each one made of a series of snaking fibres, glistening and twisting to a shining crystal some three metres off the floor. Either side of the ring were two enormous plinths with statues set upon them. Standing almost two metres high, they depicted some kind of animals, both in a sitting position, their enormous heads fixed on the entrance of the chamber.

Sullivan moved for a closer look. They resembled no species of animal Sullivan had ever seen, but bore many familiar features. Their forelegs terminated in huge wicked claws, curling over the edge of the plinth. Their hind legs were curled beneath them, their massive bodies topped with sleek, absolutely featureless heads. There were no ears, no eyes, just a wide head that sat deep on the shoulders, the protruding snout narrowing to a wicked point. They made Sullivan feel deeply uneasy. Vic had moved closer too, crossing the threshold of light.

"Oh, Sully," she gasped. "What is this place?" She moved towards the rectangular object in the centre of the light.

Sullivan turned his attention to the object of Vic's concern, joining her inside the circle of light to get a closer look. It was about three metres in length, a metre wide and stood the same high. The upper surface was adorned with an intricate carving, sunk a few centimetres into its glistening black surface. It was of a man lying at rest, his arms folded across his chest. He wore some kind of armour, similar to the set they had just seen, but bore even more adornments. Sullivan's heart grew cold suddenly. He realised why this all seemed so familiar. Fifteen, twenty years earlier, on holiday somewhere – somewhere like Casino Cairo.

"This is a tomb," he said softly.

"A tomb - whose tomb? What do you mean?" Vic asked.



“I don’t know. But I’ve seen pictures, museums. This looks just like them. Even the possessions laid out for the dead.” He gestured towards the antechamber they had just come through.

“You think this was built on Earth?” Vic moved closer to the sarcophagus, trying to get a better look at the carving. “He looks almost human, doesn’t he?” She reached out her hand to touch the carving, running her fingertips down the side of the finely featured face.

“Careful, Vic,” Sullivan said. “We can’t be sure – “

He was cut off by a sudden change in the background noise. The gentle humming ceased, and for a moment there was silence. They could hear a low growl from somewhere below their feet, the vibration flowing up through their bodies. A sharp crack broke the air.

“Vic! Get your hand away from it,” he barked.

Sullivan instinctively began to back away from the tomb, toward the entrance. Vic seemed frozen, staring past him to his left. He whipped around, following her gaze. Upon the plinth, the animalistic statue seemed to be sweating. Its flanks were slick, and as Sullivan stepped back he saw the first quiver of movement.

“Vic!” he shouted. “Move!”

His navigator was still transfixed. The golden light that streamed through the grooves on the floor and around the ring enclosing the tomb began to grow brighter. The lights atop of the poles followed suit, burning bright against the dark, curving bulkheads. As quickly as it grew brighter, the light began to diminish, but now it cast an angry red colour in place of the gentle golden light. Sullivan glanced from statue to statue. There was no mistake – their heads were turning ever so slowly towards the sarcophagus in the centre of the chamber.

“Victoria!” shouted Sullivan. He hardly ever used Vic’s full name, but it had the desired effect. She snapped out of her trance and began to move out of the circle of red light.

“It really is time to get out of here, Vic,” said Sullivan, his hand moving to his pistol. His eyes flicked from one statue to the other. They were flexing their forelegs now, as if trying to free themselves from some morass that held them fast. There was another loud crack as the statue on the left broke free from the plinth, standing on all four legs on the small square surface. Sullivan could only now appreciate the size of the creature, as it stood a metre and a half high at the shoulder.

“They don’t look very friendly, do they?” asked Vic.

"I'm guessing they're not a welcoming committee," he answered, glancing over his shoulder at the huge entrance hatch. "We need to find a way to get these hatches closed, Vic."

Sullivan pulled his weapon and pointed it at the creature as it dismounted the plinth, the impact of its landing shaking the deck clear across the chamber. Vic examined the bulkheads either side of the hatch. The second creature was awake now, rising to its feet upon the plinth. It cocked its head back and emitted a terrible noise, a shriek that came from deep within the creature, as it had no mouth from which to cry. The first creature began to move slowly towards Sullivan, its obsidian skin glistening in the fiery red light. It fixed its featureless face on him, staring at him without any eyes. Still, he could feel a chill in his soul.

"Vic," he said, "Now would be a good time to figure out how to shut these things in here," said Sullivan, raising his voice almost to a shout.

"I'm on it, Sully," she cried in answer.

Sullivan shifted the sights on his pistol from one creature to the other. They were moving apart, to his left and right, trying to flank him. Their sinister shining snouts were pointing right at him now. A shout from over his shoulder attracted his attention.

Vic had found another kind of impression set into the bulkhead, just to the right of the hatch as you entered, resembling the mark a fist would make if it were punched into putty. She made a fist with her hand and pressed it into the indentation. Golden light sprang across the bulkhead, and the hatches began to descend, suspended from twisting armatures, coiled supports like greasy black snakes writhing around each other.

Sullivan began to back up faster now. The first creature sensed his haste and crouched down on its haunches, as the second ceased its sideways movement and began to edge forward. Vic moved through into the antechamber, turning to call after Sullivan.

"Sully, come on!"

For a moment he hesitated. He knew what was coming. The creature sprang forward, hurling its enormous bulk at least two metres into the air. Sullivan was ready, and sprang backwards and to his right as far as he could. He pulled the trigger twice as fast as he could, his sights trained squarely on the creature's chest. The recoil from the weapon was minimal, but aided his evasion by pushing him backwards even further. The two shots struck the creature in its upper chest, causing it to somersault in mid air and throwing it back seven or eight metres. Sullivan slid along the floor, crashing with his shoulder into the ridge of the hatch. The creature landed on all four feet with the enormous crash of stone on stone. It looked up at Sullivan, seeking him with its eyeless

head. There was no mark on the creature, and it sprang forward, breaking into a loping stride.

Sullivan scrambled back over the threshold, Vic tugging at his jacket. The hatch followed closely behind, closing with a tremendous thud. A second deep crash followed as the creature hit the hatch from the other side. Sullivan and Vic backed up another few metres, scrambling desperately.

“We need to get out of here,” said Sullivan.

They stood, shaken, as the sealed hatch resounded again with another impact from the other side.

“Back to the Bogart?” asked Vic. “That pile of junk isn’t going anywhere.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel like ending up as food for those things.” He moved back through the antechamber into the command centre. “Which is assuming they even eat.”

“What were they?” asked Vic.

“I don’t know. Maybe they were guarding whoever was buried in that tomb. Some kind of sentinels, left to protect the dead.”

“Are they machines?” she asked.

“Not like any I’ve seen,” answered Sullivan. “I hit one twice in the chest and it barely even slowed it down.” He checked his weapon, making sure it was still functioning. It was, and Sullivan could only wonder why the two high impact slugs had failed to stop the sentinel. “Come on,” he said, “we’ve got to get back to Theo. Maybe the escape pods aren’t such a bad idea after all.”

They moved towards the starboard hatch. A strange vibration rattled through the deck beneath their feet.

“Vic,” asked Sullivan slowly. “Does this thing have more than one deck?”

Vic opened her mouth to answer but was cut off by a tremendous tearing noise. The deck right in front of the starboard access hatch began to buckle, rising up in front of them.

“You have got to be kidding,” said Sullivan.

The deck was torn asunder with a tremendous explosion of splintered stone. A gigantic sleek head poked out through the floor, followed by first one black foreleg, then another. The sharp claws screamed against the deck as the sentinel dragged itself out of the hole it had punched through the unknown alloy. Vic began to back up, moaning slightly. Sullivan stood his ground and trained his sights on the creature’s head.

The sentinel had gotten one of its back legs out of the hole when he pulled the trigger. The slug hit it squarely on the head, causing the creature to howl, the sound

coming from deep inside its massive bulk. Sullivan fired twice more. The first shot found its mark, knocking the sentinel sideways, but the second travelled high and struck the bulkhead with a sharp crack.

Sullivan glanced over his shoulder to find Vic. She was backing up towards the antechamber again, paralysed with fear. He looked back to the sentinel a fraction of a second later, only to see the gigantic creature sailing through the air towards him. He fired again, wide and low this time, and the sentinel struck him with all its weight. Searing pain ripped through his whole body as he was knocked back, and he fell into one of the two deep wells that flanked the central dais, momentarily stunned.

Sullivan looked up from where he was lying on the floor of the well, expecting to see the slick black snout, but the sentinel had not followed him in. He scrambled to his feet, searching the well for his pistol. It wasn't there. His left leg felt dead, forcing him to grab onto the edge of the deck to prevent himself from collapsing again. He looked frantically around the chamber. His pistol had flown into the corner by the sealed port hatch, and Vic was moving to retrieve it. Sullivan could see the sentinel slowly moving towards the centre. His navigator reached the pistol just as the sentinel sprang into a gallop.

"Vic!" screamed Sullivan.

Vic fired at the sentinel, her shots flying wildly past the creature. It crashed into her with a terrifying impact, crushing her against the bulkhead. It backed up, and she sagged to the deck like a rag doll, but the creature wasn't finished. It raked one of its front claws across her chest, tearing deep into her body, and then backed up, using its claws to pull its victim with it. Vic wasn't moving, and blood poured from the deep wounds in her chest. The sentinel nudged her body with its pointed snout and then turned back to Sullivan. He struggled out of the well, ignoring the pain that shot up his left arm. The leg of his overalls was wet with blood, but he didn't dare look down to survey the damage. He sucked in a deep breath and limped across the chamber towards the central access hatch.

The sentinel took Vic in one of its great forelimbs and hurled her lifeless body across the chamber. It let out another tremendous roar and moved towards Sullivan. He rolled over the threshold of the antechamber, glancing over his shoulder. The sentinel struggled for purchase as it tried to change angle, skidding across the sleek floor behind him. Its claws bit into the deck with a screaming noise as it found purchase.

Sullivan scrambled backwards on all fours looking around frantically at the assorted objects. The sentinel started to move forward, then stopped and crouched deep on its haunches. Sullivan knew what was coming next. He reached out and grabbed the

sword from its plinth with his right hand. The sentinel sprang, with a tremendous roar. Sullivan pushed backwards with his good leg, raising the tip of the sword, setting the other end into the deck. The sentinel landed on top of Sullivan, digging its long claws into his left shoulder, impaling itself upon the long black blade.

The creature let out a terrible cry and fell silent. The skin of the creature began to dry - gone was the slick wetness, and now it bore the same dull shine as the rest of the material in the ship. The sword was buried deep in the creature's chest, but its claws were still embedded in Sullivan's shoulder. He howled in agony as he tore himself free and crawled out from under the sentinel. He looked down at his wounds.

The sentinel had torn the muscles in his left calf, as well as gouging great gashes in his thigh. His arm had suffered similar damage. There were two deep puncture wounds in the shoulder and his bicep felt like it had been almost ripped off. Blood dripped down from under the sleeve of his jacket. He tried to dislodge the sword, but the creature had pinned it to the deck, and Sullivan couldn't shift its bulk. He laid a hand on the creature, running his hand over the cool stone.

He limped back into the command centre to find Vic, lying in a crumpled heap over by the port hatch. Sullivan knelt at her side, rolling her over onto her back. His navigator's lifeless eyes stared up at him.

"Oh, Vic." A tear ran down his cheek as he cradled her body in his arms, feeling her hot blood against his chest.

"Vic, I'm so sorry I got you into this. We should never have come aboard this damned thing." The tears flowed freely along his cheeks.

A huge rumbling stirred him from his grief. He could hear the tearing noise as the second sentinel's head emerged from the hole in the deck. Sullivan laid Vic's body gently on the deck, and then used the bulkhead to get to his feet. The creature blocked his only route back to the Bogart.

Sullivan picked up his pistol and hopped towards the port hatch. He laid his hand into the impression there, waiting for an agonising moment as the golden light outlined the hatch. He looked back at the sentinel. It was almost fully out of the deck now, and Sullivan cursed the time the hatch was taking to open. When the gap was a metre wide, Sullivan ducked underneath, wincing in agony from his wounds. He jammed his fist into the impression on the other side and the door slammed behind him. He raised his pistol and fired into the snaking coils of the hatch armature. It exploded in a cloud of black liquid and fiery red current that coursed through the air.

Sullivan stumbled on, his injured leg screaming in protest. He could barely walk. The agony of the wounds was fading; replaced by the light-headedness Sullivan knew to

be blood loss. He was careening through an access corridor on the port side of the vessel. He fell to his knees, and then to his side. His leg was drenched with blood. He undid his belt and pulled it free with his good hand, dropping his pistol to the deck. He tied the belt around his injured leg, crying out in agony as he cinched it tighter. Then he lay back on the deck, closing his eyes for just a moment. Oblivion came almost instantly.

## Chapter Four

And now he was here, squatting with his back to the wall in what he had figured as some sort of aft observation chamber. Half of the aft bulkhead was transparent, affording him an incredible view. After he had woken, he had made his way here from the large pool of blood he had left on the floor. There had been no sign of the sentinel, so he had searched for another way to access the starboard side of the ship and return to the Bogart.

All he had found was a few otherwise featureless chambers, filled with all manner of relics and trinkets. One had even contained a small library, with old leathery books in a language that Sullivan couldn't decipher. Eventually he had found his way to the aft-most chamber of the alien ship. If he stood right at the end, and looked around to starboard, he could see the Bogart.

She was losing fluid from a couple of locations, and venting fuel plasma from the drive section. Since the sail was inactive, she was taking a lot of hits from space debris. Sullivan could hear them striking the bulkheads of the alien ship, too. Lumps of ice, rocks – any hit on a critical system could be fatal now. And although he wasn't sure the vessel he was on had any critical systems, he knew that the heat from the sun had to get to it soon. It had already destroyed the umbilical connection to the Bogart. When Sullivan saw that, he realised that the ship he was on was indeed a tomb. And now it would be his.

For there was now no way back to the Bogart. Even if Theo managed to spacewalk two EVA suits across and get past the sentinel, Sullivan didn't think the suits would protect them from the intense heat and radiation of the sun. They might live for an hour on the Bogart, before succumbing to radiation sickness. Assuming either vessel survived much more of this.

Sullivan collapsed, sliding down the bulkhead. He knew he hadn't managed to stop the bleeding, just slow it down. He wasn't sure if he would live long enough to witness the destruction of either ship. He thought about Theo. He was a good kid, basically, maybe a little rough round the edges. A little like Sullivan had been as a

young man. Except Sullivan had had the navy to train him. It was supposed to teach you how to face death, but all Sullivan had ever done was kill. It had a way of knocking the arrogance out of a young man. And as he lay there, he thought about the three more people who were dead because of him.

His eyes began to close, their lids heavy. He stared out through the huge transparent bulkhead at the myriad stars. Sullivan fancied he could see Earth out there, a tiny blue light lost in the firmament. The ships spun again and Sullivan brought his good right arm to his eyes to shield them from the glare, but for a moment he thought he could see a dark shadow against the light. He struggled to his feet and dragged himself to the port side of the bulkhead. A huge dark object was visible off the port bow of the tomb ship. It had a similar teardrop shape, but was larger and less streamlined. As Sullivan stared at it, it pitched to port. He could see now that it changed colour as the light hit it, a thousand shades of blue and purple rippling over the thick ridges of its surface. It stopped pitching, its underbelly pointed straight at Sullivan. It grew closer, moving straight towards Sullivan.

There was a huge crash from the hatch behind him. The armature was still in place, but the sentinel didn't seem disposed to use the door control. It rammed the hatch from the other side, its strength so enormous Sullivan could see the hatch beginning to bulge inwards. He looked back out to space. The new ship was practically on top of him now. It resembled the tomb ship closely, a series of contours and curves that flowed with an incredible harmony. They caught the light, colours shifting like overlapping rainbows.

Sullivan laughed. Maybe it was the blood loss. Or maybe it was the fact that he knew a sentinel was going to kill him in the next minute or two. Or the knowledge that now, in the final minutes of his life, he would see the most wondrous and beautiful thing he had ever seen. He fell to his knees, his pistol raised at the hatch. He looked out at the new ship as it drew ever closer. No human had ever made anything so beautiful.

An opening appeared in the underside of the alien ship. A huge tube, at least two metres wide, shot out of it. It crashed into the bulkhead just to the side of the transparent section, shaking the whole ship heavily. The bulkhead inside the chamber began to glow a bright blue, the light rising to a blinding intensity before subsiding. A two-metre section of the bulkhead had disappeared, revealing the interior of the tube. It resembled the umbilical of the Bogart, but seemed almost organic in construction. There were a series of ribs that held some kind of interlocking armour plating. The end of the tube was covered in a system of gripping teeth, which looked like they had eaten their way through the hull. All of a sudden this didn't look like an encouraging development.



Behind Sullivan, the hatch gave way, the armature snapping in a huge cloud of mist and sparks. The sentinel emerged from the mist, the current playing over its glistening skin. Sullivan could have sworn the faceless head bore a smile.

“Come and get it, you son of a bitch.”

He fired twice. The creature sprang, recoiling in mid air as the slugs struck home. Sullivan rose, emptying the clip into the sentinel. Each slug hit it hard, knocking it back and causing it to roar in protest. Sullivan squeezed his last round off. The creature turned back to face him. Some of the slugs had left dull rents in its shining flanks, but it seemed otherwise unhurt. Sullivan prepared for the inevitable charge.

The sentinel sprang forward, flying through the air at head height. There was a flash of movement out of the corner of Sullivan’s eye as something moved to intercept the creature mid-air. A huge noise rang out, the noise of steel on stone, and Sullivan’s head began to spin.

There was another figure in the chamber, roughly human-sized. It looked metallic, light glinting off the interlocking plates that covered its frame. In one of its metal hands it held a shining sword, flashing it back and forth before the sentinel. They circled, and the sentinel crouched, preparing to spring again. Its opponent saw the weakness and dived forward, plunging the full length of its sword deep into the sentinel. The creature let out a howl and was still. The metal swordsman stood up and pulled the sword from the sentinel. Then it turned to face Sullivan, walking closer.

The chamber was getting very hot now. Sullivan felt weaker and more light headed than ever. The strange metal creature spoke, but he didn’t understand. The words sounded like slurred nonsense. He tried to answer.

“Sullivan,” he croaked. He couldn’t force any more words out of his mouth.

The creature spoke again, still holding the sword in its metal hand. This time the words seemed more familiar.

“Captain of the,” he faltered, “Bogart.” He broke off, falling to one knee.

The creature sheathed the sword in a long heavily adorned scabbard. It reached up with both hands to its head and pulled upwards, lifting the helmet free to reveal a face below. Sullivan couldn’t believe his eyes.

She looked almost human. Her wide grey eyes were set into a symmetrical face, with full lips and high arching eyebrows. Thick blond hair was arranged in tresses hanging loosely from her head. And on either side of her head were small, but ever so slightly pointed ears. There was an elegant beauty to her face that struck Sullivan dumb.

“English?” she said, in a high-pitched, singsong voice.

“English?” croaked Sullivan, too stunned to form coherent thought.

“Come with me, Englishman, unless you wish to die on this vessel.”

She spoke with an accent that Sullivan couldn't place, yet sounded familiar. She grabbed him by the shoulder of his jacket and started to drag him out of the vessel and up the tube. She was surprisingly strong, and dragged him along easily. They emerged from the tube and she dropped Sullivan to the floor. He looked around, and the last thing he saw before he passed out would stay with him till the end of his days. His prone position offered him a perfect view through one of the alien ship's transparent bulkheads as they moved away. The Bogart was on fire, burning all around the superstructure, and the obsidian body of the tomb ship had begun to take on a reddish hue. There was a blinding flash, and both ships were engulfed in a massive explosion. There was no sound to signal the death of the Bogart, but the shock wave struck the alien ship a moment later, delivering the tidings of its demise.

Blackness took Sullivan.

He had no idea how long he'd been out when he opened his eyes again. His vision was blurred, his head still swimming in the abyss of unconsciousness. He struggled to remember what had happened before he had blacked out. He could feel the cold floor against his face, his bare chest and limbs. He lay spread-eagled on the floor, dressed only in his shorts. He rolled over, blinking in the glare of the illumination. The ceiling had a purple hue, but a bright light shone from the centre of it, obscuring the finer details. Sullivan brought up his arm to shield his eyes, and then realised that he had used his injured left arm - except that it was no longer injured. The battle on the tomb ship flashed before Sullivan's mind's eye. He examined his shoulder, and then turned to his wounded leg, probing it with his fingers. The flesh on his calf was still pink and tender, but he could hardly tell he had injured his shoulder at all. There were wide, smooth, black bracelets around his wrists and ankles. They felt very cold, but Sullivan couldn't see how they had been fastened. They had no visible seam or hinge.

He was sitting on the floor of a chamber about five or six metres square. The walls consisted of a series of shallow alcoves, divided by huge ribs that arched towards the central light in the ceiling. The surface was smooth and flitted from purple to blue according to how Sullivan moved his head.

He tried to stand, but his legs felt unsteady and unfamiliar. He took one step, and then slowly took another. One after another, he planted his bare feet on the cold surface, trying to get the blood flowing around his shivering body. All of the walls were identical. There were no transparent bulkheads, no hatches; in fact there was nothing even to suggest Sullivan was still on the alien ship. It was only the bulkheads' colour

that seemed familiar to him so he approached one for a closer look. As soon as his ankle got to within about a metre of the bulkhead, it stopped dead and he almost lost his balance.

Sullivan steadied himself, and then reached out one of his hands. The closer his wrist got to the bulkhead, the more the bracelet seemed to be pushed away. It was like trying to push two magnets together. Neither his feet nor his hands could get close to the bulkhead. He stepped back, and the bracelets stopped pushing against him.

“What the hell is going on here?” he shouted. His voice rang out around the chamber. No answer came.

He tried approaching the other bulkheads but it was to no avail. He even tried sliding on his belly across the floor to see if he could reach them that way. Still, he could not. He sat back down in the centre of the chamber, sweating from his exertions. The perspiration began to cool on his back, making him shiver again. He wasn’t sure why he had been so eager to reach the bulkheads. They were identical in every way, with no indication of any way to get in or out. Sullivan lay back and closed his eyes. Sleep took him quickly again.

Time became meaningless for him. Periods of monotonous wakefulness were punctuated by dreams of tombs and shining purple teardrop-shaped ships. Again and again he saw the face of the girl. She floated in the darkness, the shining sword flashing around her. Sullivan had never seen such a beautiful face. He thought about Yoshi, and about Theo and Vic. Especially Vic. She had been through so much with him. The first time he could remember meeting her was in the aftermath of the bloody battle on Ganymede.

After the initial bloodshed of the furious battle between Sullivan’s rangers and the miners’ militia, the rest of the facility – mostly older and younger miners, and some women and children – had surrendered quickly enough. They had come onto the battlefield, searching for survivors or the remains of loved ones, and the sight of women lamenting over the broken body of a husband was almost too much for Sullivan.

That had been when Orlat arrived. On hearing of the stiff resistance that the rangers had met, he had decided to take charge of the situation himself. He made straight for Sullivan, and promptly ordered him to round up all the remaining miners. He then ordered his lieutenant to execute one in three of the prisoners, in an effort to discourage future disobedience.

But by then, Sullivan had learned of the reason for their rebellion. Pirates had raided a supply ship destined for the facility, and when food supplies had become scarce, the garrison had used lethal force to protect their own sustenance. These people had died

for food. There was no way that Sullivan was going to execute people for refusing to starve.

So he refused to carry out the order. Orlat threatened him with court martial, warning him in no uncertain terms that his insubordination would be rewarded by a very long time in the brig. But Sullivan stood his ground, and when the captain turned to issue the same order to a junior officer, Sullivan drew his naval sabre and held it to his captain's throat.

Orlat drew his own sword and the two officers fought a furious duel, watched by both the rangers and the shell-shocked miners. Orlat was bent on killing this upstart officer who would dare to challenge his authority, while Sullivan took all his fury out on the man who had used him as an instrument of terrible destruction. And although Sullivan was a formidable swordsman, and had been champion in his class, he could not hope to match Orlat's viciousness or experience.

Orlat had stopped short of killing him, instead wounding him through the gut. As Sullivan lay on the ground bleeding, Orlat had forced him to watch as the rangers gunned down the miners. Some had seen Sullivan's example, and refused to fire, but it took only a handful of rangers to spill enough blood to sate Orlat. So Sullivan lay, bleeding on the hard rock of Ganymede, watching helplessly as so many lives were lost. As he watched, he saw the group of marines who had refused to fire being rounded up and detained. Vic had been one of them, and Sullivan could still remember watching the tears stream down her face as the innocents were gunned down.

He was lying to one side of the room, staring at the ceiling, when the bracelets on his wrists and ankles began to tug at him, snatching him from his memories. He was dragged across the room to the exact centre of the cell. The bracelets locked together, instantly binding Sullivan's wrists and ankles. He had almost forgotten about them since he had stopped trying to reach the bulkheads and now he winced at the impacts. He struggled clumsily up on to his knees. A noise from one of the bulkheads attracted his attention. There was an opening appearing in one of the alcoves. It began as a small vertical slit, and then grew lengthways before widening abruptly with almost no noise. Standing in the opening was the creature that had snatched him from the tomb ship. Sullivan could see now it was no human.

She stood about one-seventy in height, with a frame just the slim side of average. She wore a figure-hugging bodysuit, revealing a very attractive figure, curving in all the right places. Combined with the perfect symmetry of her face and her wide, grey eyes, Sullivan was again struck by her beauty.

She spoke in a strange language as she stepped into the chamber. It sounded like music to Sullivan's ears.

"I don't understand you." Sullivan spoke in the strongest voice he could.

His captor showed no reaction. She walked around Sullivan, observing him from every angle as he fired questions at her.

"Who are you? Where am I? Why are you holding me?"

Still she showed no reaction. Sullivan noticed the ornate scabbard at her side as she stopped and rested her palm on the pommel of her sword.

"The question is, English," she said. "Who are you?"

Her voice had a strange lilt to it, pronouncing the word English like it was a name. She stared at him out of her huge, oval grey eyes.

Sullivan resorted to old naval training. Name, rank and serial number – that was all you were supposed to give.

"Sullivan, Jack. Captain, S.S. Bogart." He stared back at her.

"What were you doing on the funeral barge?"

He didn't reply. He knew now he was looking at one of the builders of the tomb ship.

"Were you trying to steal it?"

He continued to stare at her.

"Sullivan, Jack," she repeated. "Are you an Englishman?"

Her question took him by surprise. Englishman wasn't a word you heard much these days. The solar system was so huge no one would ever claim to be from such a tiny corner of Earth.

"No, I'm not," he answered.

"Yet you speak with their tongue." She spoke this as a fact.

"Yeah, everybody speaks English." He leaned forward. "Including, it would seem, you too."

"Do not concern yourself with how I am learned in your tongue. Instead, answer my questions."

She knelt down on one knee, moving closer to Sullivan.

"How did you come to board the funeral ship of Gerren the Strong? Who told you where you could find it?"

"I think there's been some kind of mistake. I don't know what you're talking about. We hit that thing by accident."

She stood up, her brow furrowing.

“You don’t expect me to believe that, do you?” She started to circle him, moving towards the opening. “That in the vastness of space, you just happened to run into the funeral barge? And then boarded it by accident?” She snorted and moved into the corridor outside the cell.

“I will find out who has sent you to disturb my cousin’s rest. And you, Sullivan Jack, will answer to the King.” The opening in the alcove sealed, leaving no sign it had ever been. The forces holding Sullivan’s bindings disappeared and his limbs relaxed. He sat in the centre of the floor for a long time, staring at where the opening had been.

She spoke English. She looked almost human. She had to be connected to Earth somehow. Maybe these weren’t aliens - maybe they were some sort of unknown cult or faction that had survived in some hidden corner of the system. Could such a thing be possible? How could they have escaped the attention of the Navy? A thousand thoughts flew through Sullivan’s mind. But still he sat. There really wasn’t much else he could do.

Sullivan spent an hour or so examining his bracelets closely. They were utterly smooth, with no seals, controls or any sign of construction – just rings of black polished glass. They all made the same note when struck against the deck, and rang resoundingly when struck together. He passed another hour examining the bulkheads closely, looking for any way to create an opening like the one he had seen. It was difficult, because he could not get closer than a metre. His search yielded nothing, so he lay back in the centre of the cell, his stomach rumbling loudly. He had no idea how long it had been since he had eaten.

“Hey!” he called to the ceiling. “Any chance of getting some food in here?”

The ceiling didn’t answer.

Hours later, the rumbling in his stomach had still not ceased, and his mouth was as dry as the deserts of Mars. His manacles hummed slightly, and then flew together with a glassy ring. He shifted his weight up onto his knees so that when his ankles were pulled together, his legs didn’t break. The alcove opened and his captor returned, wearing the same tight bodysuit and carrying a large silver bowl. She placed the bowl on the floor and moved it across the floor towards Sullivan with her foot. He looked into it to find a large silver spoon dipped into some kind of broth. It was a creamy yellow colour and contained what looked like chunks of meat. He took the spoon and sipped the broth gingerly. It tasted warm and salty, and his stomach howled in anticipation. He threw caution to the wind and began to wolf down the food.

His hunger drove him to forget where he was. He disregarded his captor completely as he gorged himself, liquid flowing down his chin to fall to the floor.

“Hungry?” she asked.

He nodded to her.

“Then eat, Sullivan Jack. You will need your strength.”

Sullivan stopped eating for a moment. He wiped his hand across his mouth to catch some of the juices.

“Just Sullivan will do,” he said.

She smiled, revealing a row of perfect white teeth.

“So, you do still have a tongue. I was worried you might have eaten it in hunger.”

Sullivan looked at her. He hadn’t expected her to start making jokes.

“Thanks for the food.”

He returned to the broth. A warm feeling was spreading from his stomach and his thirst had been slaked also, so good was the food. His captor said nothing, but just stood and watched him eat. Sullivan began to rethink his situation. He briefly wondered if the food had been drugged somehow, but then realised that he didn’t care, not as long as it banished the black hole in his stomach.

Maybe this wasn’t time for old naval training. He needed to know what was going on. Scooping the last of the solid food from the bowl, and tipping the rim to his lips, he drank deeply, slurping the last of the broth. He set the bowl down, and again wiped his face with the back of his hand. She stood leaning against one of the bulkheads, arms folded across her chest, staring at him intently.

“Maybe we got off on the wrong foot,” said Sullivan.

“I beg your pardon?” she answered.

“Maybe we can help each other.”

She stepped closer, arms still folded. Sullivan was conscious of the sword slung at her side. His wrists and ankles were still bound, so he was still very much at a disadvantage.

“What can you do for me, Englishman?” There was a sarcastic note to her voice.

“You seem to think that me and my crew,” said Sullivan, his voice faltering when he mentioned them. He went on. “That me and my crew had something to do with all this.”

“And?”

“And I told you. We hit that thing by accident.”

“Nonsense,” she snorted. “The barge would have seen your vessel from a great distance. It was instructed to avoid all other vessels.”

Sullivan had made the right call. He was learning more about his captor than she about him. Whoever she was, she definitely wasn't human. But he still found it difficult to believe she was an alien.

"Well that thing didn't avoid us." He kicked the bowl back across the floor so that it hit her on the shin. "It ran straight into us, destroying the Bogart in the process."

She lowered herself onto one knee, so that she was at eye-level with Sullivan.

"Are you saying that you did not seek out the barge?"

"Are you kidding me? If we had seen that damn thing coming, we would have gotten out of the way. And my crew would still be alive."

The expression on her face softened.

"I'm sorry for the loss of your crew. If what you are saying is true, then they have been the victims of another's foul deeds."

She stood again, and began to pace around Sullivan, one of her fingers tugging gently at her lower lip. He noticed for the first time that her hands were as slender and as shapely as the rest of her.

"Then you have had no contact with the Fallen? You are not an agent of Kerreg, or anyone else?"

"No. I'm Captain Jack Sullivan, master of the cargo vessel S.S. Bogart. I've never heard of Kerreg, or your Fallen." He craned his neck to follow her around the cell, turning from left to right to keep her in view.

"In fact, I don't even know what you are. You aren't human – what are you?"

She stopped right in front of him, her expression quizzical.

"You have never seen one of my kind?"

He shook his head.

"No, I don't even know what species you are." He smiled thinly at her. "But you seem to know a lot about us."

"I know much of the ways of humankind. But it is difficult to believe that you are not an agent of the Fallen. That you are a simple human, flying through space in that strange machine. And that you truly know nothing of my people."

He shook his head again. He was learning more now than ever. He just had to keep her talking. A little information could be very important.

"I don't know anything about you. Who are you?" he asked, staring right at her.

"In our tongue, we call ourselves the Elysians. In your tongue, we have had many names."

"You've been to Earth?" asked Sullivan. He couldn't make any sense of what she was saying.



“No, I have never set foot upon your world. But the oldest amongst us have. They know your race. They have tasted your treachery, and your capacity for violence.”

Sullivan had no answer to this.

“You are not the first Englishman I have met, Sullivan Jack. I will find out what part you played in this attack on my house. If, as you say, you are innocent, then you have nothing to fear. If you are guilty – ”

She didn’t finish the sentence. Instead, she returned to the opening in the alcove, picking up the silver bowl as she went.

“If I am guilty – what? Where are you taking me?” shouted Sullivan. He was tired of playing games, trying to glean crumbs of information. He wanted answers.

“To Elysium. To the Royal Court of the Elysian King, where you will answer charges of conspiracy and treason. We will yet unlock this mystery.” She left the cell, adding one last comment over her shoulder. “We will speak again, Sullivan Jack of Earth.”

The alcove closed seamlessly behind her. Sullivan shouted loudly at where it had been.

“At least give me my clothes back!”

But no answer came.

Time passed slowly for Sullivan. He slept briefly, and when he awoke he found another bowl of broth just within his reach. His overalls were there as well. They had been cleaned, but were still torn where the sentinel’s claws had pierced them. He pulled them on and sat down to enjoy the food. It was just as good as the first bowl, despite the fact that his stomach didn’t crave it quite as much. As he ate, he thought for the first time that his situation was beginning to improve. It wasn’t the first time he had been in cells, nor was it the first time he had faced a court. He would play along, explain how the accident happened, and then hopefully get dropped off at some place he could get back to Earth from. But at the back of his mind he remembered the dangers of subjecting oneself to the mercy of any court.

His mind drifted back to the court martial that followed his duel with Orlat. The man who would come to be known as the Butcher of Ganymede had a lot of friends in high places. For his insubordination, and the striking of a senior officer, Sullivan should have been sent to a penal colony. At his trial, Vic had been one of the non-comms that had been called to testify. For her trouble, she was drummed out of the service, and only narrowly escaped imprisonment. Sullivan had been expecting the very worst, but no one in the top brass wanted to look too deeply into Orlat’s conduct. He was already too

powerful. Instead, Sullivan was offered a deal. He managed to secure honourable discharges for all of the rangers who had refused to fire, and had himself been awarded a medal for courage. It was all a sham.

So Sullivan had found himself a civilian again. And he never thought he would face another trial again. But now he would. It would be a trial in an alien court. And he had no idea what fate awaited him.

It was not long before the manacles hummed into action once more. Again, Sullivan pulled himself into a kneeling position and stared at the alcove, waiting for his captor to appear. In due course, she stepped from the opening and wasted no time in getting down to business.

“Tell me more about how you came to be on the funeral barge.”

She was wearing a sleeveless bodysuit now, and it showed off slim, but well defined arms. She wore a bracelet on each wrist, similar to the ones Sullivan was wearing, but fashioned from gleaming metal, and adorned with the same flowing script he had seen on the other vessel.

“I told you. We were on a long-haul flight out of Tereshkova. Somewhere, high in the Kerkerov Rings, we snagged something in our plasma-sail - your funeral barge. The plasma flux caused a magnetic attraction that rammed the two ships together. There was nothing we could do to stop it.”

“This plasma-sail you speak of. What is it?” she asked.

Sullivan was surprised. Her ignorance didn’t match the kind of technology he saw around him. Any space-faring culture should know all about plasma sails.

“It’s the method of propulsion my ship uses.” He corrected himself. “Used.”

His captor laid her hand in one of the alcoves, the bracelet around her slender wrist flashing briefly. A large panel appeared in one of the alcoves, displaying the Bogart and the funeral barge, locked together with the Bogart’s umbilical. The image moved, changed, as the two vessels loomed closer. Just before the video looped back to the beginning, Sullivan could see the aft section of the barge where he had faced the second sentinel.

“This is what the Kelison saw before we boarded the barge. Where is your sail?”

“It collapsed when we hit the barge. The barge acted like a conductor. Our plasma just poured right through it. That’s what caused us to collide.” She really didn’t seem to understand what he was talking about.

“Before the collision,” she said. “How would your vessel have looked?”

“Like a big bright blue bubble - three thousand metres wide. With the Bogart hanging in the middle.”

She frowned, and then sat on the floor, back against the bulkhead.

"I do not understand. I have never seen such a vessel. The barge had been instructed to avoid all other vessels. Only a seerephon of the fleet could have approached it. It cannot have failed to see yours and should have steered well clear of it." She paused, sucking her bottom lip. "Unless someone tampered with it before it passed through the Rift. And bade it to seek you out."

Sullivan looked back blankly.

"The Rift?"

She looked annoyed, as if he had asked a really stupid question.

"The Rift that separates your realm from mine, Jack Sullivan."

He stared at her. Every answer only now seemed to pose more questions.

"Where is it?" he asked.

She laughed, a high-pitched laugh that filled the cell.

"You fly in space, and yet you do not know the location of the Rift." She reached into her pocket and pulled out what looked like a small pink orange, using her long nails to remove the skin so she could eat it. "Could it be that there's more truth to your tale than I thought?"

They sat in silence. She pulled a section of the fruit free and threw it to Sullivan. He caught it in his bound hands, and placed it in his mouth. It was unbelievably succulent, his mouth watering as his tongue tingled.

"Perhaps you are not my enemy, Jack Sullivan. Time will tell."

Sullivan didn't know how to make her believe him.

"I'm not your enemy. I don't know anything about your Rift, about your world, not even your people. There I was, flying along, minding my own business, when out of nowhere your funeral barge crashes right through my ship."

He was getting quite angry and gestured with his bound hands.

"And then, when I go knocking to see if I can get any help, or a find a way to get home, I get attacked by some giant statue that kills my best friend –"

He broke off, suddenly saddened by the loss of the Bogart's navigator. Vic sure would have gotten a kick out of this situation. She had always been more interested in aliens than Sullivan.

"I'm sorry about your crew, Jack Sullivan." She sounded genuine. "And your friends. Truly."

He had calmed down a little, remembering how close he had come to dying himself.

"Thanks. And thanks for saving my ass, too," he said.

She looked confused again. “Your ass?”

“For getting me off that funeral barge. I never really thanked you for saving my life.”

“You can’t be sure I’ve saved it yet, Jack Sullivan,” she said, smiling.

Sullivan had the distinct impression she was playing with him. He was about to answer back when the vessel rocked violently. His captor leapt to her feet, dropping a scatter of fruit peelings around her. The ship was thrown violently again, and this time she was thrown clear across the chamber.

Sullivan, on the other hand, had been kneeling in the centre of the cell. His position made him less susceptible to the pitching of the ship, and he anticipated the second movement. As his captor careened across the cell, off balance, Sullivan reached up and grabbed her. He threw his bound wrists over her head from behind, and then brought up one of his knees to apply pressure to her back, using his spare left leg to give him leverage.

“Let me go!” she hissed. She was scrabbling at his forearms, but she could not break the binding force of the manacles. She wriggled against him.

“My vessel is in danger! We will both be killed. You have to release me!” she gasped.

“You first,” he replied. “Release me from this cell and agree to return me to Earth.”

“This I cannot do.” Her complexion grew vivid, but her voice remained resolute.

“Then we die here together.”

She stared right up at him, her huge, oval grey eyes welling with tears. The vessel was rocked by a huge impact, followed by a hideous, rending, tearing sound.

“Please, Jack Sullivan.” The anxiety in her face had grown. “Allow a captain to tend to her vessel.”

He released her and she fell forward, crashing to the deck. She lay there, but only for a few seconds. The tearing noise was getting louder.

“What the hell is that?” said Sullivan, raising his voice over the din.

His captor got to her feet, made to dust herself down, and turned to face Sullivan.

“I will deal with you later,” she said. “But I don’t suppose I can blame you, all circumstances considered.” She drew her sword and pointed the tip at Sullivan’s chin. “Just don’t ever try anything like that again.”

“What’s going on? What’s happening to the ship?” he asked.

She stared at the opening in the alcove. Her expression didn’t fill Sullivan with hope.

“That was the sound of an attack spur, piercing the shell of the Kelison.”

“What?”

Her voice was icy cold as she answered.

“Darklings.”

## Chapter Five

Sullivan watched as his captor made her way to the opening in the alcove, peeking out towards the corridor.

“What the hell are darklings?” he shouted.

She put a finger to her lips.

“Hush, Englishman. Now is not the time for such foolish questions,” she whispered. “I suppose you would have me believe that you know nothing of darklings, either.”

Sullivan could hardly hear her. The screeching noise was getting louder, but there was something else as well. Something coming closer. From where he knelt in the centre of the chamber, he could see a dark shadow moving in the corridor beyond.

“Look out!” he cried.

The dark shadow burst out of the alcove, suddenly illuminated in the bright light of the cell. It was a creature about a metre or so long, covered in black, leathery looking skin. As it flew past his captor, her sword flashed up. The creature crashed to the floor, coming to a halt right in front of Sullivan. It reminded him of an ape he’d seen in a zoo, but the features were vague somehow, as if not fully formed. Where the sword had torn the darkling, Sullivan could see that it was solid inside, made of the same material as the skin.

“Remain here,” said his captor as she slowly stepped through the opening.

Sullivan proffered his bound wrists in answer.

“It’s not as if I’m going anywhere.”

Left alone, Sullivan took a closer look at the darkling. In all the millions of miles of space he had covered, he had never seen anything like this. He poked the skin. It was cool to the touch, but not cold. The interior of the creature was indeed identical to the skin. The darkling seemed to be solid matter right the way through. It had no weapon or possessions, but all four of its limbs ended in wicked talons that looked sharp, and diamond hard. The dead eyes stared vacantly up at him as he shoved the carcass away.

Behind him, his captor returned through the opening in the alcove.

“They’re all over the Kelison.”

She was out of breath and across her bare right shoulder there was a deep scratch. Bright crimson blood flowed from the cut as she probed the injury with her hand.

“And your crew?” asked Sullivan.

“There isn’t any crew.”

“This thing is unmanned?” The ship Sullivan had seen from the funeral barge had been very large.

“The Kelison is normally crewed by five. It is possible to launch it with one, or even none. But for this journey, discretion was required. So I came alone.” She was glancing back up the corridor as she spoke.

“Then let’s just get the hell off this thing!” cried Sullivan. Surely a ship this sophisticated would have some kind of escape pods.

“What was your vessel constructed of, Jack Sullivan?” she asked.

“What?” Sullivan couldn’t see how it mattered.

“The Bogart. From what was it constructed?”

He thought for a moment. He wasn’t really well rated on engineering.

“Polycarbon alloys. High-grade plastics. I’m not sure.”

“Well, the Kelison is not like one of your vessels. And not easily constructed. I cannot leave her to the mercy of the Darkling Lord. It is not a fate I would wish on any creature.”

Sullivan was still struggling to understand what she was saying.

“This ship is alive?” he asked.

“Not as you and I live, Jack Sullivan. But not as that foul creature lives either.” She gestured toward the carcass of the darkling with the point of her sword. “No, the Kelison is – ”

She broke off, and looked at Sullivan. “Perhaps this is not the time for such questions.”

She stared dead ahead and began to breathe deeply, her chest rising and falling as she gathered her courage.

“If you’re thinking of going back out there, then you’d better think again,” said Sullivan.

She looked at him intently, her wide grey eyes unblinking.

“You might be pretty good with that sword,” he continued. “But I don’t fancy your chances against that many of these things. And if you liked the odds, you’d never have come back here.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“That if you want to save your ship – your vessel,” he said, raising his bound wrists. “Then you’ll have to release me.”

She frowned, and continued to stare into his eyes.

“How can I be sure you won’t turn on me? That it is not you who has brought the darklings here?”

“You have to trust me. If those things kill you, then what will happen to me? I can’t fly your ship. How will I get home?” He stood up, trying to look at her on even ground, not an easy feat with bound ankles. “It’s in my best interest to help you.”

But still she frowned, unsure of what to do. After a pause that seemed to Sullivan to last for hours, she sighed, touched her bracelet and Sullivan’s wrists were released. His ankles followed suit and with some relief, Sullivan moved his feet apart. He let out a loud groan, and then laughed.

“Sorry.”

They stood and stared at each other. Sullivan smiled.

“If I’m going to help you, I’ll need to know your name.”

“I am Calliya.”

“Jack Sullivan.”

“Can you fight, Jack Sullivan?”

“If you mean with one of those,” he said, pointing to her sword, “then yeah, I can fight. But I have a better idea.”

“And what would that be?” she asked, her narrow features wearing a dubious expression.

“When you took my things, what did you do with my gun?”

“Your possessions are in my quarters.” She raised an eyebrow. “Right at the other end of the Kelison.”

“Can we see a layout of this thing?”

Calliya touched the bracelet on her left wrist and a vivid plan of the Kelison appeared in a nearby alcove. It curved slightly with the bulkhead but Sullivan could see no device displaying the image. Part of the alcove had simply transformed to carry the plan view of the alien vessel. Looking at it, Sullivan realised just how different this vessel was from any he had ever seen.

The various compartments were spread around in a haphazard fashion. No two were alike in shape or size, and a great deal of the vessel was just blank. There didn’t seem to be any pattern to it. Sullivan was reminded of a medical diagnostic display. It had the same lopsided symmetry as an insane kind of organ system.

“How did you say you built these ships?” he asked softly.



“I didn’t,” she said curtly. “What is your plan?”

“I have a weapon that might be able to help us. My pistol fires molten metal slugs. They were useless against that Sentinel, but maybe they can do some damage to our little friends here. They look a little softer,” he said, poking the darkling. “If we can get to my gun, we can take back your vessel.”

“I confess I have no idea what this pistol of yours can do, but I doubt that it can aid us so much as to warrant travelling the length of the Kelison,” Calliya replied, tilting her head to one side doubtfully.

“Trust me. It’ll do the trick. But you said the darklings were headed for the power chamber.”

She nodded her head. “So?”

“Then we just stay as far away from it as we can. Skirt round the edges.” He pointed at the display.

“I am not sure this is a good idea, Sullivan but very well. We will fetch your weapon.”

They moved through the opening in the alcove. The Kelison had grown eerily quiet since the appearance of the darkling in the cell. The hair stood up on the back of Sullivan’s neck as he followed Calliya out into the corridor. He wasn’t so sure he wanted to leave the sanctuary of his cell.

Calliya paused briefly at the end of the short curved corridor and then moved out into a spacious connecting chamber. Corridors branched out in from every corner, some leading upwards, others downwards. The walls and ceiling were of the same material, but of a different hue. They had the same shades of purple and blue, and to this a glorious warm gold was added, shining through from underneath. The effect was stunning.

Sullivan couldn’t speak. He stood and stared at the technicolor bulkheads around him, sure that he could see the colours shifting ever so slowly. Calliya called him from one of the corridors on the opposite side of the chamber.

“Come on, quickly!” she said in a loud whisper.

Sullivan hurried after her. The bulkheads here were only of a dull blue, and gently rippled as they snaked through the vessel. At some length they arrived at the prow of the Kelison, without encountering any resistance.

“I do not understand this,” said Calliya softly. “When I left you to scout for darklings, I saw many. They were all over the vessel. Now they have withdrawn to somewhere.”

“You said they’d go for the power chamber,” replied Sullivan.

“Yes. They will try to corrupt the Kelison, to make it their own. But I had hoped not to confront them in such large numbers. When they are gathered so, they are at their strongest.”

Sullivan smiled. “Or at their most vulnerable.”

Calliya threw him a puzzled look. They reached her quarters and she tapped her bracelet to open the door. They quickly slipped inside and sealed the bulkhead behind them, just as the Kelison lurched heavily to one side. A loud wail resounded through the deck beneath their feet and Calliya cried out.

“They have breached the power chamber. We must hurry!”

“Then get me my pistol,” Sullivan replied.

Sullivan had rarely seen such large quarters in all his life in space. Maybe Captain Orlat’s, aboard the Genghis Khan, but they had seemed such a foul place. This was simply ethereal. The fore bulkhead was transparent, and Sullivan saw the stars for the first time in days.

But something was very wrong. He couldn’t see the sun, or any constellations he recognised. He frowned, trying to make familiar shapes out of stars that just didn’t seem to fit. There were so few of them. At first Sullivan thought it was a trick of the light, but then he realised that he could only make out thirty or forty stars. He should have been able to see thousands, from anywhere in the galaxy.

Calliya moved to the console by the large bed and touched one of the symbols. A small panel in the bulkhead slid aside, revealing Sullivan’s navy service pistol and holster. She removed it, along with his battered flight jacket.

“Calliya,” said Sullivan, transfixed at the view. “Where are all the stars?”

“What are you talking about?” she replied, without looking up.

“How far have we travelled?”

“We have travelled four days, through the Rift and beyond,” replied Calliya, joining him where he stood. “Here is your weapon, Jack Sullivan,” she added, handing him his pistol.

Sullivan removed the weapon from its holster and checked the power levels. They were good, almost seventy percent. But the solid supply was gone - no solid, no slugs.

“I need metal,” he said. Calliya didn’t seem to understand. “This pistol,” he went on, “is a field loader. It needs two things. First – power. We have plenty of that. But it also needs metal to make the slugs. You feed it in the solid supply converter, here.” He turned the pistol over, showing the tiny little hatch in the butt of the pistol.

“So you just need some metal?” she asked.

Sullivan nodded. Calliya moved across the room as the Kelison let out another blood-curdling wail, pitching to port violently. She touched another control and a drawer shot out of the bulkhead. She reached in and removed a box and pushed the drawer gently. It shot back in, disappearing flush with the bulkhead.

“Will these do?” she asked, opening the box for Sullivan. Inside was a magnificent collection of jewellery. Most of it was gold, but a couple of pieces bore such gems as to outshine the precious metal that completed them.

“Perfect,” replied Sullivan. He selected a few small pieces; a ring and two earrings, ignoring any that bore gems, and opened the hatch in the pistol, placing the jewellery inside. He closed the hatch and activated the solid conversion cycle. The pistol hummed for ten seconds or so, then a small green light blinked on. The conversion was complete, sixteen shots of pure gold. Sullivan reached into the box for a few more pieces, and then stuffed them into his pockets. This would be the most expensive clip he ever shot. Calliya watched what he was doing with a look of fascination.

“I have never seen such a device,” she said.

“Really?” asked Sullivan, as he adjusted the pistol, checking its sights.

“I have heard Titus speak of pistols and such like – weapons that spit fire and smoke. But I have never seen one.”

Sullivan picked up his holster, slotted the pistol into it, and belted it around his waist.

“Titus?” he asked.

“An Englishman, like you. It was he who versed me in your tongue.”

Sullivan smiled. “He did a pretty good job.”

“Thank you, Jack Sullivan.”

“Just Jack, please.”

The vessel pitched violently beneath them and Calliya was thrown towards Sullivan. He caught his footing a split-second quicker, before catching her easily in his arms. She looked up at him with her wide grey eyes. Sullivan suddenly felt that all the stars in the firmament were not as beautiful as those eyes. She flushed slightly and pushed his arms apart, getting her balance back.

“We must hurry, Jack,” she said. “If the darklings corrupt the heart of the Kelison, then we are surely lost.”

They stood for a moment, neither speaking, just looking at each other. Sullivan drew his pistol.

“Let’s get your ship back,” he said.

Sullivan was surprised at how eager he was for battle. He had spent so much of the past few days in a state of frustration - staring at the inside of the cell, with nothing to fill his mind but how he had failed his crew, and how far he might be from home. He had decided then, that no matter what, he would get back to Earth. And nobody, not this angelic alien, or the swarm of vicious creatures that had attacked the Kelison, was going to stop him.

They slipped back through the hatch into the fore access area, heading for the power chamber. They made their way back along the port access corridor, still inching along, wary of being surprised by one of the foul creatures. Sullivan still found himself staring at the walls as brilliant tones of purple and blue swirled gently over the bulkheads. They returned to the aft access area and this time Calliya led him down a different corridor.

With no warning, a dark shape careened around a corner in the twisting corridor. It clung to the wall, hurtling along in a blur. Sullivan drew his pistol, but long before he could draw a bead on the creature, Calliya's sword flashed out, nearly cleaving the darkling in two. Its carcass hit the deck with a thump.

"Quickly," whispered Calliya. "They will know we are coming."

Sullivan moved behind Calliya as they raced down the corridor, her dark blade glimmering in the half-light. Sullivan pointed his pistol dead ahead as they rounded another corner. He could see the open expanse of the power chamber at the base of the corridor now, but before it lay a horde of darklings. They thundered up the corridor, huddled together into a dark mass. Sullivan trained his pistol on the mass and began to fire.

Six metres. Each shot tore into the assembled darklings, stopping one stone dead in its tracks. A horrific shriek would accompany the abrupt demise. Five metres. Sullivan kept pulling the trigger. Four metres. Calliya let out a loud battle cry. Three metres. Some of the horde had slowed up, thrown into disarray by the molten metal slugs tearing through their ranks, but they were almost upon them. Sullivan dived forward, striking out with his free hand. Calliya's sword flashed in the narrow confines. At her first stroke, two of the remaining darklings fell dead. Sullivan caught one of the creatures by the throat. He rolled on top of it and straightened up to face the other creatures. He fired twice, striking two of the darklings that threatened Calliya's rear. The arm that pinned the creature down burned as the darkling raked his arm with its long claws. He pressed the muzzle of the pistol to its forehead and pulled the trigger. The darkling's head disappeared in an explosion of powdered black clay.

Calliya dispatched three more with short strokes of her blade, scattering the remaining darklings scattered shrieking up the tunnel. She had been wounded slightly, grazed on her cheek and her sword arm. Sullivan looked down at his left arm. There was a fair bit of blood, but none of the cuts were deep. He removed another piece of jewellery from his pocket and inserted it in the grip of his pistol.

“Many more down there?” he asked, nodding towards the power chamber.

“I fear so,” sighed Calliya.

They moved carefully inside. The darklings inside didn’t seem to expect them. Perhaps they were confident of their raiding party’s ability to track down their dead scout, or were simply too intent on corrupting the Kelison.

The power chamber of the Kelison was the largest chamber within the vessel’s shell. It stretched thirty metres into the distance, and was about half as wide. The bulkheads pulsed with energy as they arched and curved to the high ceiling. In the centre of the chamber lay the heart of the Kelison. It was a gigantic crystal lattice, fully six metres wide, suspended in a bony framework. It spun slowly, a huge stream of energy that flowed lengthways down the chamber churning around it. The energy stream shone with a brilliant blue light, as currents of darker shades mingled with impossibly bright ones. Darklings were clustered around various arteries that led from the framework around the heart, biting and clawing at their pulsating lengths. Occasionally, spurts of blue fire would spring from a ruptured artery as the darklings managed to disrupt it. Sullivan began to pour slugs at them.

Calliya rolled under the energy stream and sprang to her feet on the other side. Darklings flew before her, so furious was her attack. Sullivan continued to fire, driving the foul creatures back, the shrieking threatening to drown out the humming and cracking of the energy stream. Sullivan found two suddenly on his left. He kicked one hard, sending it flying upwards into the energy stream. The darkling was consumed in an instant, but the other one seized his leg, digging its wicked claws into his thigh.

Sullivan put the muzzle of his pistol to the creature’s head and pulled the trigger. As the carcass fell limp, he grabbed it by the arm and started to swing it before him. He risked a glance across the chamber, searching for Calliya. She was cutting a swathe through the darklings, scattering them high and low. Sullivan smashed another darkling with his makeshift club. He fired at two more that came at him from high on the right. The slugs hurled them backwards, but something else caught his eye. There was something moving at the back of the chamber, but the bright light of the energy stream made it difficult to make out exactly what it was. The darklings were scattering in all

directions now, their assault on the heart of the Kelison brought to an end. Sullivan called to Calliya, pointing towards the back of the chamber.

“Quickly!” she cried. “Stop it!”

They ran to the end of the chamber, the huge black shape clearly visible. It had the same basic shape as the other darklings, but was at least twice their size. Its massive claws dug into the bulkhead, propelling it up the sheer, arching surface. Sullivan pulled his trigger twice, striking the creature with the second slug. It roared and almost lost its grip, but regained its purchase and broke through the ceiling of the power chamber. Smashed pieces of bulkhead fell to the floor around them.

“What the hell was that?” wailed Sullivan.

“A more elaborate form of construct,” Calliya replied. She was panting, her bare arms and face covered in a mixture of sweat and the black darkling clay.

“You know, sometimes I wonder if you really do speak English,” said Sullivan.

Calliya looked back blankly.

“A more elaborate form of construct?” he asked. “What does that mean?”

Calliya threw him an impatient look.

“It means, Jack,” she said, “that while it can be likened to the darklings, it is larger, smarter and harder to destroy.” She looked around the power chamber, surveying the damage. There were darkling carcasses littered all around them.

“And,” she continued, “it will probably head for the command chamber, to try and corrupt the Kelison from there. We must destroy the alpha construct.” She turned to Sullivan. “Are you hurt?”

Sullivan shook his head.

“Then we must make haste for the control chamber. We have little time,” said Calliya, staring at the jagged hole in the ceiling.

They moved back out the way they came, stepping over the scattered remnants of the horde of darklings. As they moved, Sullivan could see that like him, Calliya had been wounded. There were several large gashes about her back and thigh, but she appeared not to notice.

They traversed a circle through the centre of the vessel, heading back to the fore access area at a run, taking the few darklings lurking there by surprise. One was destroyed by a molten slug tunnelling through its frame; two more were dispatched by Calliya’s blade as they continued their run up through the narrow corridor. More of the foul creatures lurked in the tunnel, some of them charging at Sullivan and Calliya, others howling a retreat to warn the others.

Those that lingered in the tunnel did not survive long. Sullivan's pistol continued to spit deadly fire at them as Calliya's black blade bit through their tough hides. Calliya burst into the command chamber first, sword flashing as Sullivan followed closely, diving through the opening. The chamber swam with darklings, scuttling over every surface, leaping in four-legged bounding strides, careening over each other as they surged towards him. He fired into where they were concentrated heaviest, scattering the darklings. Calliya moved ahead of Sullivan, striking at those that evaded the gunfire.

The command chamber echoed the chamber from the barge, with a raised central dais that bore the command chair. It was larger and more elaborately decorated on the Kelison, and it was also flanked by two deep wells in the deck of the command chamber. They were significantly larger here, and each had two console and chairs. The main difference from the tomb ship's control centre, apart from the size, was that in front of the dais, sitting a metre off the ground was a plinth, with a smooth, dark, perfectly spherical stone sitting on top. The darklings swarmed over the control consoles, tearing and gouging at them with their long wicked talons.

Sullivan could see the alpha. It stood on all fours upon the command chair, snarling and howling at its minions milling around it. Calliya wasted no time. She hurdled the well in the deck and in a flash was upon the alpha. The darklings turned, scuttling to aid their leader. Sullivan fired at them, rolling to avoid being crushed by a leaping assailant. His slugs stopped two of them from scaling the dais that bore the command chair, but others swarmed all around Calliya.

To and fro her blade flashed, cutting at the alpha darkling. Sullivan could hear the ring of metal on metal as the huge black creature warded off her blows with its gigantic forearms. She cut at it again and again, but the creature was getting the better of her. It struck out with one of its massive limbs, striking Calliya square in the chest. She was knocked off the dais, leaving Sullivan a clear bead on the alpha darkling. Two slugs hit it in the upper torso, smashing it back off the dais.

The other darklings shrieked as the alpha fell crashing into the port well, scrambling towards the port and aft hatches. Sullivan kept firing, ducking to avoid wild attacks from the panicking horde. Each time he felt the bite of a darkling claw, he would turn and fire towards the direction the pain had come from. He fought towards the starboard well, where he had seen Calliya fall, leaving a trail of shattered carcasses behind him. She lay at the bottom of the well, battling three darklings. She had driven her sword through the first, and was using the exposed point to keep the second at bay. She had the third by the throat, but couldn't free any of her limbs to strike the creature. She winced as its long talons raked her arm. Sullivan fired, destroying the second

darkling, and reached down and grabbed the third darkling by one of its flailing limbs, hurling it across the chamber. It hit the deck hard, and then sprang up and made for the starboard hatch.

Calliya freed her sword and then took Sullivan's proffered hand, pulling herself out of the well. Both of them were breathing heavily, and bleeding from a variety of shallow wounds.

"Is that the last of them?" panted Sullivan.

"I do not think we are out of danger yet," replied Calliya.

The last of the darklings scurried through the exit hatches, as Calliya surveyed the command chamber. Carcasses littered the floor, none moving. Sullivan heard the distinctive ring of metal striking the deck from the other side of the dais. If he had remembered his naval training better, he would have checked to make sure the primary target was eliminated, but it was too late now.

The alpha scaled the dais once more. Sullivan raised his pistol, but the creature hurtled into them, driving his shot as he was thrown backwards across the chamber. Calliya was knocked in the other direction, but rolled and sprang to her feet. The alpha was upon her in a flash. She tried to use the open spaces to her advantage, but it anticipated her movement and struck a thundering blow to her chest. Calliya fell, as if struck dead.

"No!" cried Sullivan.

He brought his pistol up again and began to fire at the alpha's back. The slugs bounced off harmlessly as it turned to face him. He could see it now clearly for the first time. Its body looked similar to the smaller darklings, but was three or four times the size. The back and forelimbs were covered in dull black metal armour, the broad flat head covered by a helm of a similar material. Sullivan checked his pistol. Two shots. He aimed at a point in the centre of the head, trying to avoid hitting the armoured helm, but as he fired the creature sprang forward and upwards and the slug flew beneath harmlessly.

The alpha landed and sprang again, knocking Sullivan to the floor, pinning him with its massive bulk. Its massive forearm crushed down upon his chest, the huge talons of its left hand closing around Sullivan's gun-hand. His trigger finger was compressed, discharging the final slug. It tore through the hand of the alpha darkling, severing two of its fingers and the creature howled and withdrew, cradling its wounded left forelimb.

Sullivan scuttled backwards on the floor, his chest burning from his broken ribs. The alpha moved forward again, and Sullivan froze as it approached, lowering its head.



It brought the tip of its featureless, blunt snout to his bare foot, sniffing back and forth. Sullivan shifted backwards, his free hand closing around something on the deck.

He brought his hand round slowly, risking a glance. It was the talon of the alpha that had been severed by his final slug. He closed his hand around it. It felt cold. Like metal. The alpha had its snout pressed to the blood running from his wounded knee. It seemed intrigued by Sullivan, like it had never encountered his like.

Sullivan slid the talon across the floor behind his back and stopped it with the butt of his pistol. He placed the field-loader on the deck and placed the five-centimetre talon inside the solid supply chamber. The alpha's head was moving towards his chest now. He pressed the activation control. The gun hummed. The alpha started, slowly raising its head level with Sullivan's.

"Eat this," said Sullivan.

He brought the pistol up to the alpha darkling's face and pulled the trigger in a swift motion. The head exploded, the slug driving against the helm with such force as to drive a hole in the back. Sullivan rolled to avoid the massive bulk as the alpha fell to the deck with the tremendous crash of falling masonry. He stared at the pistol in his hand. He had no idea what kind of metal that was, but it packed one hell of a punch.

Sullivan slowly rose to his hands and knees and crawled across the floor towards where Calliya lay. Vic had died in the command chamber of the funeral barge. Now he could see Calliya's body lying just as Vic's had, and his heart wrenched. This woman had kept him prisoner for days aboard this ship. She was taking him to face a trial on an alien world. For all he knew, she might be willing to take him to his doom. But she had saved his life. And he wasn't going to let anyone else die. Not if he could help it.

He finally reached her. It wasn't as bad as he thought. She was breathing, and she opened her eyes as he drew closer. She tried to speak.

"Sullivan." Her voice faltered.

"It's okay," said Sullivan, "I got it. It's dead."

"No," she said, as a coughing fit racked her slim frame. Her body relaxed, and she tried to sit, bright crimson blood trickling from the corner of her mouth as she spoke.

"The darklings will return. We must sever the invasion spur."

Sullivan helped her to her feet, feeling her weight as she leaned heavily on him.

"I must take the helm," she whispered nodding towards the chair on the dais.

Together they limped towards the dais, scaling the steps at its rear. Calliya collapsed heavily into the chair and gestured towards the starboard well.

"I need you to take the forward seat, Jack."

Sullivan climbed down and sat into the foremost chair. Before him lay a control panel unlike any he had ever seen on any ship. It was waist height, and inclined towards him gently, and resembled a thick piece of rough cut glass. It clouded over in sections, obscuring the patterned deck. The peculiar flowing script that he had seen on the barge appeared briefly, then shifted and changed to a display of the two interlocked vessels. Around the display, various symbols appeared, floating on the smooth surface.

“Uh, I don’t really know what I’m doing here,” he said, craning his neck to look at the command chair. Calliya was slumped in the chair, but at his words, she drew herself up and spoke.

“Look to the left of the console. You will see a grouping of four icons. When I give you the command, you will press the bottom-most one.”

“Okay,” replied Sullivan, “but what am I actually doing?”

“I will try to roll the Kelison very quickly, breaking the invasion spur. I will then turn back towards the Nightwing and you will activate the lance. It will engage in the forward position, and I will destroy that foul thing.” Speaking seemed to take a lot out of Calliya, and Sullivan could see more blood leaking from the side of her mouth.

Sullivan looked back to the console. He could see clearly the symbol that controlled the lance.

“I guess I’m ready,” he said.

Calliya touched the controls on the arm of the command chair. The two access hatches to the chamber began to hiss and close, moved by great writhing arms that stretched from the ceiling.

“We must isolate the ruptured chamber,” Calliya said, her voice fading to a whisper.

All through the Kelison, hatches began to shut as the vessel responded to the commands of its pilot. Colours shifted on the bulkheads, moving from deep shades of deep purple to bright shades of cobalt blue. Deep in the power chamber, the energy stream flickered and grew, filling the chamber with blinding light. Close to the aft of the vessel, the darklings still milling around in the ruptured chamber began to shriek as they clambered over each other, gouging and kicking their way towards the invasion spur. It had broken an opening in the bulkhead about two metres in diameter, edged with a horrific assembly of curling teeth, long talons and hooked claws. It bit through the surface of the Kelison, creating an airtight seal against the cold vacuum of space. The darklings were scurrying back up the spur towards their own vessel.

In the command chamber, Sullivan checked over his shoulder, making sure that Calliya was still conscious. She was, and looked down at Sullivan with a very faint smile.

“Ready?” she said.

Sullivan nodded and turned back to the console. Calliya closed her eyes, and both of her bracelets began to emit a gentle blue light, characters flowing over the surface of the shining metal. Sullivan could feel a vibration through the base of his spine as all around him, the bulkheads took on more vivid colours.

On the outer shell of the Kelison, a ring of blue light appeared around the widest edge of the vessel. Then she pitched violently to port, and although Sullivan could see the few stars rotating in the fore display he could feel no movement in his body. There was no sensation of motion at all as the vessel flipped one hundred and eighty degrees, but he did feel the shudder as the Nightwing’s invasion spur snapped.

The Kelison peeled off backwards, moving in a slow loop. Sullivan could see the darkling vessel for the first time in the display as the Kelison came about, bringing its nose round to face its enemy.

The Nightwing resembled the Kelison, but was much smaller, only some forty metres long. It was the same basic teardrop shape, but wider and flatter, with curling blades that stretched from its widest edge. All over its dull black surface were a variety of invasion spurs and smaller protrusions. Sullivan could see darklings floating in space near the broken spur. Some even seemed to be clinging to the breached hull. The Kelison inched closer.

“Activate the lance, Jack,” whispered Calliya.

Sullivan pressed the bottom symbol. A bright shaft of light sprang from the Kelison, extending some thirty metres out into space, finishing at an infinitely sharp point. Calliya moved the Kelison ever closer to the darkling vessel. The lance pierced the horned carapace in the belly, the overlapping plates boiling and buckling inwards. Sullivan watched as the hull gave way and the lance began to cut through the interior. The escaping atmosphere began to expel bodies and shattered fragments of the Nightwing.

Just as the wounded enemy filled the display, the Kelison started to veer to port. Again, Sullivan could feel no sensation of acceleration or their course change. Calliya touched another control and a different section of the forward bulkhead became transparent. Sullivan watched as the new, smaller section clouded. Another image formed, and he realised that he was looking at an aft display of some sort. He could see

the darkling vessel rolling now, propelled by its lifeblood leaking through its shell at an uneven angle.

Streams of gas began leak to out, illuminated by shafts of deep red light leaking through the shell. In an instant, the Nightwing became a ball of rolling red gas, churning as it was fuelled by the energy contained deep within. It exploded violently, throwing jagged sections of hull in every direction, but the Kelison effortlessly shot away, outrunning the expanding crimson cloud of fire and debris.

Sullivan looked back to the fore display. They were making way through clear space, the same few stars visible once more. He turned back to Calliya to congratulate her, but realised that she was slumped very unnaturally to one side in the chair. Her eyes were closed and a trickle of blood ran from the side of her mouth.

“No,” said Sullivan, moving quickly out of his chair.

The colour had drained from her face, her arms hanging limply over the sides of the chair. He scrambled up out of the well and onto the dais. There was no way he was going to let her die. Not after what they had just been through.

## Chapter Six

The colour had drained from Calliya's face, her arms hanging limply over the high arms of the chair.

"Come on, don't you dare," Sullivan scolded her.

She didn't respond. He picked her up, surprised at how little she weighed, and then laid her very delicately on the deck. He pressed his fingers to her neck, feeling the faint beating of her heart. He watched as her chest moved almost imperceptibly.

"Don't you dare die on me," he said. "Calliya, I can't fly this ship without you."

Sullivan undid Calliya's short jacket. He could see the vivid bruising on her shoulder where the alpha had struck her. There would be massive internal damage. Even if he had a medipac, or access to medical facilities, he wasn't sure he would be able to help her. Not like she had helped him. Calliya had said that there was no crew, but when he had come on board he had been badly injured. He looked down at the new pink flesh on his arm. Somehow she had been able to heal his wounds.

There had to be some kind of technology on board - something that might be able to help Calliya. He lent over her, drawing his face close to hers.

"Calliya, you have to wake up. I know you have technology that can help you. But you need to open your eyes," he pleaded. "You can't just rescue me from the brink of certain death, bring me all the way out here and then die on me."

He sat back on his haunches, his stomach churning – it was like being back on Ganymede, cradling one of his wounded rangers in his arms. There was only so much death a man could take. He was trapped on an alien vessel, under attack from creatures so mindless that they seemed purely evil. And his one chance of getting home was about to die in front of him. He reached out, taking Calliya's delicate hand between his own. His eyes wandered to her bracelet, which fitted snugly around her narrow wrist.

It resembled the manacles he still wore, but where his were of blackest glass, hers were fashioned from shining silver. They were embossed with the same alien script, but they also bore some of the symbols that Sullivan had seen on the control panel. He slid his fingers down her hand and touched the bracelet. For the briefest moment, there was

nothing, but then a voice exploded in his head. It was an unnatural tone, an androgynous echoing voice that came as both a whisper and a roar; a rolling babble from which Sullivan could make out only one word, repeated over and over again.

*Calliya*

He drew his hand back as if it had been burned, his head ringing from the noise. He wasn't sure what had just happened, but there could be only one explanation. It had to be the voice of the Kelison. But this was way beyond anything Sullivan had ever been trained for. It was way beyond anything he had ever dreamed of. He took a deep breath, and then gently touched both of her bracelets. The voice returned, louder and clearer.

*Calliya*

Sullivan spoke aloud, unsure of whether the ship could hear him or not.

"You have to help her."

*Not Calliya*

"No," Sullivan replied, "I'm not Calliya, but she's going to die if you don't help her."

There was no reply.

"What's wrong with you?" Sullivan shouted. "I need to know how to get to your medical bay, or your medical chamber, or whatever you call it!"

There was another long pause, and then the voice came again.

*Calliya?*

This was a question. Sullivan was puzzled. The ship, or artificial intelligence, or whatever he was talking to, didn't seem to understand what he was saying.

"She's hurt. She's dying." He directed his voice towards the bulkheads, towards the ceiling, even towards the strange spherical stone in the centre of the chamber, searching for any clue as to how to communicate with this thing.

*Calliya hurt?*

"Yes," he called back. Maybe simpler ideas would work, thought Sullivan. They would be easier to communicate, anyway. "Repair Calliya?" he asked hopefully.

*Repair Calliya*

The reply came more as a statement than a question, accompanied by a loud hiss as the armature opened the starboard access hatch. Sullivan understood the invitation and gently lifted Calliya's limp body. He held her close, still grasping her bracelet with one hand, trying to make himself heard again.

"I don't know the way. You'll have to lead me. Do you understand?"

*Repair Calliya*

"I will, but you have to show me the way."

As he approached the fore access area, the lights dimmed over all the ship. Across the area he could see one corridor still shining with a gentle blue glow. He stumbled towards it, struggling to keep his footing in the darkness.

“A little more light would be nice,” he said, but there was no reaction from the ship.

He checked on Calliya as he moved into the soft light of the corridor. She was pale, and Sullivan could see no sign of life.

“Hang on, okay?” he said softly. “I owe you.”

The corridor moved into a part of the ship he had never been in before. He figured he was roughly underneath Calliya’s quarters, just under the nose of the Kelison. Further down the corridor he thought he could see what he guessed to be the lance housing, but the light faded beyond the entrance to another chamber. The hatch hissed and disappeared back into the gloom.

He ducked as he moved beneath the hatch, checking again on Calliya’s condition. It wasn’t good. Even in the dim cobalt light, he could see her face was deathly pale. He surveyed the chamber. It was bare, save for a jagged, rectangular formation of stone that rose a metre and a half out of the deck right in the centre of the small space. It was topped by a huge glass surface, absolutely smooth, about two metres in length and maybe half as wide, with a small control panel jutting out of the stony side of the table. He carried Calliya over to it and laid her gently on the cold glass surface. He looked down at the control panel and quickly realised he could make no sense of it whatsoever.

Once again he placed his hands upon Calliya’s bracelets. He spoke aloud, while at the same time trying to concentrate on the words in his mind.

“I don’t know what to do,” he called. There was no response. He looked down at the injured Elysian. Her colour had not improved and Sullivan knew time was running out.

“If you don’t do something, she’s going to die,” he said. No answer. “And I can’t fly this thing, so you and I are going to be stuck out here too.” Still nothing. “You want to die out here?” It didn’t dawn on him that he had no idea where out here even was.

*Repair Calliya*, came the voice, resounding through Sullivan’s head.

“I know, I know,” he shouted in reply, “but how?”

He stared down at the panel. The symbols were unlike the ones he had seen in the control chamber, so he had not the slightest inkling which one might control the table. Or even what the table did. For all he knew, he had just laid the wounded Calliya on the galley table.

The hair on the back of his neck stood straight up as he felt an electric current pass through his body, bringing no pain, just a vague tingling. There was no voice, but he could feel the presence of the entity that was the Kelison. He had the overwhelming urge to press one of the scattered symbols on the panel. Then his fingers glided to another symbol, and then another. The table began to hum, passing a gentle vibration through the control panel and up through Sullivan's fingers. A representation of Calliya's body appeared on the display.

The healthy parts of her body were depicted as cool blue areas, but her injured shoulder and internal organs were a dark red, overlaid with the numerous red streaks scattered over the rest of her body representing the many cuts and gouges. Sullivan's fingers were drawn to a line of symbols that surrounded the graphic of Calliya. He pressed one in the very middle.

The hum shifted pitch abruptly, as the entire surface of the table began to blaze with a powerful blue light. The light grew brighter and brighter, forcing Sullivan to recoil from the table, shielding his eyes as it filled the whole chamber. Sullivan peered through the gap between his arms. Beams of blinding azure blazed upwards from the table, surrounding Calliya. She began to float gently up off the table, her golden hair transformed an icy blue in the intense colour, her tresses waving gently about her head. She floated upwards, her legs crossed at the knees, arms splayed and hanging slightly beneath her. Her head hung at a gentle angle, as if two invisible arms were lifting her from under her body. To Sullivan she looked like an angel ascending into heaven. But Calliya hung there, half a metre off the table, suspended in the curtain of light. Sullivan moved back to the table again, reaching out to touch the light with his hand. It was cool, but caused the ends of his fingers to tingle pleasantly.

He looked at Calliya, sure he could see her chest moving again. She was alive. And improving too, by the look of it. Suddenly he felt very tired, and his limbs grew almost too heavy to carry. He found himself a nice spot against one of the bulkheads and sat down heavily, surveying the damage to his own battered body.

There were great rents in his overalls, shifting as he moved, revealing claw marks and great gouges on his flesh beneath. None of them were too deep, and they didn't seem poisoned, but they hurt like hell. When the alpha had hit him, he was sure it had broken a few of his ribs. At least none of them had punctured anything vital. He rested his weary body against the bulkhead, his exhaustion overwhelming him.

Sullivan lost all track of time as he sat watching Calliya, his back resting against the gently curving bulkhead. He wasn't even sure if he had passed out or not. He



looked over towards the stone table. The curtain of blue light still rose from the edges of the glass surface, but it was much softer than before. Calliya no longer floated off the surface, but she still lay asleep, curled slightly to one side. Sullivan struggled to drag himself to his feet, using the bulkhead to aid him. Once upright, he lurched towards the table.

The nasty bruising that had covered Calliya's upper chest was gone. She was breathing normally and appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Sullivan let out a sigh of relief. For the first time in a very long time, something had gone right. It gave him the hope that he would get back to Earth after all. He limped out the door, trying to remember the way back to the command chamber. If there were any answers to be had, then it would be there.

Through countless corridors he hobbled, his eyes swimming with the endless purple bulkheads, until he finally reached the familiar command chamber, still littered with the carcasses of the fallen darklings. It was only when he sat in the command chair that he realised that without Calliya's bracelets that he had no way to communicate with the Kelison. He didn't dare touch any of the control panels, or approach the ominous looking spherical stone that sat upon a stone plinth in front of him. He delicately touched one of the controls on the high arm of the chair, and was rewarded with a scattering of displays across the sloping forward bulkhead. In any direction, he could only make out a handful of stars, and none of them were familiar. He couldn't understand it. How far could they have travelled?

Sleep came again to Sullivan.

He awoke, gently shaken from his slumber.

"Jack Sullivan, are you dead?" It was Calliya.

"No," he croaked. "I'm not dead yet."

He opened his eyes. She was standing in front of him on the dais. She looked in perfect health, and was actually smiling, wearing no sign of the ordeal they had endured.

"Well," she laughed, "you look absolutely frightful. You should get yourself to the regenerator." She paused. "It was you who carried me to the healing chamber, wasn't it?"

He nodded.

"But how?" she asked. "I didn't tell you how you were healed after I brought you aboard. How did you know what to do, or even where to go?"

“Your bracelets.” His voice was a hoarse rattle. “When I touched them, I heard a voice. I think it was this – thing.” He waved his finger at the bulkheads around him. “It told me what to do. At least, it showed me what to do.”

Calliya looked at him in shock. “You heard the song of the Kelison?”

“I wouldn’t have called it a song, but I definitely heard something.”

“That is most unusual. I have never known the Kelison to sing to anyone but its master.” Calliya shrugged and then nodded her head ever so slightly towards Sullivan in gratitude. “But, thank you, Jack Sullivan. For saving my life.”

She jumped down off the dais, heading straight for the carcass of the alpha. It terminated abruptly at the shoulders, the thick head destroyed almost completely by Sullivan’s slug. She turned the body over and examine it, poking it and prodding it this way and that. Sullivan limped down from the dais.

“What are you looking for?” he rasped.

“An alpha construct should bear the mark of the one who raised it,” she said, peering under the plates of armour. “The Fallen who is his master.”

“And?” replied Sullivan. His head was starting to swim, his feet unsteady beneath him. “Who was it?”

“There’s no way to know.”

“Why not?”

“Because sometimes it would bear the mark upon its head,” she said, pointing at the destruction that sat atop the alpha’s shoulders.

“Sorry,” he said.

She laughed in reply. “Do not apologise, Jack Sullivan. You did well to kill the beast. It was a formidable alpha. But I will find whoever is responsible for this attack.” She paused, lost in thought for a moment, and then looked at him. “I think it’s time you got some rest. Come, let me return the favour.” She reached out one of her hands.

Sullivan wobbled and looked down at himself. Dried blood covering most of his overalls, and he could barely move the right side of his body as every breath brought shooting pain. He winced in agony and grasped Calliya’s outstretched hand, letting his weight fall onto her. She was surprisingly strong, catching him as he fell.

“Time for the regenerator, Jack,” she laughed.

Together they struggled down to the regeneration chamber, deep in the prow of the ship. Sullivan groaned in agony as he climbed onto the cold glass surface of the regenerator. He looked up at Calliya’s kind face as the soft azure light fell across it.

“Where have all the stars gone?” mumbled Sullivan.

“Sleep, Jack Sullivan,” she said softly, tapping the symbols on the control panel in front of her.

Sullivan saw the curtain of light around him grow brighter, and felt as if a thousand tiny hands bore him up from the table’s surface. He felt warm and weightless, his skin tingling all over his body as slowly his head grew heavy and sleep quickly overtook him.

Calliya watched as the human floated in the healing field of the regenerator. He wasn’t the first human she had ever met before. But she had never met one that could travel in space. She had heard her aged cousin speak of such things before he passed, but she had never given them much credence.

She left the healing chamber and made her way back to command. Along the way, she kicked a few of the darkling carcass. They were starting to revert to the raw materials they had been fashioned from. By the time they reached Elysium, they would be all but dust. The alpha in the command chamber was the same. Again she checked it for the marks of the Fallen who had raised it, but there were none. It had been a ferocious beast, she thought. All of the Fallen could raise such a powerful creature, but very few would risk the wrath of the Elysians by attacking the Kelison openly. And there was still no way to explain a Nightwing evading the patrols this close to the Rift.

She sat into the command chair, closing her eyes, and letting her mind open to the vessel around her.

*Calliya Calliya Calliya*

The voice bore waves of happiness with it. The bulkheads around the chamber glowed in warm shades of vermilion and purple. Calliya smiled, as the waves of joy flowed over her.

*Not Calliya?*

*He is healing. And he is a human, named Sullivan.*

*Human? Sullivan?*

The Kelison was clearly confused.

*Like Titus, Kelison. Titus is a human too.*

*Human. Sullivan human.*

The Kelison seemed satisfied with that. Calliya instructed it to make directly for home as fast as it could in its wounded state. The vessel changed heading slightly. She then asked after the Kelison’s health. It was unable to give her specifics, but instead communicated its general state of being so she hopped off the dais and down into the port well. The aft control panel gave detailed displays of the damage done to the vessel.

It wasn’t too severe. The darkling spur had pierced one of the aft dorsal power chambers. The Kelison had isolated it from the rest of the vessel and sealed off the

chamber, but it would need quite some time to repair, once they returned to Elysium. Calliya sat back in the chair, thinking deeply.

If Sullivan was telling the truth, and she had very little reason to doubt him, then the funeral barge must have sought out the human ship. Which would mean that someone had intercepted the barge after its launch, but before it reached the Rift. But who would dare to do such a thing, and why?

She briefly toyed with the idea of using the touchstone that stood in front of her to relay what had happened to Elysium. She stared at the spherical stone. Perhaps not, she thought. It would only cause more panic than she had already. When she had emerged from the Rift, and been challenged by the patrols, she had used the touchstone to join her mind to that of the other masters, on board the patrol vessels. She knew that the news of her prisoner would have spread faster than starlight, all the way to Elysium.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of fruit. She chewed it, still musing on what to do. She had to see Titus. He would know what to make of all this.

Sullivan awoke some time later, his body whole again. He jumped down from the table, marvelling at the wonder of this alien technology. Not only did he feel well, he couldn't ever remember feeling better. His overalls were ruined from the two battles that had nearly seen the end of their owner, but somehow, he had survived. He bounced out of the healing chamber, determined not to get lost this time. At least the Bogart had signs, he thought. He hadn't gotten very far when he met Calliya coming the other way.

"I see you're awake," she said.

Sullivan smiled.

"I seem to spend a lot of time asleep lately."

Calliya laughed. "Well, you look well rested. Actually, I was just about to eat something, and I thought you might like to join me."

"That's the best offer I've had in ages," he replied.

She turned and he followed her back up the corridor, but after a few steps, she stopped and turned to him.

"You still look rather frightful, Jack."

Sullivan looked down at his ruined overalls. "I see what you mean."

"Might I offer you a change of clothes?"

She led him to a small chamber located near her own. Inside were similar furnishings to hers, but simpler and less lavish somehow. From a small drawer in the bulkhead, she removed a bundle of clothing and then laid it on the bed.

“I’ll be waiting for you in the aft observation lounge.” She smiled over her shoulder as she walked out of the chamber.

Sullivan examined the bundle lying on the bed. There was a loose fitting white shirt of some gloriously smooth fabric, and a pair of trousers of a thicker material, a dark earthy brown hide. He removed his overalls, tearing the last few seams in the process, and donned the alien clothing. They fit surprisingly well.

He made his way to the back of the vessel. On the third attempt, he located the observation chamber where Calliya was waiting for him. She had changed clothes too, and was now wearing a shimmering translucent shift, which glittered in the starlight that flooded through the transparent aft bulkhead, echoing the shades that shifted slowly around the chamber.

“I’m not late, am I?” asked Sullivan.

“No, not at all,” she answered quickly. “Please, sit.” She waved her hand towards the long black glass table that occupied the centre of the chamber, and the two chairs situated at either end. He sat in one, and Calliya took her place at the other.

No sooner had they seated themselves than a small hatch opened in one of the bulkheads. Sullivan hadn’t been aware of it at all before it had opened, and now he watched in surprise as a small creature scuttled out of the opening.

It was about a metre high, and shaped like a portly simian of some sort, its potbelly hanging towards short, bandy legs. It had clearly defined features, which looked a vague approximation of a human’s, but they seemed unfinished. Sullivan instantly thought of the darklings, and started suddenly.

“What the hell is that?” he cried.

“Do not fear, Jack. It is just a construct.” Calliya seemed totally unfazed.

“A what?”

“A construct.” The creature was carrying two steaming bowls on a tray, and it walked briskly up to the table and deftly placed the tray upon it. Calliya took one of the bowls for herself and gestured to Sullivan to take one. The construct scurried back the way it had come, the opening vanishing seamlessly into the bulkhead behind it.

Sullivan reached for the bowl and discovered it was full of his favourite stew. The alluring aroma caused his hunger to suddenly swell. He began to eat hungrily, forgetting all about the strange little creature until the construct reappeared, carrying two goblets and a large ceramic carafe. It poured two glasses of rich red liquid and then disappeared through the bulkhead again. All the time it was in the chamber, Sullivan stopped eating and stared at the odd-looking creature. It was sandy coloured, and at close range its skin seemed to bear almost a grainy texture.

Calliya sipped the ruby red liquid. Sullivan tried his own. It was some kind of wine, warm and refreshing, and he drank deeply. The clear sweet flavour was a far cry from the synthetic wine they served in most spacer's bars. For some time, they ate in silence. Then Sullivan decided now was as good a time as any to get some answers.

"You want to tell me again what just served us dinner?" he asked.

"A construct. All of our kind utilise constructs. They build our houses, harvest our crops, and whatever else we require of them."

"So they're not like the darklings?"

Calliya laid her spoon on the table and took a long sip from her goblet.

"No, not like the darklings. They are foul creatures bred for war, and destruction. These constructs are no good for war. They are only to serve us."

"What about the sentinels? Are those to aid you?"

"No. The sentinels are different. The Elysians still have the power to make constructs of war. At least, some among us can craft them."

"You craft them?" asked Sullivan, still eating hungrily. "You mean you manufacture them?"

"No. They are raised from base materials, using the Lore of the Titans. Like this one." She indicated the construct that had returned bearing a fruit dessert of some sort. "It was raised from the sand near my home on Elysium," she added, smiling at the thought of her world.

Sullivan was still unsure of how it could have been constructed. Maybe it was some kind of advanced organic technology. That might explain the incredible living ship he was on.

"Is it intelligent?" asked Sullivan, watching the small creature scurry to and fro across the chamber.

"No, not intelligent. It can only do what it was constructed for. In this one's case, to clothe and feed myself and the crew, and any guests I might be – entertaining." She began to eat her dessert.

"How do you control it?"

Calliya waved one of her bracelets.

"It is similar way to the way I communicate with the ship, but it will respond to verbal commands also."

Sullivan nodded and tried his dessert. It was light and fluffy, and fabulously sweet. His palette turned somersaults as the food melted in his mouth. He made noises and pointed towards the dessert with his spoon.

"This is delicious!" he exclaimed.

Calliya smiled. "You like Elysian food?" she asked, laughing.

Sullivan nodded enthusiastically and they sat, eating their desserts in silence. After the construct had refilled both of their goblets, Sullivan leaned back from the table, his appetite sated. He had no idea whether the construct had refilled his goblet at Calliya's behest or not, and he really didn't care. The wine was too sweet nectar to refuse. He gazed out through the expansive transparent bulkhead at the dark void. The few stars hung like pinpricks in a vast black curtain.

"I still don't understand where all the stars have gone," he said.

Calliya looked confused. "They haven't gone anywhere, Jack. From here, you can see almost half the stars in the Realm."

"The Realm? How many stars are there in the Realm?"

"This is the Finite Realm, Jack. It is not like your realm. Here, there are one hundred and eleven stars, and each and every one is known to my people."

Sullivan tried to make sense of what she was saying.

"Your world," he asked. "How long will it take us to get there?"

"We will be there tomorrow. The Kelison is one of the swiftest of all seerephon. The journey from the Rift takes only two days," Calliya answered.

"And what's going to happen when we get there?" he asked.

Calliya looked suddenly solemn.

"You will stand before the King of Elysium and answer the charges against you."

"That doesn't sound like much fun," answered Sullivan. "Can't you just take me back? You know I'm innocent."

"I believe you, Jack. But I have already told the fleet that I have a human prisoner. I cannot let you go now. And besides, I was lucky to pass into your Realm unnoticed once. The patrols would not let it happen again."

"So you're just going to throw me to the wolves?" said Sullivan.

"I'll do all I can, Jack. I owe you that much. So we will make for my estate first, instead of the Royal City. We will talk to Titus, and then we shall see what must be done." She drank the last from her goblet. "Undoubtedly, you will have to appear before the court eventually. But we cannot know what might happen there."

Her words did not fill him with confidence.

"Who is this Titus?" he asked.

"A friend," she answered. With that, she stood up. "Now, if you excuse me, the hour grows late. And I have a damaged seerephon to tend to before I see my bed."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to stay here a while. I feel like I've been sleeping forever." He flashed a wry grin.

Calliya smiled back. "Stay as long as you like. The construct will keep your goblet full. And when you tire, you may rest in the crew quarters where you found the clothes. The construct will help you if you lose your way."

She turned and left the compartment. Sullivan turned back to gaze at the sparse starfield. Ever since he had been a young cadet, taking his first few voyages in space, he had found the stars a source of great tranquillity. Some spacers complained about the boring monotony of the void, but Sullivan liked to think of it as looking back in time. Stars that were so far away they might not even exist anymore. There was no way to know if they were even real. He laughed to himself. He wondered what some of those spacers would think if they were in his boots right now. Hurtling along in an alien vessel, held captive by a beautiful mysterious creature, witness to a technology beyond anything he had ever seen.

He sat for hours, counting the stars over and over, but rarely reached forty-two before losing count. He couldn't make any sense of what Calliya had said about the Finite Realm. Had they left Earth's galaxy? Travelled to some remote intergalactic constellation? Was it possible that the Elysians could travel faster than light? That would be the most incredible revelation yet, if it were true. He wasn't sure if what he was drinking was intoxicating or not, but after countless glasses, his eyelids grew heavy. With the construct's help, he made his way aft to the quarters he had found the clothes in and lay, fully dressed, on the large comfortable bed. As he slept, he dreamed of huge teardrop shapes, floating in the darkness. Of swirling colours and snarling shadows. And of Calliya, her angelic face pushing all other images aside.

Sullivan awoke once again feeling strong and refreshed, with no ill effects from imbibing large quantities of the wine he had been drinking at dinner. If he ever got out of this, he would have to take a bottle back to Earth. He left his quarters and peered in through the open hatch into Calliya's. They were empty.

He searched almost the entire vessel before he found her. He was sure he had had to backtrack on several occasions but at length he had come to the power chamber that held the heart of the Kelison. Calliya was there, with several constructs, which busied themselves with the removal of the remains of the slain darklings. She called to him as he approached.

"Good morning, Jack Sullivan! Are you well rested?"

"Very," he answered.

She was trying to reattach some of the arteries that the darklings had torn from the lattice. She had a wooden bucket full of a viscous green liquid one hand, and was using



the other to spread it over the wounded areas. She had repaired almost half of the damaged arteries. Sullivan was going to offer to help, but he realised he had no idea how to.

“I don’t suppose I can be of any help?” he asked.

Calliya shook her head. “There’s no need. I will be finished soon. If you like, you can wait in the command chamber for me. We should be nearing Elysium.” She resumed what she was doing. “I will join you as soon as I am finished here.”

Sullivan left the chamber and made his way back towards the prow of the Kelison. He was beginning to get to know the layout now, and had made this journey at least once before. He entered the command chamber through the port entrance, his eyes suddenly drawn to the display. It was almost entirely filled a fantastic nebula, one unlike any Sullivan had ever seen. He sat in the command chair, staring in amazement.

Everywhere that Sullivan looked, he could see an explosion of colour – blues, greens, reds and pinks mingled in an endless swirl. The nebula crackled with energy, great founts of light spilling from its depths, arcing across its surface. The Kelison was heading directly for it, and as he stared, Sullivan realised he could make out a planet within the nebula itself. It was difficult to make out the exact features with all the gas that obscured it, but he fancied he could make out an Earth-like array of continents and oceans. The nebula was drawing inexorably closer now. He wished Vic had seen this. Maybe she would have known what to make of it.

Calliya entered through the port hatch, her face lighting up as she saw the nebula dead ahead of the Kelison.

“Elysium!” she cried, bounding up on to the dais.

Sullivan vacated her chair, nodding towards the nebula. “So that’s your world?”

“Yes,” she replied. She tapped some of the controls on the chair. Numerous displays appeared on the skin of the bulkheads. Sullivan stared at the various views around Calliya’s home system. He could see the star now, connected to the planet by a long diaphanous finger of gas. The same nebula seemed to surround the star as well. He had never heard tell of a solar system like this. A lone planet orbiting a star, sharing the same micro-nebula?

The Kelison hurtled towards Elysium, plunging into the velvet folds of the nebula at what seemed to Sullivan a tremendous speed. Calliya closed her eyes, communicating just one word to the Kelison.

*Home.*



## Book Two

### The Fields of Elysium



## Chapter Seven

The homeworld of the Elysians loomed large in the display as the Kelison shifted course and began to slow down. Sullivan marvelled at the lack of inertia. If the Bogart had slowed in the same space of time, it would have taken them a week to scrape the crew off the forward bulkheads. But this vessel could accelerate and decelerate at will and suffer no ill effects, something Sullivan had always thought was impossible. The more he saw of Elysian technology, the less he understood.

The Kelison slowed further and moved into a gentle orbit, the nebula thinning as they descended through its lower layers. Sullivan could see the gentle purple clouds rolling through the overhead display, highlights thrown across them by the violet sunlight. Below, he had his first view of Calliya's world, and two things aside, it reminded him a lot of Earth. The first was that the landmasses looked unfamiliar, and there seemed to be more ocean than back home. The second was that there was no sign of the sprawling metropolises that covered much of Earth's surface, just endless rolling countryside.

The Kelison jarred slightly as they encountered the planet's atmosphere.

"You might want to take a seat, Jack Sullivan," said Calliya.

Sullivan tore his eyes from the display long enough to hop down into the starboard well, taking the same seat he had taken during the assault on the darkling vessel. He could see one of the continents looming closer, a lush green island that lay in the centre of a crystal clear azure sea. The southeast corner loomed closer and closer as the Kelison began to come out of its dive and skim the surface a few kilometres up. Sullivan got his first good look at the world of Elysium.

The sky was almost the same blue as the Earth's, but he could see wisps of the violet nebula threading their way through it, beyond the rolling white clouds. He shifted his gaze to the aft displays, watching as the terrain flew past at great speed. He could make out mountain ranges; huge snowy peaks that erupted from the rolling plains around them. There were lakes and rivers cutting their way back and forth across the land in every direction. The Kelison slowed further and descended, the terrain changing

gradually as islands of thick forest interrupted the rolling hills and grasslands. There was no sign of any habitation – no roads, no cities, no industrial zones. It wasn't a sight Sullivan was accustomed to, as there wasn't a planet left in the solar system that didn't bear some trace of man's hand.

They were now low enough for Sullivan to see the horizon through the giant forward display, and he could make out another massive range of mountains in the distance. The Kelison banked and turned again. It was very hard to judge the speed at which they were travelling, but Sullivan figured it was sub-sonic at most.

They slowed further, turning in a tight circle as Sullivan shifted to try and see what they might be descending towards. There was a structure below them, the first sign of habitation he had seen on this world. He barely had time to make out the basic shape of the structure before the Kelison dropped vertically at an astonishing rate, coming to a halt only a few metres from the surface. It gently floated down the last few metres, before shuddering slightly as it touched the ground, giving Sullivan a better view of the structure out of the forward display.

The Kelison had landed in a grassy field a few hundred metres from the building, which looked like it had grown out of the ground. Great, earthy spires spun out of the soil like massive smooth roots, joining to create high arches that crossed here and there. There was only a rough symmetry to the building, in that it consisted of four tall spires that surrounded a set of softer, smaller ones; these were so closely packed they formed the central bulk of the building.

"Come on, Jack Sullivan," called Calliya, as she leaped from the command chair. "Come and see my home."

Sullivan climbed out of the well and followed Calliya back through the starboard hatch, down to the forward access area, and then down the corridor that descended at the steepest angle. It was a dead end, but as they neared the far bulkhead, a hatch the width of the corridor opened. It was lowered from the Kelison by three, writhing armatures until it formed a ramp onto the green grass outside.

Sunshine blazed in the hatch, and it took Sullivan's eyes a few seconds to adjust as they emerged from the vessel. Then he looked back at the Kelison wondering again at its construction. It stood upon three great spikes that protruded from its belly, piercing the ground as they supported the giant bulk of the seerephon. No human hand could ever have made such a vessel. The sunlight glinted upon its shell, and as Sullivan moved, the hull appeared to change colour. He turned to ask Calliya about it, but she was already striding purposefully towards the building.

"Come!" she called.

Sullivan broke into a run to catch up to her. He could see a figure approaching from the direction of the building. It was small, but didn't look like a construct. As they drew nearer, Sullivan could see it was man-sized, and dressed in long brown flowing robes. The figure broke into a waddling run, pulling his robes up to his knees. When he reached Calliya, they embraced warmly.

They held the embrace for a moment, and then parted as Calliya turned to Sullivan.

"Jack Sullivan, may I present Dr. Titus Kendall-Scott." She smiled broadly, her whole face lighting up.

Sullivan could see that he was indeed a human. There could be no doubt. He appeared to be of about sixty years of age, with short grey hair only around the sides of a shiny pate. He wore small gold-rimmed glasses and smiled broadly as he proffered his hand, his mischievous blue eyes twinkling behind the polished lenses.

"Good heavens! I mean, this is quite a surprise, Mr. Sullivan," he said.

"Sure," said Sullivan numbly as he took Titus's hand, which squeezed his own with a powerful grip.

"I had quite given up hope of ever meeting another man of the Empire in my lifetime, I can tell you!" Titus beamed. "But Sullivan is an Irish name, is it not? Or perhaps you are one of our colonial cousins? Boston or Philadelphia maybe?"

"The Empire?" asked Sullivan. "Boston?" There was something odd about the way Titus spoke.

"Worry not," said Titus. "But forgive me. This is all quite unusual. And you must be exhausted from your journey. Where are my manners?"

"I think it is my manners that are at issue," interrupted Calliya. "The last time I checked, this was still my homestead."

"Of course, my child," laughed Titus. "Let us get inside, so that you may tell me what has befallen you. The court is alive with rumour." As he spoke, Titus's eyes fell upon the damaged section of the Kelison's shell. "Clearly, there is a great deal for you to tell me."

Calliya looked back towards the damaged seerephon.

"We were set upon by a Nightwing, Titus, barely two days from Elysium. I do not know how they managed to evade the patrols, or reach so close to the Rift, but they were intent on corrupting the Kelison. We were fortunate that Sullivan managed to slay the alpha, or neither of us would be standing here."

"Good grief," replied Titus, visibly shocked. He kept staring at Sullivan, his eyes flicking down to the pistol on his hip.

They walked towards the entrance to the homestead, Sullivan's boots crunching upon the loose stone apron that skirted the reddish stone steps. They scaled the steps, and Titus shoved the two large, heavy looking wooden doors aside.

"Welcome home, my lady," he said, bowing with a flourish.

Sullivan followed Calliya through the doorway into a cavernous entrance hall. The floor was covered with huge, polished stone tiles of a hundred different shades while either side of the hallway stood suits of exotic armour, displayed in a similar fashion to the one he had seen on the funeral barge.

At the end of the hall were two massive spiral staircases that spun gently away from the ground in either direction, reaching towards the upper expanse of the house. Sullivan craned his neck to get a look at the ceiling, where an enormous dome sat atop the entrance hall. Alternate sections were transparent, and the brilliant sunlight streamed through, carving patterns of light on the floor.

"It's good to be home," said Calliya, stretching her arms out high above her head.

"Are you tired?" asked Titus. The concern upon his face was clear. "Do you need to rest?"

"No, we have rested enough," she replied. "But we have much to discuss, Titus."

"I don't doubt that for a moment," he answered, gesturing towards a door in the corner of the entrance hall. "Let us take some refreshment on the veranda."

Sullivan listened to this exchange with interest, following them as they made their way through the house. He had many questions to ask, not least of which was who this quaint little man was. The ground floor in the centre of the building consisted of a series of great halls, each more elaborately decorated than the last, while myriad arms littered the walls, some familiar to Sullivan's eyes, others utterly alien to him. There were tapestries spun in shimmering threads, statues of golden figures, and all over the house blazed more islands of natural light, flooding down from skylights high in the scattered domes.

They moved out onto a wide veranda, overlooking a lush pasture that sidled into the distance until it was overcome with thick forest. Sullivan could see a long translucent canopy that sheltered a table and some comfortable-looking chairs. Titus raised his hands and clapped twice.

They sat into the chairs as a construct appeared from somewhere inside the house, bearing a delicate teapot and china tea service, balanced upon a tray. The creature stood still, holding the tray high as Titus poured three cups of tea. Sullivan had seen his grandmother make tea once, as a very young boy, but he couldn't remember seeing a teapot outside a historical vid since then.



Titus took a cup for himself and sat heavily into his chair with an audible sigh.

“My dearest Calliya,” he asked. “What in heavens has befallen you these past few days?” He sipped his tea, and then looked at Sullivan. “And who the devil, my dear sir, are you? Calliya’s message to the fleet merely said that she had discovered an intruder aboard the funeral barge. How did you come to be on board?”

“By accident,” replied Sullivan.

Titus looked puzzled. “I see,” he said uncertainly. “Or rather, I don’t. But we should start at the beginning.” He turned to Calliya. “What have you gotten yourself into this time?”

Calliya smiled. “I’m not sure yet. But I have some ideas.” She stood up and walked to the edge of the veranda, gazing out upon the rolling fields and thick green forest.

“How did you know there was an intruder on board the barge?” asked Titus.

“I didn’t. I only knew that for some reason, it had not completed its voyage. I believe that somebody tampered with the funeral barge of my cousin Gerren. That they instructed it to seek out a human vessel,” she added.

Titus looked aghast.

“Is that possible?” he asked.

“I myself instructed the barge. It was to cross through the Rift and make directly for the Fires of Helios and to avoid contact with any other vessels. I know the instructions were understood, Titus, I’m sure of it,” said Calliya, growing more excited as she spoke.

“But who could do such a thing, if indeed it was done?”

“Oh, it was done,” interjected Sullivan. “That barge could not have missed the Bogart. It made straight for us.”

Titus looked at Calliya. “So, the rumours are true?”

She nodded.

“And men truly travel in space in vessels of their own construction?”

She nodded again.

“Oh mercy,” said Titus, sweating suddenly. He removed a handkerchief from the folds of his robe and mopped his brow. “I had not dreamed that such that thing was even possible.”

Calliya turned out towards the forests. “Very few of us have the power to override another’s instructions, Titus. So whoever did this had to be strong – very strong. And had to want the barge to fall into human hands for some reason.”

Titus looked at Calliya sternly.

“My child, you’re not suggesting a prince of one of the Royal Houses would – ”

“Tayfen,” interrupted Calliya, “would stop at nothing to bring about his ends. You have heard him speak. You know how he views humankind. He would do anything to bring about the return of the Golden Age.”

Titus shook his head.

“What do you mean?” asked Sullivan. He had been trying to follow the conversation as best he could, and now he wanted to know more. “What’s the Golden Age?”

“Prince Tayfen has often spoken out in the Royal Court,” replied Calliya. “He believes that we should once again rule over all of humanity, and over the Worlds of the Fallen. That we should use our strength to grow powerful again, and return to our domain in the Infinite Realm. He believes that humanity exist only to be dominated by us.”

“Does everyone think that?”

“No,” she went on. “Many, including the King, believe we should continue to remain here. That it is our duty to protect the Rift from the Fallen, as we have done for five hundred generations. As we have, ever since the Exodus. But if Tayfen can expose the Finite Realm to mankind, then we would be forced to act.” She stopped, looking right at Sullivan. “Titus,” she added, “take care of our guest, would you? I am sure he has many more questions, but I have a damaged seerephon to tend to.”

“Of course,” said Titus. He stood, and bowed ever so slightly as Calliya disappeared inside the house. He turned to Sullivan. “Would you care to take a stroll in the grounds, Mr. Sullivan? I’m sure I can answer some of your questions, at least.”

They stepped down off the veranda and onto a rough gravel path that led around the homestead. On one side, they skirted small copses of dark brush, while on the other the polished stone of the house stretched skywards. They walked in silence for some ways before Sullivan elected to start asking some of his questions.

“Just who are you and how did you get here?”

Titus laughed.

“The second part of your question is a difficult one to answer indeed. As to the first, that is somewhat simpler.

“My name is Dr. Titus Kendall-Scott. I was born in the borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, in the city of London, in the year 1841. I was raised as one of three children, and read Greek and Latin at Oxford. I travelled extensively as a young man, searching for truths in the legends of the ancient past. From the Great Pyramids at Giza to the lost city at Tihuanaco, I made my life’s work the debunking of myths and fantasy.

Ultimately, my studies led me here, and I have lived here in Eden for almost fifty years now, by my tally.”

“Eden?” queried Sullivan.

“Forgive me. It is my own, private, name by which I refer to this world. As you will no doubt soon discover, Mr. Sullivan, you have found paradise, whether you call it Eden, Elysium or Avalon.”

“Where exactly am I? How far have I travelled from Earth?”

“I have no idea,” answered Titus. “The World of Elysium lies in the Finite Realm, at the very heart of the cosmos. According to the Elysians, at least. Earth lies on the other side of the Rift, many days flight from here.”

“And how did you get here?”

“I regret that I cannot divulge the exact details of how I came to be here. I took an oath many, many years ago, and I intend to honour it.”

“Okay, I understand. But can you at least tell me how long you’ve been here? When did you leave Earth?”

Titus thought for a moment. “Oh, fifty or so years ago. June thirteenth, 1882, in fact. It was a Tuesday, I believe.”

“And you think fifty years have passed since then?” asked Sullivan incredulously.

“Well, I suppose my tally might be off by a little. I had wondered when I first heard that men had learned how to travel amongst the stars, something I had never dreamed of seeing in my lifetime. But I have counted the summers and winters ever since I arrived.”

Sullivan stared straight ahead, unable to process what Titus was telling him.

“Titus, I was born in the year 2167. When the Bogart left Tereshkova, the solar calendar read March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2208. That’s over three hundred years since you were on Earth – you cannot have been here only fifty years.”

Titus looked puzzled for a moment, and then shook his head in disbelief.

“Three hundred years? Is it possible? I must admit, it would not be the strangest thing I have seen since I came to this place. But for so many years to have passed on Earth?” He broke off, mopping his brow with his handkerchief, and sought out a rounded stone bench they had just passed, sitting down heavily.

“I’m sorry,” said Sullivan, sitting down on the bench next to Titus. “How is any of this possible?”

“In my experience of the Elysians, Mr. Sullivan, almost anything is possible.”

“Even being nearly four hundred years old?” asked Sullivan.

Titus laughed. “No, no, my boy. I am quite sure my counting is not that bad. I have seen but fifty winters in this place. There has to be another, rational, explanation.”

Sullivan thought for a moment. “Then the solar year must be longer. For every year that passes here, four or five must pass on the earth.” Sullivan knew at first hand the disorientation that came with living off-world. All the planets had different solar years, as well as confusing calendars. Mars was close to that of Earth’s, as was Venus, but Mercury’s year was just two days long. It made it difficult to remember anyone’s birthday without using the standard solar calendar and a computer.

“But that doesn’t explain me, Mr. Sullivan.”

“Sorry?” Sullivan said, breaking from his mental calculations.

“Are there many Victorian gentlemen living in your century?”

Sullivan shook his head.

“Even by my own reckoning, I am over ninety years old. And I neither feel nor look my age. And by your reckoning, I have lived for nearly three hundred and fifty years. Which I certainly don’t feel.” He stood up again. “I had long suspected something on this world prolonged life. I had thought that it might not affect me, as I am not a native, but it would appear that it has. Even Calliya, in all the fifty years I have known her, has grown from but a babe into the young woman you see today.”

“She’s fifty years old?” queried Sullivan, following Titus as they resumed their circuit of the grounds. “That’s impossible.”

Titus stopped, his head dropping with a sigh.

“Mr. Sullivan, you must forget everything you ever thought you knew, about what is possible and what is impossible. Look around you,” he said, gesturing at the giant sienna spires.

Sullivan stopped for a moment, staring at the delicate stone towers, stretching towards the velvet-spun sky. He had seen incredible things in all the millions of miles of space he had traversed. The mammoth deep space station orbiting Pluto, the most distant of all man’s colonies. The gas converters in the seas of Venus, big enough to swallow the entire atmosphere. But he had never seen the likes of this. Or a technology that resembled all he had witnessed, from the funeral barge to this fantastic palace.

“Have you ever read the bible, Mr Sullivan?”

“Some. When I was at school. Why?”

“Perhaps, in those days of your youth, you may have read some of the Old Testament. It speaks of a God who involved himself in the lives of men. Who would rain down fire and brimstone on any who incurred his wrath. But by the time I was born, there was no sign of God’s hand, except in the deeds of men. I began to look back

further in history, examining the ancient texts of all of the ancient civilisations. What fascinated me most was that there were commonalities between them, far too many to be pure coincidence. These commonalities pointed towards the existence of an advanced culture on Earth, long before we began to create our own history.” Sullivan nodded, listening intently. “These beings have lived among us, Sullivan. On Earth.”

“Calliya mentioned something about that,” Sullivan replied.

“It surprises me that she did. The Elysians are very untrusting when it comes to humans. Why, it was years before they granted me my freedom, and even then only on condition of complete secrecy. I was taken very good care of, mind you. The King was kind enough to allow me to stay here, with the young Calliya and her cousin Gerren.” He turned to Sullivan. “Don’t be surprised if the Elysians treat your words with mistrust, Mr. Sullivan, for they have had a very long time to become set in their ways. Immortality can make one quite intractable, I can tell you.”

“Immortality?” asked Sullivan. Such a thing was pure fantasy. It couldn’t be possible.

“Well, virtually. They don’t seem to age like us. Their physical age would appear to reflect their psychological age. The oldest of them have grown quite weary with the passage of years, and seem quite elderly, but it doesn’t always hold true. Some who appear young are very old indeed, and are amongst the most powerful.”

They walked along in silence as Sullivan was tried to soak up this latest revelation. An immortal race of powerful beings, which lived on a world that Earth, and its Navy, had never detected, but was within a couple of weeks travel. It was simply too much to take in, too much to believe.

“But now, Mr. Sullivan, I must beg your leave to ask some questions of my own,” said Titus, his hands clasped behind his back as he walked.

“I can only try to answer,” replied Sullivan, with a lame grin. “To be honest, I’m having trouble taking in what you’re telling me. These people lived on Earth?”

“Every ancient culture has some mention of them. The epic of Gilgamesh, the book of Genesis, the Mahabharata – they all speak of a race of shining people, who walked the Earth long before the historians of the Middle East began to record the course of their civilisations. And every one of those legends, those prehistoric tales, ends with the tale of a great flood, which wiped out all that mankind had built. After that, very little mention is made of the shining people. Some rumours are recorded, such as the danann of the Celtic myths, or the Atlanteans of Plato’s Timaeus, but as time went on, they faded into history. But these are the very people, Mr. Sullivan. Their presence on

Earth may well have given rise to the deities of the ancient world, like Ra, or Zeus.” He gave a little chortle. “You might say we walk amongst the gods.”

They walked on, Sullivan lost in thought.

“And what of my own ancient culture?” asked Titus. “Do you know what became of the Empire?”

“The Empire?”

“The British Empire. Reigned over by her glorious majesty Queen Victoria. Surely, even in your century something of the mighty empire still stands.”

“All of the old empires were destroyed in the World War.”

“The World War?” asked Titus.

“Look, history’s not really my forte,” replied Sullivan, looking down at his booted feet. “But I think that the twentieth century put paid to all the empires of the old world. They just built bigger and bigger armies, until they had nothing to do but destroy each other. The space age began just after, so we don’t learn much about what happened before.”

It was Titus now who struggled to absorb the information.

“But you still speak English. And your name – are you not an Irishman?”

“Actually, I was born on a naval base in western Siberia. My father was stationed at the weapons yard there. I think he was born on Mars, though.”

“On Mars?” Titus’s voice was nearly a shriek now. “I have missed much, I think. Tell me, how did you come to travel amongst the stars? Are you an explorer?”

Sullivan laughed. “No, I’m no explorer. My father was in the Navy, so as soon as I was old enough, I joined up, eager to follow in my father’s distinguished footsteps. He had been one of the most decorated junior officers in naval history, so great things were expected of me.”

“So it was a naval ship that collided with the funeral barge?”

Sullivan shook his head. “It didn’t take me long to discover that the Navy and I didn’t really have much in common. I joined, thinking I was going to get the chance to protect the innocent, and make the solar system a safe place to live. But all we did was kill. Sometimes the enemy would be trying to kill you, and others would just be running away. But it didn’t make any difference to the Navy. They just kept rolling on.”

“Mercy,” answered Titus. “The Earth has changed beyond anything I would ever recognise. I am sure there is more history to learn than I have learned my entire life.”

“Don’t worry, Titus,” said Sullivan with a smile. “I’m sure you’ll get a chance to catch up. And maybe then we can exchange stories, like how you managed to get here.”

Titus became very serious.

“Please do not ask me that Mr. Sullivan. Perhaps one day it will be otherwise, but for now I have been forbidden to speak of it.”

Sullivan was about to ask why when they rounded one of the flattest, widest roots of the homestead, his eyes catching another structure, nestled close by in the thick forest. It looked as if it had actually grown from the trees, such was its construction. The walls were trunks of rich brown mahogany, topped with a flat roof woven from a tangle of living branches, hiding it amid the thick forest. Calliya was striding towards the building, bedecked in full armour, her sword slung at her side, bejewelled helm upon her head.

“Calliya!” shouted Titus. “What are you doing, my lady?”

He began to walk at the double towards the tree building, with Sullivan matching his stride. As they neared it, Sullivan could make out a pair of large double doors, open at the side of the building. Calliya headed through them, out of sight. Titus almost broke into a run as he rounded the corner.

They moved through the double doors into the building. It was a single expansive room inside, with four paddocks located at each corner. They had high, polished wooden fences, and supporting beams that curled all the way up to the ceiling, where narrow shafts of purple-hued light cut through the living blanket, illuminating the dim stable. Each of the four paddocks held a similar occupant – a huge four-legged creature that resembled a horse, but only in the vaguest fashion. Their hair was longer; their gaits wider and in place of hooves were large flat paws. Both of the wide brown eyes were set into the front of the broad, flat, almost feline head, just ahead of the large pointed furry ears. But the one feature that really grabbed Sullivan’s eye were the extra limbs that the creature had situated halfway along its spine. Two gigantic wings were held folded tightly up off the ground, almost touching at a point over the creature’s shoulder blades.

Calliya was busy fastening a saddle to the nearest creature, one slightly smaller than the others, and covered in rich white fur. She was whispering in the creature’s ear, reaching into her pocket to find it a piece of fruit.

“Don’t try to stop me, Titus.”

“What are you talking about, Calliya? What are you doing?”

“I’m going to pay someone a visit.” She adjusted some straps on the ornate bridle that she was fitting around the creature’s head.

“Who?” asked Sullivan, still staring at the fantastic beasts milling around in their paddocks.

“Prince Tayfen. He is one of the few who would be strong enough to tamper with the barge, and would have the will to do it. He has long sought to end our exile from the

Infinite Realm. And everyone at court knows how closely his house is connected to the Fallen. His own uncle rules many of the Darkling Moons.” She said the last few words with a snort.

“Hush, my child,” said Titus, looking around him nervously. “You know it is not so wise to say such things of the head of one of the Royal Houses.”

Calliya simply snorted again in reply. Titus stepped into the paddock.

“It is even less wise, my child, to confront the Prince of the Royal Citadel about such things. Even the King would be slow to openly challenge Tayfen’s power. The time will come when we will get our chance to speak.” He laid a hand on Calliya’s shoulder. “You know I’m right, Calliya.”

Calliya stopped fixing the bridle and let out a sigh. She stuck out her lower lip.

“I hate it when you’re right, Titus.” She turned back and reluctantly began to undo the straps on the saddle.

“What are these – things?” asked Sullivan.

“These are drakan,” answered Calliya. “They are simply the most wonderful way to travel. This one,” she added, patting the neck of the white drakan, “is called Harl. He has been my steed for my whole life.”

Calliya’s eyes filled with joy as she spoke of the beasts. Titus ambled outside as Sullivan asked if he could take a closer look. He wasn’t used to seeing such large animals up close. Animals were pretty few and far between in the solar system - about the only place you could see them was in old history discs, or theme parks. He ran his fingers through the thick white fur on the drakan’s flanks. It was soft and luxurious, and the drakan purred as he stroked it.

Titus called to them from outside the stables.

“Calliya! Mr. Sullivan! I think you might prepare yourselves.”

They ran out to see Titus gesturing towards a large shape approaching through the evening sky. Gigantic wings beat a slow rhythm as the flying beast drew closer.

“I think we have a visitor,” said Titus.



## Chapter Eight

The gigantic drakan reared up in mid-air as it approached, beating its giant wings to soak up the excess velocity as it descended towards the clearing where the three figures waited. Sullivan could feel the air propelled by the huge wings on his face as the creature beat them one final time, before gliding the last few metres to the ground. The huge claws of the drakan carved furrows from the earth as its bulk hit the ground. A figure sat nestled in an ornate saddle atop the drakan, clad in shining silver armour, the polished overlapping plates glistening in the evening sun. The bejewelled helm, much like the one that Calliya was wearing, bore a thick white plume that rose from the elaborate crest. Sullivan could make out no features of the visitor as he stared at the helm, as it covered most of their face, but he could see the rich dark curls that flowed from beneath.

The drakan let out a roar as it ground to a halt, flicking its head against the reins and splaying its paws to spread its weight. The figure jumped down from the saddle and walked towards them, removing the helm. The drakan's rider was another Elysian woman, but older than Calliya. She was tall and graceful, and her face had a harsh beauty about it. Narrow set dark eyes looked out from either side of a prominent nose, while beneath them a wide mouth curled into a half-scowl.

"Bellanis!" cried Titus. "What a pleasant surprise!"

"Dr. Kendall-Scott. I should have known I'd find you here," replied Bellanis, in perfect English, her voice flat and cutting. She looked pointedly at Calliya's armour. "Going somewhere, Calliya?" she asked, in her own tongue this time.

Calliya removed her helm and walked towards Bellanis, answering her in the language of the Elysians. As they spoke, Titus whispered a rough translation into Sullivan's ear.

"No, Bellanis, I have just returned."

"I had heard. How dare you cross the Rift? Your oath as a Fleet Master expressly forbids it. His majesty will not be pleased," Bellanis sneered.

“He will be even less pleased when he hears what I have to tell him,” retorted Calliya.

Bellanis squinted slightly at that, her gaze falling upon Sullivan, who stood behind Calliya, Titus whispering in his ear. The Elysian Princess regarded the Earthman.

“So, it’s true!” She moved past Calliya, eyeing Sullivan closely before speaking in her own language again. “I cannot believe that you would dare bring a human to Elysium, Calliya – it has been forbidden for a thousand generations. The King will not be pleased. You know he has no love for mankind.”

“But the King is wise, and I have every faith in his judgement. It is the feelings of others in the court that concern me,” replied Calliya.

Bellanis shot her a withering stare, before poking Sullivan in the chest with an armoured finger.

“And you, human. What have you got to say for yourself?” Her voice was cold and icy.

“Jack Sullivan, at your service.” Sullivan stuck out his hand, but Bellanis just stared down at it.

“It talks,” she said, in English, for Sullivan’s benefit. She looked him up and down, and then turned back to Calliya, speaking in the Elysian tongue again.

“I have to admit, Calliya, that your rashness has surprised even me this time. First you cross the Rift without permission. Then you bring back a human, against our most sacred commandment. And now the King wonders why you have not brought your prisoner to the Royal City.”

“He does? Is that why you’re here?” Calliya answered, turning back towards the homestead. She removed her bejewelled helm, shaking out her golden locks as she walked.

“His majesty officially requests your presence, Calliya,” called Bellanis. “And that of the human, too. I was sent to bring you to him with all possible haste.”

“But it has grown late,” interrupted Titus. “We cannot make the journey to the Royal City before nightfall. Stay with us tonight, Bellanis, and we will make the journey first thing in the morning.” The portly Victorian’s voice had taken on a placating tone.

Bellanis frowned and watched Calliya as she walked idly back towards the delicate spires of the homestead.

“That girl’s impudence will cost her, Titus. She must bide her tongue before the Royal Court,” said Bellanis, her expression softening. “But I am weary from my journey. And the hour does grow very late. Perhaps it is a good idea to rest for the night.”

She followed Calliya towards the homestead, calling after her in the Elysian tongue.

Titus grabbed the reins of Bellanis's drakan and led it inside the stables. There was an empty paddock at the end of the stable, and Sullivan opened the gate so that Titus could lead the huge winged creature inside. Together they loosened the straps on the its bridle and saddle, Titus leading Sullivan by example.

"So who is this Bellanis, anyway?" asked Sullivan.

"She is the only daughter of the King. And thus one of his most trusted advisors. It would do us the world of good to count her as an ally," replied Titus.

"She didn't seem to like me much."

"Perhaps not. Certainly, like many of the Elysians, she has no love for our kind, but she is a fair woman. She may even help our case." Titus sighed as he hung the saddle on its ornately carved peg. "But even she will not dare speak out against Tayfen. The Prince of the Royal City has far too many friends in the court."

"But isn't she the King's daughter?"

"The monarchy here is different to that of Queen Victoria's. There is no right of accession as such. Here, the crown goes to whoever wields the most power. Of course, the near immortality of the King changes things as well. He has reigned for centuries, with endless usurpers lingering for a chance at power that never comes. It makes the politics of the court somewhat – thorny."

Sullivan pulled the bridle from the large squat head of the drakan as it looked back at him with deep brown eyes. He thought he could hear it purring gently, a low rumble emanating from the drakan's torso.

"And Prince Tayfen," continued Titus, "has the strongest claim to the throne. He heads one of the oldest and most powerful of all Elysian Noble houses, and has waited a long time for his chance."

They finished stowing the tackle and left the stable, making their way across the deep lush grass towards the homestead. As they neared the entrance, Titus stopped Sullivan.

"Do try to remember, Mr. Sullivan, that Bellanis may not be entirely open to your version of events. Do try and watch what you say around her."

Sullivan nodded in understanding

"I'll see if I can remember my navy manners," he replied with a grin.

A little while later, in one of the homestead's grandest chambers, the uneasy dinner party sat around an enormous circular table. It was carved from smooth grey stone, and

as soon as they sat down various constructs milled around, covering it with all manner of food. Great urns of steaming broth were flanked by platters bearing cuts of roast flesh; there were baskets of bread, skewers of delicate morsels, and an aroma rising from the food that was enough to make Sullivan's mouth water.

He sat facing Calliya, with Titus to his left and Bellanis to his right. The two women had changed their clothes, swapping their polished armour for long flowing dresses. Calliya was clad in a heavy gown of deepest emerald, echoing the verdant forests that surrounded her homestead. Bellanis, on the other hand, wore a high-necked dress of purest white, which formed a sharp contrast with the raven curls that fell around her head, softening the harsh lines of her face.

The Elysian Princess helped herself to some of the thick broth. Sullivan had discovered from Titus that it was called shaeshian, and was made from the meat of a small animal that the constructs trapped in the surrounding forests. When Bellanis had filled her bowl, Sullivan reached out and greedily filled his own.

Calliya took some of the skewers of meat for herself, soaking up the succulent juices with a large chunk of soft bread, while Bellanis spoke to her in the language of the Elysians. Titus was too far away to whisper a translation in his ear, so Sullivan had to watch their faces for some clue as to what they were talking about. The language flowed musically, the cadence of their voices rising and falling. It was difficult to distinguish individual words, let alone decipher any of them.

"I could not help but see some damage to the Kelison as I approached. Just what have you been up to?" asked Bellanis. Her eyes narrowed as she sipped her broth.

"Two days from the Rift, we ran into a little trouble," answered Calliya.

Bellanis raised one eyebrow. "Trouble?"

"We were set upon by a host of darklings. The Nightwing breached the Kelison on the aft quarter and they came through the seerephon like a plague."

Bellanis stopped eating, laying her spoon delicately on the table.

"A host of darklings? Between Elysium and the Rift?"

Calliya nodded in reply.

"The Fallen have grown bold, Calliya. Time was, none of the Darkling Lords would dare stray so close to Elysium. They would fear the hand of the King." Bellanis paused for a moment before resuming her meal. "Have you any idea which of the Fallen spawned them? Or why they sought out the Kelison?"

"No," answered Calliya. "The alpha was destroyed, and bore no markings. And I was forced to destroy the Nightwing before I could discover who had sent them."

"Destroyed? How?"

Calliya pointed at Sullivan across the table. Bellanis had trouble accepting this.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Calliya. No human could destroy an alpha.”

Calliya smiled. “He’s unlike any human I have ever heard about.” She stopped, staring down at her food. “I found him on the funeral barge of my cousin, Bellanis.”

“That’s impossible,” hissed Bellanis. “How could he have gotten aboard?”

“I have seen it with my own eyes. They can travel the stars, in ships of steel and glass.”

Bellanis turned to Titus, throwing him a sarcastic look, speaking to him in English. “And you, Titus. Do you believe that humans travel the stars?” She looked at Sullivan. “Or is it an agent of the Fallen, snatched from the darkness of the Fold and sent to meddle in our affairs? Perhaps that is how he came to be aboard the barge.”

“I fear that the future may hold many things that are difficult for us to believe, Bellanis,” answered Titus.

“Believe it or not, I am a human,” quipped Sullivan. “And I do travel the stars,” he added, waving his hand in the air. He had listening to Calliya and Bellanis, understanding nothing, but now he had an idea of what they had been talking about.

“And it talks, too!” retorted Bellanis in mock surprise.

“Yeah, I can talk. English, anyway. And I’m no agent of the Fallen, whoever they are.”

Titus raised his hands. “Friends, friends!” he cried. “Let us not speak so harshly over such a fine meal.” The portly Victorian looked imploringly at his companions.

“Mr. Sullivan,” he continued, “is indeed from Earth. That much I can vouch for myself. And I sincerely doubt he is an agent of the Darkling Lords. An English gentleman of any standing would surely be able to spot such a spy in our midst. And, he has also aided Calliya in her safe return. For that, I shall be eternally grateful.” He stood, raising his glass.

“To Captain Jack Sullivan, master of the Bogart.”

Calliya stood quickly, but Bellanis was much slower to stand, grudgingly raising her goblet.

“Your customs still confound me, Titus. Even after all these years.”

Sullivan rose last. As he raised his own goblet, he decided to add his own toast.

“And to Calliya, for rescuing me from – certain death.” He smiled, trying to lighten his morbid comments.

The four diners drank deeply from their glasses, and then took their seats once more. The constructs continued to mill about, refilling a plate here or a goblet there.

They filled their bellies with the rich fare, washing it down with the glorious wine and, for a time, they ate in silence.

“So, Mr. Sullivan,” said Bellanis, as she pushed her bowl back from her. “What is your tale? How did you come to travel the stars, and trespass where you should not? Do many men explore the Infinite Realm?”

“Not much exploring left to be done,” replied Sullivan. “My father was a navy man so I was raised on one base after another. I always dreamed of following in my father’s footsteps, so as soon as I was old enough, I signed up.”

“A familiar tale, even in my day,” added Titus.

Sullivan nodded. “Yeah, and I’m sure it worked out just as well for them as it did for me.” When his companions returned only blank stares, he continued. “Let’s just say that the navy didn’t exactly work out for me. When I joined up, I thought I’d have the chance to see the Solar System, to serve Earth and make a difference. But things didn’t work out quite as I had planned.” He let out a wry smile.

“What do you mean?” asked Calliya.

“Let’s just say that I thought we were supposed to be the good guys. Trouble was, the other guys always thought they were the good guys too.”

“So the vessel you travelled on was not a navy vessel?” asked Calliya.

Sullivan laughed. “That hunk of junk? No, the Bogart was a cargo ship. Long haul, moving machine parts, supplies. She’s nothing like a naval frigate.”

“What do you mean?” asked Bellanis. Her attention had peaked when Sullivan had begun to speak of his past, and his career in the navy.

“The Bogart carried four crew, and maybe two kilotons of cargo, depending on the journey’s length. And it would still take her a month to make the Earth-Mars run. A naval frigate, she can be up to a thousand metres in length. She can carry two hundred crew, and maybe another few hundred marines. And she’ll be fast, too. Earth to Mars in a week.”

Bellanis looked puzzled for a moment, and then turned to Calliya for a translation. Calliya replied quickly in her own language. Bellanis threw her head back and laughed.

“I have never heard such a story! A vessel that can carry hundreds of men? Such a thing is impossible.”

“Perhaps, Bellanis,” countered Calliya, “if you had seen Sullivan’s vessel for yourself you would not dismiss his tale so quickly.”

“Perhaps. But I am still more interested in why a host of darklings would attack the Kelison. The Fallen know well they are forbidden from venturing so close to the

Rift. It is many a year since they have troubled us so close to home. And who would send them?" She looked across at Sullivan. "Maybe they were looking for something."

"That's ridiculous. What would the Fallen want with Sullivan? And how would they have known he was there? Unless someone told them?"

"Come now, Calliya," said Titus. "We cannot possibly speculate on motives the Fallen might have had for attacking the Kelison. It may just have been coincidence. Random raids are rare, but they do occur."

Calliya bit her lip, staring at Bellanis, who returned her gaze from steely dark eyes. Titus continued to speak, trying to ignore the tension.

"I am sure there will be time enough to discuss all this when we arrive at court tomorrow. Tell us, Bellanis, how fares your father the King? It is some months since I visited the Royal City."

Bellanis stared a few moments longer at Calliya, before taking her goblet and turning to Titus.

"His majesty is very well, thank you Titus. Of course, Prince Tayfen still harangues him endlessly, but I think my father has made his mind up."

"Tayfen still pushes for re-emergence?" asked Calliya, her voice suddenly much softer.

"My cousin will never cease in his quest for the golden years. He will always believe that the key to the future of the Elysians lies in the reclamation of our dominion. And who knows? Perhaps he is right. And with each passing year, his influence in the court grows stronger. More and more, people are listening to what he has to say."

"And who knows to what lengths he might go to – to convince those who do not see things his way? Perhaps he is willing to match his words with action," said Calliya.

Bellanis shot Calliya a withering stare.

"You would do well to watch your tongue, child. That is the Prince of the Royal City you speak of. A mere Fleet Master should know her place."

Calliya looked visibly angered at the slur, but kept her silence. When Bellanis didn't relent, Calliya tried to make up for her digression.

"Forgive me, Bellanis. I meant no disrespect. I was simply trying to –"

"I know exactly what you were trying to say," snapped Bellanis. "All of the court is aware of your views. And this latest – adventure – will do nothing to improve your standing."

The Princess stood up, turning to first Titus and then Sullivan. "I find I am tired, and desire to rest for the evening."

As she turned, another diminutive construct appeared to lead her to her room. She strode away, shouting over her shoulder.

“We fly at dawn for the Royal City!”

The three remaining diners picked at morsels that sat on their plates.

“That could have gone worse,” said Sullivan. Titus and Calliya began to laugh. “She’s not very friendly, is she?” he added.

“No,” replied Titus, “but I fear she may be one of the friendliest faces we see tomorrow.”

Calliya stopped laughing, but still bore a broad smile.

“Cren will hear us, Titus. I’m sure of it.”

“I hope so, my lady,” Titus replied with a sigh. “I hope so.”

They sat for a time, picking at the remains of the feast on the table, before Titus summoned some constructs. When they arrived, Titus bade them goodnight.

“When you are ready, Mr. Sullivan, one of our little friends will lead you to your room. Do try and get some rest. Tomorrow will be a very tiring day.”

With that, Titus turned and left the dining room. Sullivan and Calliya were left to sip the last from their cups. It was the same glorious wine that he had drunk on board the Kelison, and it was just as beguiling now as it had been then. He let the nectar slip down the back of his tongue, savouring the flavour.

“What’s going on, Calliya?” asked Sullivan.

Calliya looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“Why were you on the other side of the Rift? What possessed you to go after the funeral barge of your cousin? You couldn’t possibly have known what was happening.” Sullivan swirled the liquid in his crystal goblet.

Calliya said nothing for a minute, but bit her lip as she thought.

“Some of our kind are so old, Sullivan, and have seen the dawn of so many days, that their perception of time becomes somewhat elastic.” When Sullivan looked utterly confused, she tried to explain. “They have a way of seeing things that have not yet come to pass.”

“And one of them told you to go after the barge of your cousin?” he asked.

“Not in so many words,” replied Calliya. “He simply said that I should find out what had befallen the funeral barge. That he had a feeling that something was wrong. And that I should prepare myself.”

“Prepare yourself?” queried Sullivan.



“For a difficult test. I suppose he was speaking of the Nightwing, but there’s no way to be sure. Lennat can be notoriously vague. I may yet have to face the test that he spoke of.”

Sullivan said nothing at this, but drained his goblet. A construct emerged from nowhere to refill it, but Sullivan used his hand to cover it.

“No thanks, little guy. I have a big day tomorrow.”

The construct didn’t appear to understand him. It tried to pour more wine from a large carafe, but spilled it when Sullivan began to block its movements. Calliya laughed.

“They don’t speak English, Mr. Sullivan.”

“Call me Jack, please,” said Sullivan, pushing himself away from the table to avoid the sloshing carafe.

Calliya closed her eyes for a moment and the construct withdrew. Another, smaller one appeared in the doorway.

“This one will lead you to your room, Jack,” said Calliya with another smile.

The Earthman got up and followed the construct out of the dining room. Calliya sat for another while, replaying the events of the preceding days. Her eyes wandered around the elaborate decorations adorning the walls from the ceremonial armour, to the tapestries that told the tales of days long past. They depicted shining figures, standing atop towers and pyramids, memories of when her kind walked in the Infinite Realm, and ruled mankind like gods. She stared at them, wondering how it would have been if she had lived during the golden years, and had a hand to play in the affairs of men. Perhaps now she would get her chance after all.

## Chapter Nine

Early the next morning, shortly before the Elysian sun had crept above the distant horizon, Sullivan was awoken by a construct knocking loudly on the heavy wooden door of his bedroom. He had spent the night in very luxurious surroundings, in a room that contained a large comfortable bed, bureau, and sizeable wardrobe, all carved from the same dark wood that appeared throughout Calliya's homestead.

The construct entered unbidden, closing the door behind it, before making its way to the heavy curtains that ran the length of one side of the room. They had been closed when Sullivan had gone to bed the night before, and for some reason he had never even checked behind them. Perhaps it had been the amount he had drunk at dinner, but he had felt completely at ease, and he couldn't recall having slept so deeply for a very long time.

For the first few moments, just as he opened his eyes, he had forgotten where he was and all that had happened to him. There were a blissful few seconds of ignorance before the reality of his situation dawned on him. He sat bolt upright, just as the curtains were pulled apart by the ebony construct, the violet sunlight filling the room. The construct scuttled out the way it had come in, leaving Sullivan to prepare for the journey to meet his fate.

Someone, or something, had left fresh clothes for him, folded on top of the bureau. There was a formal looking shirt, collarless and embroidered with gold thread at the cuffs, and fastened by way of a row of shining golden buttons. He donned the shirt and the tight black trousers, which were fashioned from the hide of some animal, and had been tanned and finished to a dull sheen. After he put on his boots, Sullivan picked up his belt and holster from the pile of discarded clothes by the side of his bed. He checked the charge and the solid supply chamber on the field loader.

He had noticed Bellanis staring at the pistol over dinner yesterday, but she didn't seem to recognise what it was. The field loader's power cell was still almost two-thirds full, and the darkling talon still had another seven slugs to yield, but as an afterthought, he checked the tiny display on the side of the grip. The display usually told the pistol's

user the exact composition of the solid supply, but at the moment, it simply bore a red error message, signalling that the pistol's sensors could not identify the metal that the slugs were made from.

Strange, thought Sullivan. The pistol's spectrographic sensors were capable of distinguishing all known metals, and the basic elements of the universe shouldn't be any different, no matter how far he travelled. He shrugged and belted the holster to his hip. As long as it still had the power to destroy armoured creatures like the alpha, he didn't care what metal was loaded. He briefly thought about leaving the pistol behind. Calliya had failed to mention it at dinner the night before, and he couldn't be sure there wasn't a good reason for it. He was sure Titus would know what a pistol was, but he would never have seen anything like the field-loader, and Sullivan hadn't seen anything like a firearm since his arrival.

He finished dressing and left the room to make his way downstairs. He had been quartered in one of the high towers, and the ebony construct was waiting to guide him down the smooth stone stairs to the ground floor of the house. He made his way round to the stables, where his three companions were already waiting for him.

Titus and Bellanis had each saddled one of the drakans, Bellanis already astride the huge black one that she had arrived on the day before, and Titus securing the bridle on another, called Pegasus, with a long grey coat. Calliya was still fitting a large tandem saddle to her own, slightly smaller white drakan. The two women were dressed in full armour, unlike Titus, who was dressed in a very sedate three-piece suit. All three wore long heavy flying cloaks.

"So glad you could join us," snapped Bellanis, her drakan flicking its wide head beneath her.

"Good morning to you too," replied Sullivan. He ignored the pointed stare of Bellanis and joined Calliya as she made the final adjustments to the tandem saddle.

"You will ride behind me, Jack. Drakans are not difficult beasts to master, but today is hardly the time for riding lessons."

"No problem," answered Sullivan, eyeing the huge creature warily.

Calliya helped Sullivan mount the saddle by way of a series of stirrups, guiding him into the hindmost seat of the huge saddle. It was raised above the level of the forward seat, affording him a very good view. The drakan moved beneath him, its great flanks rising and falling gently with every breath, while either side of him, gigantic wings were folded tight in, enclosing him almost completely. The skin of the wings was translucent, and the forward edge covered with a very fine fur.

Calliya climbed up into the seat in front of him. She craned around and pointed at the straps of a harness that emerged from beneath Sullivan's seat.

"You might want to fasten your harness. We wouldn't want you falling out of your seat," she said, letting out a little smile.

"No," cried Bellanis from the back of her own drakan. "That wouldn't do at all!"

"Come now, ladies, let us not squabble," clucked Titus. "We have quite a distance to travel today."

Bellanis turned her drakan away from the stable and kicked its flanks. The beast bounded forward into a gallop, its wings extending slowly out from its sides. Once they were fully unfurled, the creature sprang into the air, beating them quickly to lift it upwards. Titus moved his large grey drakan around to follow, cajoling and urging it forward, before the creature sprang into the air with effortless grace.

Calliya looked over her shoulder one more time, pulling the drakan's head round to follow the others.

"You ready, Mr. Sullivan?"

"I told you – call me Jack!" cried Sullivan, gripping the sides of the saddle as the white drakan bounded forward. He was pressed down hard into the saddle as the drakan leapt from the ground, the huge wings stretching out to catch the air, propelling the beast and its two riders smoothly into the air.

Sullivan's stomach sank as the drakan soared upwards, but as they climbed he risked a look backwards over his shoulder. The stone spires of Calliya's magnificent homestead were shrinking quickly, blending with the thick forest that surrounded them. They climbed to what Sullivan guessed had to be about a thousand metres, and then the drakan levelled out, picking up speed.

Sullivan looked forward. They were following their companions from a distance, with Bellanis leading the way. Calliya drove her heels against the flanks of the beast, urging the drakan to close the gap.

"This is incredible!" shouted Sullivan, the wind whipping at his words.

Calliya looked over her shoulder, beaming broadly.

As they flew, Calliya explained about the drakans. They were native to a world far across the Finite Realm, but there had been a time when they also travelled the skies of Earth, before the time of the Exodus. When the Elysians left, they brought the last of Earth's drakans back through the Rift with them. They had always been the traditional method of transportation for her people. The one they were riding upon was called Harl, and Calliya had raised it from a pup.

Sullivan did his best to listen through the whistling wind, though he found his attention wandering as he surveyed the stunning landscape that surrounded him. To the north, he could see a vast, dark mountain range rising up out of the lush pastures that skirted their feet, while far off to the south he thought he could make out the blue line of the sea. As they hurtled west, he marvelled at the glorious sky, where mauve highlights played on the edges of voluminous white clouds, while underneath, grassy plains alternated with patches of thick forest.

Onwards they flew, for much of the day. After a few hours, when the wind had chilled him almost to the bone, they stopped for a break. The drakans rested, drinking deeply from a lake they had spied from the air, as Titus distributed some provisions he had thought to secure from the kitchen before they had left.

Sullivan munched hungrily on some kind of sweetbread and drank from a clay jug that Titus handed him. It was not wine, but some kind of earthy brew; one that both warmed his stomach and slaked his thirst. They did not tarry for long, but instead resumed their journey with barely a word of conversation. The closer they drew to the Royal City, the more Sullivan thought he could sense the tension rise amongst his companions.

All through the sunny afternoon they soared above Elysium before the forests below gave way to rolling hills and grassland. Here and there, Sullivan could see a homestead, much like Calliya's, although some were even larger and more majestic than hers. For every kilometre they travelled, the structures became more commonplace. And still they flew on. Just as he was thinking the journey was endless, Sullivan caught his first glimpse of the Royal City.

It was not a large city, at least not by human standards. In his many years travelling the solar system, he had seen cities of gargantuan proportions. The Eastern American Urban Zone was nearly a thousand miles in diameter - a thousand miles of slums, ghettos and barrios. You could see the black stain on the Earth from Mars. But as he stared at the fast approaching Royal City, he realised he had never seen anything so beautiful, or elegant, anywhere in the Solar System.

It lay in the centre of a vast plain, a circle of blue stone dominating the rolling grasslands, a vast sheer wall, topped with a series of impossibly high, narrow watchtowers. Around the top of each of the towers ran a wide balcony, but otherwise the city wall was featureless, as if it had been hewn from a single stone. As they drew closer, Sullivan was able to see over the wall and into the city beyond. Wide cobbled avenues, lined with trees and watercourses, stretched back and forth across the city, winding their way between buildings of every shape and size. Tiny figures bustled about

their business, collecting in the plazas, leaping out of the way of the odd drakan as it loped past. But Sullivan's eye was quickly drawn to the centre of the city.

There stood an enormous structure, one that dwarfed every other building in sight. It was roughly hemispherical in shape, and rose out of the ground like a huge cut gemstone, the facets glinting in the setting sun, set like any other jewel amidst a ring of stone walls and towers. The crystal dome was transparent, but the effect of the refraction was to make it impossible to see inside the building.

Up ahead, Bellanis banked her drakan into a slow descent. Titus and Calliya followed closely behind, as Sullivan continued to survey the city from the air. As they descended, he could better make out the Elysians going about their business in the streets below. Everything he could see appeared to be made from the same bluish stone, from the smallest cobble to the highest spire.

The drakans swooped low towards the jewel at the heart of the city, which Sullivan guessed to be the royal palace. The sunlight shone through the dome as they approached it, blazing through the faceted surface, striking the riders like a hundred suns setting behind the palace.

They landed their steeds in a wide-open area in front of the stone structure that surrounded the palatial dome. An elaborate fountain sat in the centre of the plaza, with snaking shapes rising out of the water, each one propelling a foamy jet high into the air. Sullivan felt the impact all through his body as Harl landed with a crash on the stone surface. Calliya helped him dismount the beast, his legs numb from the long flight, and he rubbed his thighs vigorously, trying to restore the circulation.

They stood before the principal entrance of the royal palace, a set of palatial glass steps that led to a cavernous doorway. As Bellanis and Titus dismounted their drakan, an entourage arrived to greet them. At its head walked an enormous, corpulent figure, dressed in dark blue robes; he was surrounded by a variety of constructs, each one fashioned from a different material, and of a different shape. Some were sandy in colour, and had four legs, while others appeared almost wooden, and walked upon two legs. They bustled around the Elysian as he waddled towards them.

"Cren!" cried Calliya in delight, rushing forward to embrace him. He smiled warmly and returned the embrace, speaking softly in the language of the Elysians.

"It is good to see you, Calliya. Although I wish the circumstances could be different." He looked over her shoulder at Sullivan. "I would not have believed it possible, not without seeing it with my own eyes."

Calliya broke from the embrace and stared at Cren. "What do you mean?"

"A human. And a spacefaring human, no less. I had never believed those stories."

“Well, I’m afraid it’s true,” interrupted Titus, shaking Cren’s hand warmly. “Strange times are upon us I fear, my old friend.”

Bellanis had stayed mounted on her drakan.

“I must return to my city residence,” she called to Cren. “I will join you at court presently.” She wheeled her drakan around and it loped off along the blue stone streets, scattering Elysians as she did, its wings tucked in tightly either side of its rider.

Cren turned to Calliya.

“The King is angry with you indeed,” he scolded. “Flying off through the Rift with scarcely a word to anyone. What were you thinking? You know it’s forbidden to cross the Rift without his majesty’s permission.”

“I was warned not to tell anyone, but I fear I didn’t manage to keep it secret enough,” answered Calliya. “I am sure one of the Fallen knew of my mission.”

At this, Cren’s eyes narrowed.

“How can you be so sure?” he asked.

“We were attacked by a host of darklings as we returned from the Rift. Were it not for Sullivan’s help, the Kelison would surely have been corrupted.”

Cren looked aghast.

“Darklings? Who sent them?”

“We can’t be sure. When Sullivan destroyed the alpha, there was too little left to be identified.”

Cren raised an eyebrow in surprise when he heard of the destruction of the alpha, looking at Sullivan.

“Mr. Sullivan, I presume?” he asked, in perfect English.

Cren’s question snapped Sullivan out of his reverie. He had not understood a word of what Calliya and Cren had said; instead he had allowed his attention to wander, gazing at the wondrous sights of the royal palace.

Its construction was like nothing that Sullivan had ever seen. The palace really did appear to have been fashioned from a gigantic jewel. As he scaled the glass steps and crossed the threshold, he could see sunlight streaming through dozens of facets. The centre of the jewel was hollowed out, forming a gigantic hall, while corridors ran off either side of the entrance, snaking their way around the circumference of the crystal dome.

“Does he speak?” whispered Cren, leaning towards Titus, who laughed in reply.

“He does talk, but I fear the sight of the Palace of a Thousand Suns has had something of an effect on him.”

“I had forgotten,” replied Cren. “It is many years since fresh eyes have looked upon the house of our glorious King. Fifty, I would guess. And if I remember correctly, Titus, you were struck almost as dumb as our new friend here. I did not think another human would ever marvel at it again.”

Titus chortled. As they moved inside the first entrance hall, Calliya asked Cren what had been going on in court that morning. When Cren replied, he spoke in English, assuming that although Sullivan said little, he would still have enough sense to listen carefully.

“It has all been quite exciting, for a change. Many of the Fleet Masters sensed the Kelison crossing the Rift, and by the time the news arrived that you had returned carrying a human, the entire court was on the verge of exploding. There was talk of despatching the fleet, of refusing to let you return home, and there were even rumours that the Kelison had been taken captive by bands of marauding humans, escaped from The Fold.

“But the King would hear none of it. He was determined that we should wait for your return, and find out what really had taken place. But that became even more difficult when Tayfen arrived at the Palace.”

“Has he been here long?” asked Calliya.

“He has been addressing the court since early this morning. His usual diatribe, of course.” Cren pulled in his chin, trying to impersonate Tayfen. “Another golden age is upon us! Now is the time to reclaim our birthright! He is full of nothing but an endless supply of hot air.” His brow furrowed as he considered the Prince of the Royal City.

“I wish that were true,” said Calliya, without a hint of humour in her voice.

The party stopped for a moment, as Cren turned to Calliya.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

“Someone tampered with the funeral barge of Gerren. It did not travel into the Fires of Helios. Instead it intercepted the vessel of a human. And then somehow a host of darklings seemed to find us all too easily, in the space between here and the Rift.”

Cren looked every bit as serious now. “Are you suggesting that Prince Tayfen had something to do with it?”

Titus broke in. “We’re not suggesting anything, old friend. But there are many questions that remain unanswered.”

Sullivan looked around him at the entrance hall. It was like standing inside a giant crystal goblet, nestling inside the giant gemstone heart of the palace. He could see shapes moving behind the glass facets, but it was impossible to tell where exactly he was seeing. For every few steps taken, the shapes and colours beyond the walls would shift



and change. The party made their way across the glass floor, passing huge twisting crystal corridors that spiralled gently downwards, carrying them into the heart of the structure that lay a little below ground level. After Sullivan had completely lost any sense of which way they had come, Cren stopped before two obsidian doors set into the crystal wall. There were an elaborate series of deep carvings gouged into them, a whole array of crests arranged around the central motif, surrounded by the flowing Elysian script. Cren raised his hand, signalling them to stop.

“Mr. Sullivan, you and the others must wait here until I introduce you.”

With that, he pushed open the two doors and moved inside, closing them behind them.

Sullivan looked nervously at Titus and Calliya. Despite all of his life’s experiences, he had never encountered anything like this. This didn’t feel like the court-martial he remembered all too well. They had held that in a sterile, grey room. Nothing could have prepared him for this. For the fifth time in as many days, Sullivan felt alone and confused. Titus must have seen something of this on his face, for he spoke some reassuring words.

“Don’t worry, my boy. The King will give you a fair hearing.”

Calliya smiled. “Of all our kind, he is the wisest.”

Sullivan just nodded. His stomach was churning, and he could feel a cold sweat beading on his forehead. He wished he could just get it over with. These were more familiar sensations, and they brought with them the memory of standing, waiting for judgement, before the Naval Tribunal. He could only hope that what he was about to undergo had a better conclusion than that had done.

Cren reappeared, opening the double doors inward. He looked at the three of them in turn, and then turned back to face the Great Hall. Sullivan could only get a vague idea of what awaited him, shielding his eyes against the refracted sunlight that squeezed around the substantial figure of Cren. The portly Elysian turned his back on them and addressed the court as Calliya made her way in.

“May I present,” Cren cried, using the tongue of the Elysians once more. “The Lady Calliya, Fleet Master of the seerephon Kelison, Princess of the House of Gerren.”

Titus waited a moment, and then squeezed Sullivan on the upper arm.

“See you inside,” he said quietly, winking behind his gold-rimmed glasses, and moving inside the Great Hall.

“And may I also present, for the enjoyment of the Royal Presence, the eternal friend of Elysium, the honourable Dr. Titus Kendall-Scott, of Earth,” cried Cren. Sullivan waited for a few moments before walking through the double doors, resting his

hand on the butt of his pistol for reassurance. Any Navy man would feel naked without his sidearm.

He found himself at the top of a flight of glass steps. Cren stood to one side at first, but then closed the doors behind Sullivan and placed a hand on his shoulder. The level of noise in the Great Hall had dropped the second Sullivan had set foot through the door. From outside, he had heard the steady murmur of the assembled court, but now, as he looked down on the large circular space, it was quiet enough to hear a pin drop. Cren spoke again in the unfamiliar tongue, but Sullivan recognised his own name.

“And last, by the request of His Royal Majesty, the Earthman Sullivan.”

Cren walked him gently down the glass steps as the crowd began to part, the assembled Elysian nobility withdrawing towards the edges of the Great Hall. Sullivan let his eyes wander around the sun-filled chamber. Light seemed to penetrate the hall from every angle. He could only guess at the number of facets, perhaps somewhere near a hundred, but he had no idea what trickery was employed so that he could see the sun through practically every one of them. It was like standing in the centre of an enormous diamond. The floor, like the steps, was of black glass, and the centre of it was sunken, forming a shallow pit that could be viewed from the tiers that ran around the edge of the hall. Looking around the chamber, he could see the crowd withdrawing up onto the sides of the room, forming into distinct groups. Many of them wore armour like Calliya and Bellanis, with scabbards slung heavily at their sides, while others wore robes of a dazzling array of colours and designs. Above each group of Elysians stood a standard of differing design, which Sullivan could only take to represent the ruling families of Elysium.

Directly opposite from the glass steps, on the tier on the other side of the hall, sat the raised dais that held the throne of the King. Sullivan could clearly see the Elysian monarch upon the throne as he neared the open area at the bottom of the steps. He wore robes of glimmering silver, and where they fell away from his body, Sullivan could see he was clad in close-fitting armour underneath. He wore no crown, but long straight white hair, parted in the middle, framing a face that seemed to wear a thousand years. The King looked up as Sullivan reached the sunken circular pit of the Great Hall. It was almost completely silent, save for the very faintest of murmurs echoing around the assembled nobility.

To Sullivan’s right, a figure emerged from the crowd. He was tall and clad in glistening blue armour, the colour of midnight, with long straight ebony hair that fell around his shoulders. He shouted something in Elysian, causing uproar amongst the court. Sullivan looked around frantically for Calliya or Titus.

“How dare,” cried Tayfen, for it was he that Sullivan saw come to the front, “this creature come before this court free and unfettered? Have we lost our minds?” When no definite answer came from the crowd, he continued. “Who knows what evil the Fallen have culled from the Fold? Humans have always been easily swayed by our darkling kin. Even in this, or most sedate of ages, do we feel so safe that we would let an agent of darkness into his Royal Presence, with no consideration for his safety?”

Various heads nodded around the Great Hall. At first, Sullivan still couldn’t make out his friends, but then he saw them. They were working their way around the tier at the edge of the pit, making for the Royal Dais. At his side, Cren spoke up, and Sullivan could only hope it might be in his defence.

“Tayfen! Hold your tongue! Have you grown so mistrustful that you would doubt the word of a man who has come here of his own free will?”

“It is precisely because of his willingness to come here that I mistrust him,” snapped Tayfen, his black eyes staring out from his sharply angular face. “What better way to win the trust of the court than to come with open arms? And if his intentions are so pure, than what is that he wears at his side? You or I would carry a sword there, Cren, but what is that that he bears? Some sort of primitive weapon?”

Cren looked around to Sullivan. He glanced down at the holstered service pistol.

“Perhaps you should give that to me,” he whispered to Sullivan in English. “For the time being,” he added.

Sullivan reluctantly unbuckled the belt and handed it to Cren, who gathered it in one hand and held it behind his back. Tayfen stepped down from the edge and approached them, drawing a long blue-black cloak around him as he walked. He moved his face close to Sullivan’s and spoke in his own language.

“Well, I still do not trust this – human.” He almost spat the last word, such was his clear disdain for Sullivan.

Sullivan held his tongue. He knew he was in a potentially lethal situation. The Midnight Prince held his gaze for what seemed an age, then turned with a flourish and resumed his place on the tier at the side of the hall. Cren moved Sullivan into the exact centre of the hall, and then moved towards the Royal Dais. The King signalled for Cren, who leaned in closely to hear the whisper of the ancient monarch.

Up on the tier, Titus turned to Calliya, whispering, “We can’t leave him out there to stand on his own!”

“I know, he won’t be able to understand a word that is said,” she hissed in answer. “You have to help him.”

Titus moved forward, stepping down into the pit and joining Sullivan in the centre of the chamber.

“And what is this?” cried Tayfen. “The accused should stand alone!”

“Might I remind you,” answered Titus as calmly as he could. “That anyone who stands before this court has the right of a second. And that as the sole native of this man’s world present today, I take it upon myself to stand with him.”

Tayfen sneered in answer, and was about to speak when Cren stood tall and called out, using his most official tone of voice.

“The King will hear from the Princess Bellanis, Fleet Master of the seerephon Orisa, and Daughter of the Royal Line!”

There was a rise in the noise level around the hall. Some of the assembled nobility bent their heads, talking to each other quietly. The double doors crashed open behind Sullivan and Bellanis strode down the crystal steps.

She had exchanged her armour for an even more elaborate variety, with polished silver plates overlapping from the shoulders down. Tiny tusks and horns sprang from the gleaming metal, and under an armoured arm she carried a great plumed helm. She carried her head high as she walked, ignoring Sullivan and Titus completely as she passed them.

“The Royal Presence welcomes the Princess Bellanis,” said Cren with a bow.

“Thank you, Cren. It is always an honour to appear before the Houses of Elysium,” replied Bellanis, returning the bow deeply towards her father and King. She stood straight again as Cren requested that she make her report. The princess turned to the assembled crowd.

“It was six days ago that I first sensed something was wrong. I had taken the Orisa far to the south, to visit the domain of the Duke of Cohloc, when I felt a strange sensation. It was as if one of the fleet had been destroyed, or corrupted. I had never felt this sensation before, but it was not until I returned to here, to the house of my father, did I discover what it meant. The Kelison had crossed the Rift.”

Some of the other Fleet Masters in the Great Hall nodded, as if they too had felt the same sensation.

“By the time I learned this, the Kelison had returned, and the fleet felt whole again. And then the King called me to his presence, and told me that he had received a message from the Kelison’s touchstone. That the Lady Calliya had returned from the Infinite Realm, and had brought someone with her.”

Bellanis waited for the last few words to sink into the eagerly listening nobility, pacing a slow circle around the edge of the pit.

“When I asked where she might have brought someone back from, the King told me only that she had crossed the Rift.”

Uproar broke out amongst the crowd, and the quiet murmuring was replaced with a loud rabble. Titus had been whispering a rough translation of Bellanis’ words in Sullivan’s ears, but he stopped as shouts echoed around the Great Hall.

“She crossed the Rift?” cried one elderly man from behind Sullivan. Others voiced similar sentiments, but Titus could only manage to translate the odd snippet. Cren raised his arms, trying to quiet the crowd.

“Please, please, my esteemed friends! Let us allow the Royal Princess to complete her report!” The noise began to die almost as soon as Cren spoke, and Bellanis was wearing a smug smile when she began to speak again, enjoying the attention.

“I travelled for almost a day until I reached the domain of the Lady Calliya. As I neared her homestead, I caught sight of the seerephon Kelison, and thus I knew that the Lady had indeed returned from whatever journey she had taken. But as I drew closer, I could see that the Kelison had suffered a grave wound, one that bore all the hallmarks of a darkling assault.”

Another wave of noise broke out amongst the assembly. Once again, Bellanis waited until it had subsided before continuing.

“When I landed, I discovered that the Lady Calliya had truly crossed the Rift to the Infinite Realm, and had brought a human back here, to the shores of Elysium!”

This final revelation was greeted with the greatest noise of all, and it took several minutes and a great deal of gesturing from Cren before it began to die away. Bellanis turned with a flourish, flicking her brocaded cloak out in a wide arc and took her place on the Royal Dais. The King had barely moved during Bellanis’s whole report, and Sullivan began to wonder how aware of proceedings the white haired figure was. He leaned closer to Titus.

“Why does the King look so old? I thought you said these people were virtually immortal.”

“It’s not quite so simple,” whispered Titus. “The great weight of years eventually takes its toll on their spirit. Then their bodies follow suit. Eventually, the most ancient just fade away. Then a barge arrives to bear them back to the flames of Helios, where their bodies become one with the Infinite Realm. But don’t allow appearances to deceive, Mr. Sullivan – the King is still powerful, perhaps the most powerful of all the Elysians.”

The noise eventually dropped to a level where Cren could make himself heard.

“The King will hear from the Lady Calliya!” he cried.

Calliya made her way down from the dais. To Sullivan she looked defiant and confident, but inside her stomach was churning. She would have to tread carefully here to avoid serious censure from her King. She joined Titus and Sullivan in the centre of the shallow pit. She gave each of them a quick glance and then turned to face the court, arranged on the tier around her.

“Seven days ago, I paid a visit to the Whispering Woods. It was the anniversary of the Kelison’s raising, and I wished to pay my eternal gratitude to Lennat. I dined with the esteemed shipwright that night, and he made of me a very odd request.

“He said that he felt I should search out the funeral barge of my cousin. I asked him why, but he was not forthcoming. I knew the barge had been a full two seasons in flight, and had surely been consumed by the Fires of Helios. I told him this, but he simply repeated his request and shrugged. He said that he felt sure something was amiss.”

Several of the crowd murmured and nodded in assent, as if they were all too aware of the famed shipwright’s wisdom. Calliya continued to speak.

“I could not simply ignore the words of Lennat. I asked him why we would not bring the matter to the Court, or to the Fleet, as I was not about to cross the Rift lightly. He said that it might yet be a trivial matter, and not worth concerning the King. But he cautioned me that it might equally be an event of great significance, and could not be ignored. And so I took the Kelison to flight, and bade it to make for the Rift as swiftly as it could. We crossed scarcely three days later. Once on the other side, the Kelison felt the presence of the barge immediately. It had not yet made its final journey into the heart of Helios.”

Calliya bowed her head briefly as she spoke the last word, and many of the assembled Elysians did the same. Calliya gave them no more pause for thought before resuming.

“But something else was amiss. We made best speed for the barge, and when we arrived I discovered that someone else had gotten there first. The barge had rammed a human vessel, and both of them were on the point of perishing in the flames of Helios.”

This time, the crowd fell very silent, save for Tayfen’s voice, which rose from Calliya’s right.

“A human vessel? Are we now to believe that the humans have raised seerephon?” His tone was mocking and incredulous.

“No, not seerephon,” answered Calliya defiantly. “Machines of steel and glass, like nothing I have ever seen before. So I was curious, and went in for a closer look. It was then that I realised that the sentinels on board were hunting.

“And as my glorious majesty will no doubt understand, I was curious to know the nature of who had trespassed in the tomb of my cousin. So I breached the barge, and rescued this man from the clutches of death at the claws of our sentinels. Moments after I withdrew the breaching tube, the barge and the human vessel were destroyed.” She paused for a moment, allowing her words to sink into her rapt audience.

“And thus I found myself in the company of Mr. Jack Sullivan, captain of the cargo vessel Bogart.”

Sullivan’s ears perked up when he heard his name, and that of his ship. Titus had been trying to translate what Calliya had been saying, but he had had trouble keeping up. The crowd also reacted, many of them gesturing angrily at Calliya. He couldn’t understand what they were saying, but he had a fair idea of what they meant.

Tayfen came to the edge of the tier and stepped down into the pit.

“Do you mean to tell us,” he sneered, as he approached Calliya, “that you found this – creature – on a vessel in space?”

“This – man,” answered Calliya, “was the master of his own vessel. Until it was rammed by the funeral barge of my cousin.” She stared at Tayfen as she spoke, unblinking.

“Rammed?” laughed Tayfen. “What are you talking about, girl?”

Calliya started at the slur, stepping forward towards Tayfen aggressively.

“Now, now, friends,” cried Cren from the royal dais. “The Prince Tayfen will show the Lady Calliya due courtesy, and allow her to finish.”

Tayfen smiled wanly at Cren and retook his place on the tier. Cren looked witheringly at him and then addressed Calliya in a soothing voice.

“And now, my dear Lady Calliya, continue. You were saying something about the human vessel being struck by the barge. But surely,” he smiled, “that is impossible. Why, you yourself instructed the barge, did you not?”

“I did,” she answered, “as the court well knows. Many of you attended the Lord Gerren’s Rite of Passing, and watched me instruct the barge to bear my cousin through the Rift and to the Fires of Helios. But somehow, after the barge left Elysium, the commands I gave were changed.”

“But who could do such a thing?” asked Cren in disbelief. Many of the nobles were anxiously talking amongst themselves. “And what of the damage to the Kelison? How was that sustained?”

“Not a day’s flight from Elysium, we were set upon by a Nightwing, and a host of darklings filled the Kelison.”

At this, an outcry broke out around the Great Hall. Many of the Elysians were shouting angrily, and waving at various other houses arranged around the hall. To Sullivan the noise was both deafening and disorientating, such was the babble. Tayfen again raised his voice.

“This is an outrage!” he cried. “How long have we suffered the assaults of these foul spawn of the Fallen?” Voices rose in support from other houses around him. “There was a time when they would not dare venture so close to our swords, lest we cut out their black hearts!”

Some of the Elysians had crossed the floor to remonstrate more strongly with those of other houses. To Sullivan, it seemed complete disarray. He turned to Titus, who simply shrugged in reply. He looked just as bewildered as Sullivan felt.

Calliya strode to the edge of the royal dais.

“My lord – if this man, this Jack Sullivan, had not been aboard, the darklings would surely have overwhelmed the Kelison and I would not be standing here today. It was he who slew the alpha.”

Her voice was urgent, imploring the King for calm. Tayfen appeared at her shoulder, also seeking to appeal to the King.

“We cannot let this human wander freely over our soil! He has brought the darklings on us – and I do not believe his story. No human can travel in space; those are just stories parents tell to scare their children. And now we are to believe that he has slain an alpha?”

The King halted Tayfen’s rant with a raised hand, and Calliya and the Prince withdrew from the dais, their heads slightly bowed. The King raised his head and spoke quite slowly, and very clearly, in English. His voice was soft and deep, and carried the wisdom of thousands of years.

“I wish to hear from this – Sullivan.”

The crowd had fallen deathly silent the moment the King had begun to speak. Now they all turned to look at Sullivan, expectantly. He shifted nervously and stepped forward towards the dais, coughing to clear his throat.

“It’s an honour, your majesty.” He looked straight at the Elysian monarch. “What do you wish to hear from me?”

The King smiled.

“The truth. Of how you came to be on board the funeral barge of Lord Gerren the Strong. Of the host of darklings. And of how you slew the alpha.”



Sullivan looked down at the black polished glass floor for a moment, shrugged his shoulders, and then began to speak. He didn't see much point in holding anything back. He was very much at the mercy of this court.

"About a month ago, I got an offer to take a cargo of machine parts to Aldrin Outpost. Now while a trip to Mercury isn't everyone's dream job, the money was too good to resist." He looked around him, wondering how many of the Elysians spoke English, and of those, how many could follow what he was talking about.

"It was what we spacers call the End Run. That means that we take an extremely high velocity trajectory the long way around the sun, which gives us the extra speed to reach the furthest planets at awkward times. It's not the most popular journey, but I managed to find myself a crew and we set sail. About six weeks into the journey, our sensor nets picked up an object fast approaching. We tried to tack out of its flight path, but the ship came straight at us."

A rumble echoed around the Great Hall. This was the part of the story that the Elysians were interested in hearing.

"It collided with our plasma sail, causing some kind of conductive magnetic current with the injectors on the Bogart. Before we knew it, the damn thing had smashed right into the side of us, rupturing the drive section and killing my engineer."

Sullivan stopped, not sure of whether or not even Calliya or Titus would understand what he was talking about. He tried to explain things in even simpler terms.

"When the barge struck the Bogart, it ruptured the metal skin. The vacuum of space killed Yoshi, who was my engineer, and also my friend. And the damage done to the Bogart meant that there was no way to escape the sun's gravity well. We had only hours before the heat of the sun melted the outer skin of our ship, giving us no choice. We had to investigate the other ship, so my navigator and I boarded the barge.

"But I can assure you all – our priority was survival." As he said this, he turned in a circle, trying to address the entire court. Tayfen was still sneering at him from the head of his house.

"We had no idea to whom the barge even belonged. We assumed that it was built by human hand at first, but by the time we realised that someone else might have built it, the sentinels had come to life, and we were running for our lives."

Sullivan's voice was almost breaking as he recounted the traumatic events on the barge.

"We managed to kill one of them, but the other one got to Vic, and nearly tore her apart. It forced me back towards the stern of the barge, and trapped me. I guess it was

waiting for me to bleed to death, or maybe it just couldn't get to me. Either way, I knew I was dead. And then I was saved."

Sullivan looked across at Calliya, thanking her again silently.

By now, those of the Elysians who could understand Sullivan were hanging on every word and those many that couldn't were trying to catch a few words whispered in translation. Tayfen had come to the edge of the pit again, but this time spoke English. His voice was flat and hollow as he sneered at Sullivan.

"Do you honestly expect us to believe, human, that you travel in a vessel in space? That the barge simply crashed into you? That you trespassed in one of our sacred tombs only in an effort to save yourself? And not only that you slew an alpha, but a sentinel, too?"

Tayfen's mocking tones rang in Sullivan's ears, but he simply stared levelly back at the prince, trying to control the anger in his voice as he spoke.

"That is the way it happened. You only have to ask Calliya. She saw my ship. We fought the darklings together. I'm not your enemy!"

"The Lady Calliya?" laughed Tayfen. "We are supposed to take the word of she who crossed the Rift with no regard for the laws of her people? Perhaps she too has been corrupted by the Fallen!"

At this final, unbearable slur, Calliya leaped from the tier and into the shallow pit, her hand on the hilt of her sword, the black blade halfway out of its scabbard. Prince Tayfen was quick to react, flicking back his cloak to reveal a jewelled scabbard. Other members of his house surged forward, spilling into the pit to shield him from Calliya's fury.

"Enough!" roared the King, halting Calliya as she raised her sword to strike. "You will not raise arms in the Great Hall!"

Calliya sheathed her sword and bowed deeply, her face still flushed with anger. "Forgive me, your majesty. But I have no tolerance for lies."

The King ignored Calliya's lack of respect for the Prince of the Citadel. The dark-clad nobles of Tayfen's house glared at her as they retook their place on the tier.

"Although, I must confess I am curious as to how the alpha was slain," said the white haired monarch. "By a human who doesn't carry a sword."

He stared pointedly at Sullivan, who returned the stare without flinching.

"Perhaps you would care to demonstrate this weapon you wield," the King said softly.

Sullivan sighed. He wasn't sure at all how the Elysians would react to the power of the Ingram .50 field-loader. Calliya had been impressed, but Sullivan had the feeling

she was very open-minded when compared to her people. He looked over at Cren, who dismounted the dais and handed Sullivan's gun belt back to him.

"I'll need something to demonstrate with," he said, looking around the Great Hall. An object hit the floor behind him. He turned, to see a jewelled helm thrown by one of Tayfen's house rolling across the black glass. He picked it up.

"I guess this'll have to do," said Sullivan. He threw the helm high into the air and drew his pistol. In one smooth motion he brought the sights to bear on the helm and squeezed the trigger, the silence in the hall shattered by the discharge.

The ornate helm fell to the floor, split in two by the molten slug, the edges of the rent steel still smoking.

There was a moment of absolute silence, followed by an eruption of howls of alarm and outrage all along the tier of the Great Hall. Sullivan holstered his pistol and watched the chaos unfold around him. Nobles were screaming at other nobles, or crying for the King to take action while Tayfen stood, a smug grin hanging beneath his cold eyes.

He turned and marched across the floor to the King, speaking again in his native tongue.

"My Lord, this human should be cast into the Fold. He has obviously drawn the darklings down upon us, and we can give no credence to his story. Look at the weapon that he carries! Have you ever seen the like? He must be dealt with swiftly, so as to dissuade any more of his kind from soiling our tombs. This is proof that, as I have long suspected, humanity is in league with the Fallen."

"No," cried Calliya, coming forward. "You cannot condemn him to the Fold! He would not survive a single day. You must have mercy, my King."

They both continued to plead with the King, each striving to be heard over the other while the uproar from the court grew and grew. The King raised his hand, signalling for silence, but to no avail. He reached behind the simple throne and took a long staff from one of his attendants. It was made from dark, gnarled wood, and bore on top a glittering gem the size of Sullivan's fist. He dug the end of the staff into the floor and drew himself to his feet. Sullivan was surprised at how tall he was, and Calliya and Tayfen backed up as the King glared down at them.

"Silence!" The King did not shout, but such was the force of his voice as to silence the Great Hall in an instant. When the quiet was absolute, the King began to speak slowly and deliberately in Elysian.

"I have heard much here today that interests me. And I have seen behaviour that I greatly wish I had not. I will take some time to consider all that has happened. Lady Calliya, I release the human into your caring. You will be responsible for what befalls

him until I send for him again. As for his unusual weapon, he has not tried to harm us yet, and may not betray our trust. And you, Prince Tayfen, will temper your enthusiasm for the past, and your thirst for conspiracy. Times may have changed more than either you or I can imagine.”

“But my King, that is why we must stretch our hand once more beyond the Rift. We – ”

“Enough!” snapped the King. “I will hear no more today. Ages have passed since we forsook the Infinite Realm. If mankind has indeed learned to walk amongst the stars, then strange and difficult times may be upon us. Return to your domains,” he said, waving his staff around him to indicate all of the assembled Elysians. “I will send for you soon, so be ready.”

He stepped down from the dais and made his way across the pit. As he passed Sullivan and the others standing in the centre of the Great Hall, he stopped and whispered briefly in Calliya’s ear. Then he carried on across the floor, his tall frame stooped as he rested his weight on his staff. Once he had made his way up the steps and out of the hall, flanked by his daughter and his attendants, the assembled nobles relaxed and began to talk amongst themselves again.

“What did his majesty want?” asked Titus, turning to Calliya.

“He wishes to see the memory fragment from the Kelison. The one that shows Sullivan’s vessel entangled with the funeral barge.”

“Well, that’s got to be a good sign,” joked Sullivan. “At least he almost believed me.”

“It did not go as badly as I had feared,” said Calliya. “Although next time you might leave your weapon with the drakans.”

They were barged out of the way as Tayfen and his entourage stormed past. None of them spoke to Calliya as they passed, but a few of them threw withering stares at her.

“Not everyone round here is so friendly, huh?” asked Sullivan, grinning. He felt greatly relieved by the King’s pronouncement. After the demonstration of his side-arm’s power, he had half-expected to be thrown into the Fold, wherever or whatever that was. He could stay another little while at Calliya’s magnificent homestead. Maybe what he needed was some shore leave. After they realised he was no harm, they might take him back through the Rift and drop him somewhere. Somewhere he could get home from.

Cren arrived from the dais, almost breathless from hauling his massive frame across the hall at speed.

“I trust, my Lady Calliya, that I do not have to warn you about making any more,” he paused for a second, scratching one of his pointed ears. “Ill-advised or rash decisions?” he added, hopefully.

Calliya smiled in reply.

“You don’t have to worry, Cren. I’ll keep my nose out of trouble.”

Cren looked relieved. He nodded to Titus and Sullivan, and then moved quickly out of the hall. As they stood in the middle of the hall, they became aware of a number of the Elysians staring at them from various little groups dotted around the tier of the Great Hall.

“I think,” said Titus, “that this might be an excellent time to withdraw.”

Sullivan and Calliya nodded their assent, and they made their way out of the hall in search of their drakans, saying very little.

Later, as they soared away from the Royal City, Sullivan took one last look back at the glittering jewel that lay at its centre. He had no idea what might happen the next time he laid eyes on the delicate structure, but he was in no hurry to find out. He clung tightly to the saddle as Harl sped onwards across the evening sky, following Pegasus beneath the shimmering purple shroud. Calliya had decided it would be best to fly at night and rest in the morning, and Sullivan and Titus had both been in agreement. Sullivan found himself looking forward to the comfortable lodgings of Calliya’s homestead in the forest. He had never come across such a comfortable prison, or such an intriguing warden. Maybe he could wait a little longer to see home again.

## Chapter Ten

The balmy Elysian days passed quietly for Sullivan, and he spent much of his time wandering in the gardens around Calliya's homestead, enjoying the idyllic landscape. Titus would often accompany him, and they would talk about either the Earth of days gone by, or the colonised solar system that Sullivan had left behind. The Victorian was fascinated by Sullivan's old navy stories, and by the adventures he had had as a junior officer, travelling all over the new human domain.

Calliya had given him the freedom to explore the homestead, but it was only after hours of wandering did Sullivan realise the full size of the structure. He found room after room, filled with books, tapestries, ornaments and relics. Many of them, Sullivan was told, had belonged to Calliya's cousin, who had passed away two years earlier. Titus had recounted much of what had happened.

Death amongst the Elysians was rare. Lord Gerren the Strong, Calliya's cousin, had ranked amongst the eldest before his passing. According to Titus, when they reached a very great age, some of the Elysians grew weary of their eternal existence. Their hair would whiten, and their bones grow brittle, until eventually, the spark of their soul would fade and leave their bodies. Exactly three days after their death, a funeral barge would arrive from the Shoal of Shades, and the body would be laid in state within it. Then the barge would be instructed to bear the remains to their final resting place, the Fires of Helios – the yellow sun of the Earth. While they were on the subject of Calliya's family, Sullivan thought to ask about her parents. If she was relatively so young compared to the rest of the Elysians, then what had become of her parents?

Titus sighed as he answered, his voice growing heavy with sadness. Years ago, before Titus had come to the Finite Realm, Calliya's parents had been lost in battle against the Fallen. No one would ever speak of what had happened, save to say that they fell on some distant world, far on the other side of the Realm. They left their young daughter to be raised by a distant relative, Gerren the Strong, here in this homestead.

Almost a week after they had returned from the Royal City, Calliya woke Sullivan early one morning. She stood in the doorway of his room as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“Are you feeling brave this morning, Jack?” asked Calliya, a mischievous smile on her face.

“Brave?” mumbled Sullivan.

“Just get your clothes on and meet me downstairs,” she said, disappearing from the doorway.

After he had dressed, Sullivan found her downstairs, in the kitchen. She handed him a piece of soft, crusty bread and a cup of warming liquid, which washed the sleep from his mind in an instant. He still had no idea what Calliya had in mind, and didn’t figure it out until he realised she was leading him to the stables. When they arrived there, he saw two drakans milling around the entrance to the stable, their reins held by a short and stocky earthy coloured construct. Both of the flying beasts were fully tackled. One of them was Harl, Calliya’s snow-white male, but the other one was larger, and bore reddish brown fur. It looked at Sullivan as he approached.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” said Sullivan.

“If you’re going to stay amongst us, you had better learn how to ride a drakan,” Calliya answered.

Sullivan felt very unsure. He had seen people ride horses in theme parks on Earth and Mars, but he had never been close to a large animal until he had ridden tandem with Calliya to the Royal City. Calliya tried to reassure him as he approached the giant beast, which eyed him suspiciously, as if it knew what Sullivan had in mind.

Calliya held the bridle as Sullivan carefully climbed into the large decorative saddle. This drakan seemed much larger than Calliya’s, but Sullivan wasn’t sure if that just because he was sitting alone on the beast.

“Be gentle,” said Calliya. “This drakan is called Merriat. He is the brood mate of Harl, and very well trained.”

“Yeah, he might be,” answered Sullivan nervously, “but I’m not.”

The drakan bucked slightly, as if it had heard what Sullivan had said. Calliya suggested that they begin by learning how to control the drakan on the ground before they tried flying, and they set off on a gentle canter through the forest.

At first, Sullivan felt completely out of control. He just held on for dear life as Harl led the way, twisting through the thick forests. When he finally found the bravery to open his eyes and look around him, he found himself truly in a new world. With the rarity of open country on Earth, Sullivan found the experience quite unlike anything he

had ever imagined. Perhaps this was how the Earth had been when the Elysians walked upon it, but in Sullivan's day it was simply crowded and cancerously polluted. The air rushed against his face, forcing Sullivan to squint to keep them from watering, as he ducked the occasional branch that flew past his head. After he began to relax, he found he could direct Merriat by tugging the reins to one side or the other, and although Calliya kept shouting advice from in front, Sullivan was having a hard time hearing her.

They rode until the middle of the day, before making their way back to the homestead's sunny veranda for lunch. Sullivan felt exhausted when he sat down, but soon found that the Elysian food had a way of restoring his strength. So when Calliya proposed that they have their first flying lesson after lunch, he was happy to agree, and actually found himself looking forward to learning to control one of the fantastic beasts in the air.

Once he was strapped to the Merriat's saddle once again, soaking up the afternoon sun, Calliya gave him some last minute instructions.

"If you pull the reins downwards, and make Merriat lower his head, then he will descend. If you make his head rise, then he will follow it and climb. But try not to squeeze too hard with your legs, as that will only make him fly faster." She climbed astride Harl, laughing. "Titus, when he learned, said that it was like riding a horse. Have you ever ridden a horse, Jack?"

"Calliya, I've never really seen a horse up close, much less ridden one. There aren't that many left on Earth anymore."

Calliya looked sad when he told her this. "Why?" she asked.

"They just all died out, except for the zoos and parks. There was just no room left for them."

The two drakan loped forward at speed, and Sullivan pulled gently back on the reins, lifting Merriat's head. The beast understood the command perfectly, and leaped into the air, driving Sullivan down into the saddle. As they soared high above the treetops, Sullivan clung on for dear life, glad of the security afforded by the flying straps. Merriat streaked beyond Harl as Sullivan's clamping thighs drove him on at speed.

"Relax!" cried Calliya, her voice barely audible over the wind.

"That's easy for you to say!" Sullivan shouted.

The lessons continued for much of the day. By the time the sun had crept below the horizon, Sullivan had discovered how to make Merriat fly in gentle circles, as well as ascend and descend at will. As he grew confident in the saddle, the experience became more and more exhilarating, until Sullivan felt completely drained. When they at last



lodged the drakan in the stables, he found his tired muscles could barely hold him upright.

Every day for the next week, Sullivan practised flying the drakan under Calliya's expert tutelage. By the end of the week, he had achieved a level of proficiency he was proud of, and could make Merriat stop dead in the air and hover, or turn him into a steep dive that skimmed the tops of the trees.

One morning, like every other, he rose and dressed warmly, looking forward to another's days training on the drakan. But Calliya was not in the dining room, or on the veranda, or out by the stables. He searched for her everywhere, and eventually found her tending to the Kelison.

Countless constructs crawled over the hull of the seerephon, but Sullivan could still see the great rent in the shell that the darkling invasion spur had left. Calliya was attached to a rope emerging from the inside of the breach, and was examining the edges carefully.

"Hey there!" shouted Sullivan, waving from the ground.

"Good morning, Jack!" she cried in answer. She waved, and then began to rappel down the sheer shell of the vessel. She saw his attire and made an apologetic face.

"I'm sorry, Jack, but I don't have time for flying lessons today."

"What's wrong?" asked Sullivan.

"I am concerned about the Kelison. The wound left by the darkling spur does not seem to be healing. The constructs have been working as hard as they can, and have managed to repair much of the damage, but I fear something fouler afflicts the Kelison."

"Something fouler? What do you mean?" asked Sullivan, staring up at the wound. All around the edges, the normally blue-purple shell had turned to black, as if it was rotting. For all his experience with space travel, he knew nothing of ships that could heal themselves.

"Perhaps the Nightwing employed some kind of venom that I am unfamiliar with. I have not had enough dealings with darklings to know for sure," said Calliya, the concern clear upon her face.

"So what will you do? Is there an antidote?"

"I must take the Kelison to Lennat, the shipwright. He will know how to undo the damage that has been done, and how to purge the venom from the vessel."

Calliya reached into her pocket, pulled out a piece of fruit, and began to walk around the Kelison, running her other hand along the smooth shell of the seerephon's belly. Sullivan followed her.

"Lennat? Isn't he the one who suggested you go looking for the funeral barge?"

“One and the same. The shipwright is one of the oldest of all Elysians, and has been tending to the seerephon of the fleet for ages. There is nothing about these vessels that he doesn’t know, and he has had a long experience of dealing with darkling matters.”

She examined the shell as she walked, tapping it with her knuckle, or stopping to examine a particular scratch or mark.

“So why did he send you after the barge? Can he see the future? Or is it possible he knew more about what happened than he let on?”

“I cannot believe that Lennat could have anything to do with such foul deeds. He doesn’t take much part in the affairs of the Great Hall, and hasn’t left the Whispering Wood for centuries. Some say that he knows about things before they happen, so I suppose it is possible that he sensed what had befallen the barge. All the seerephon, even the sleeping ones that fill the Shoal of Shades, are connected somehow, and the shipwright is connected to them.”

“I’d really like to meet him.”

“I’m sorry, Jack. The Whispering Wood is our most sacred domain, and Lennat is somewhat mistrustful of strangers, to put it mildly. Even in fifty years he has lived among us, Titus has never been permitted to look upon the wonder that is the birthplace of the seerephon. So I shall have to make this journey on my own.”

Sullivan shrugged his shoulders.

“I understand. A captain has to take care of her ship. I’ll be here when you get back,” he added, smiling.

Calliya poked him in the chest, grinning broadly.

“You had better be. Cren would not be pleased if he thought I was letting you roam freely around Elysium.”

After lunch, Calliya set off for the Whispering Wood. Before she left, she entrusted Titus with the care of Sullivan, who protested that he did not need anyone to baby-sit him, which was met with a withering stare from Calliya.

“I shall return in a couple of days, no more,” she added. Before she disappeared through the seerephon’s hatch, she shot one last glance at Titus, as if to dissuade him from doing anything foolish.

The Kelison lifted off effortlessly from the clearing, the artificial gravity curdling the Earthmen’s stomachs as it soared into the air before disappearing rapidly over the horizon. Then Sullivan asked if Titus would like to take a flight on the drakans, but Titus declined, saying that he had something to attend to. He collected the constructs that had been working on the Kelison and led them back to the homestead.

That evening, Sullivan and Titus dined alone, and Sullivan found that he missed Calliya's presence, and the light that her smile brought to every meeting. By now, he had learned the names of almost all the foods that the constructs laid out, but he still had a problem pronouncing the name of the wine that they took with every meal - although that didn't stop him from drinking deeply of it.

"I was wondering," said Titus, dabbing at his lips with a silk napkin, "if you still felt like taking a flight on the drakan?"

Sullivan nodded, his mouth still full of the hearty stew that he could never seem to get enough of.

"Because," continued Titus, "there is something I would like very much for you to see."

Sullivan raised his eyebrows.

"Won't Calliya mind that you've taken me for a little trip? She said that Cren wouldn't be very pleased if I went wandering."

"Perhaps it is best if Calliya and the others don't hear about our little trip. I'm not sure if they would think it wise. And after you've seen it, I'm not sure you will wish to go shouting about it either."

"Why? Is it like the Whispering Wood? A shrine of some sort, that humans aren't supposed to see?" Sullivan was intrigued now.

"No, not a shrine. I'm not even sure how many of the Elysians know of its existence. Certainly some of them do, but they pay it little heed, and consider it little more than a curious relic."

"Pay what little heed? What kind of relic?" asked Sullivan, his curiosity piqued by the Victorian.

"Perhaps it would just be simpler just to show you. And it has been some years since I laid eyes on it myself. Shall we say dawn, tomorrow?"

Titus would speak no more of his mysterious trip. Instead, the conversation turned to Earth, and to the great changes that had befallen it since Titus had left, as well as the years Sullivan had spent travelling the solar system as a junior officer in the Navy. It left the Victorian thinking that he would not even recognise his beloved home were he ever to return. With so many years having passed, it would seem that the world Titus had known had been lost forever. Ultimately, the talk turned to why Sullivan had left the Naval service.

"When I was a boy, Titus, I hardly knew my father. The war was terrible, and stretched across the entire system, so he didn't get much shore leave. For years, I only

saw him for a week at a time, and all I could really remember of him was the uniform. It was deepest naval blue, and trimmed with shining gold.”

Sullivan drank deeply from his goblet as he continued his story.

“Of course, eventually, he didn’t come back. He was killed in the Battle of Deimos, trying to capture the kinetic cannon the Southern Block had built to destroy Armstrong Station. So as soon as I was old enough, I joined the Navy. I wanted so much to be like him – he had believed in the war, so I did, too. I thought I would be fighting to protect our way of life. But it didn’t turn out like that. After the fall of the Southern Block, the Navy went about making sure that such a conflict would never happen again. So they crushed what was left, striking out at the slightest sedition with overwhelming force.”

“Victors are seldom gracious,” observed Titus, “in any century. Such has been the way of war since prehistory.”

“Let’s just say, that being a Naval Officer was not what I expected. And after what happened on Ganymede, I could never wear that uniform again.”

Titus pressed him, but Sullivan did not feel like talking about the massacre he had played a part in, or the duel with Captain Orlat that followed his insubordination. He didn’t want to explain how, if he had managed to beat the Butcher of Ganymede, the massacre might have been averted. He doubted he’d be able to sleep as it was.

As he lay in bed that night, Sullivan tried to figure out how much time might have passed on Earth since he came through the Rift. He still had no idea where he was, or what part of the galaxy made up the Finite Realm. If over three hundred years had gone by on Earth for the fifty that Titus had passed on Elysium, then the weeks since he awoke on board the Kelison would be equivalent to months on Earth. The Bogart would be long overdue by now, and reported missing. And the Navy would not wait very long before declaring the ship lost and the crew dead. It was a long time before he managed to get to sleep.

Next morning Sullivan rose just before dawn and dressed quickly, wrapping a warm flying cloak around him. It was woven from thick thread, and had a huge hooded cowl to keep the flyer’s head warm. He was just about to make his way down to the stables when he stopped, went back, and took his holster from where it hung on the ornately carved post of the large bed. He checked the charge and strapped it to his hip. He wasn’t sure exactly where Titus was taking him, but Sullivan didn’t see the harm in going prepared.

The portly Victorian was waiting by the stables. The familiar earthy coloured construct had just finished securing the tackle to the drakan, and Sullivan found Titus

similarly attired for the trip. Underneath his flying cloak, Titus had foregone majestic robes and his three-piece suit for more casual, hardwearing clothes like those that Sullivan wore.

“Are you ready?” enquired Titus. He seemed curiously excited, and bounced as he mounted his grey drakan, a sedate looking beast that the Victorian had whimsically named Pegasus.

“Ready for what?” asked Sullivan as he climbed aboard Merriat. The beast purred slightly as he settled into his saddle, as if he was now growing accustomed to, and was even beginning to enjoy his rider’s presence.

“Don’t you like surprises?” laughed Titus as Pegasus bounded off, rising quickly into the sky. Sullivan turned Merriat, waited a moment for the construct to shuffle out of the way and then dug his heels into the drakan’s flanks. He pulled hard on the reins, lifting Merriat’s head and they sprang upwards, following the fast diminishing silhouette of Pegasus into the violet dawn.

Onwards they flew, through much of the morning, the forests beneath gradually giving way to rolling foothills. Down in the fields below, massive constructs tilled the earth, dragging ploughs through the furrows. Around the edges of the forests, tall willowy constructs gathered the fruit from trees, filling cart after cart. Sullivan could see a row of mountain peaks rising ahead of them in the distance, their rocky summits shrouded in a purple blanket of cloud. He was sure now that the peaks were their destination, and he followed as Titus led Pegasus to an even higher altitude.

As they approached the mountain range, the clouds grew transparent, revealing a high plateau that lay surrounded by a ring of mountains. It looked inaccessible from the ground, and Sullivan could see only a thick blanket of forest that covered it. The drakan bore them high over the ridge that bordered the plateau, and Sullivan risked a look down as they hurtled over the tangled verdant canopy. There was almost no break in the forest, and no sign of any kind of constructions or civilisation.

Up ahead, Pegasus began to circle slowly towards the ground, and Sullivan pulled his cloak tight around him as he banked Merriat in to follow. He scanned the plateau for some time before he made out a massive shape in the forest below. A long black object lay nestled amongst the crawling trees. It was difficult to make out its exact lines, but as he drew closer Sullivan began to recognise certain features.

It was at least three hundred metres long, some fifty yards wide, and formed by three bulbous pods, each one larger than the preceding one, that flowed together to form one long undulating shape. It had obviously lain there for some time, as the surrounding forest had stretched out long green fingers to ensnare the giant, dark mass, curling

creepers and thick branches under and over it. A long, narrow strip of younger growth stretched away from the wider end.

Pegasus and Merriat were close to the canopy of the forest now. Titus had pulled his steed up, hovering in mid-air as he waited for his companion to join him. He called to Sullivan from the large white drakan.

“Well, what do you think?” The excitement on his face was obvious, even from a distance.

“What is it?” Sullivan shouted in reply, digging the toes of his boots into the area just behind Merriat’s forelegs. This, Calliya had told him, would signal the drakan to hover and hold its position, as it neared Pegasus.

“I had held the hope that you might be able to tell me that!” Titus cried. “Follow me!”

With that, he urged Pegasus downwards, and the drakan disappeared through a break in the canopy. Sullivan followed, a little unsure of piloting his giant beast through such a narrow gap, but Merriat drew his wings in, allowing himself to fall a short way before beating his wings once, powerfully, to gain purchase on the air. He repeated this manoeuvre several times before crashing to the ground, absorbing the impact with his thick legs and wide, flat paws.

Sullivan looked around him. They were in a small clearing, about twenty metres away from the black shape. Below the canopy, the vegetation could not hide the true nature of the object as it did from the air.

It was a ship. Sullivan knew the minute he stood alongside it. He had stood beside enough vessels under construction and repair in dry-dock to get a sense of the scale, but it was more than that. He could feel it.

They dismounted their winged steeds, leaving them to graze in the forest as Titus bounced over towards the towering black hull. Sullivan followed him, but a little more cautiously. He couldn’t quite make out the exact lines of the ship, and he didn’t recognise what he could make out.

“I came across this many years ago,” babbled Titus excitedly. “When I first came to Elysium, I took to the habit of making extensive maps of the entire continent. It was something that the Elysians had no interest in, so one rather dull afternoon, I decided to take a trip over this mountain range. I almost missed it, but somehow it caught my eye from the air.

“Since then, I have often returned here, but I have been unable to unlock its mysteries. I’m sure it doesn’t belong to the Elysians, but apart from that, I am at a loss to. There were tales of men that took to space in great creatures like the seerephon, but I

gave them little credence. This is no creature, I'm sure of it. It has to be some kind of machine."

While Titus was talking, Sullivan had walked the length of the clearing, trying to get a look at the surface that lay beneath the vegetation. Frustrated, he reached up and began to pull away some of the vines.

"I have made a complete circuit of it, but could find no means of operating it, or indeed, gaining entry to it," Titus continued. "That is," he added, adjusting his glasses, "assuming it is hollow."

"Oh, it's hollow alright," answered Sullivan. As he drew away the vines, he began to make sense of what he was seeing. "It's a ship, and a human ship, but I don't understand how it could be here."

The ship was lying on its belly, and listing towards them. He looked along the near side of the ship, but there was too much vegetation to make out any evidence of landing struts. The Earthmen were just off the port side of the central pod, about halfway along the ship. Sullivan looked up the twenty or so metres of hull that stretched up over him. It was bare, utterly sheer and seamless, and when he laid his hand on it he felt the unmistakeable coldness of man's metals.

"We need to get to the forward section," said Sullivan.

"I beg your pardon?" answered Titus, looking at the heavy vegetation that blocked their way.

"If there is an access hatch, it'll probably be in the forward section, which I'm assuming will be the narrow end – which would be that way." He pointed into the thick carpet of the forest.

"I see," said Titus. "Well, we had better get started then."

They removed their flying cloaks, shivering slightly in the thin mountain air. Before long, Sullivan wished he had brought a sword with him, the sweat pouring from their brows as they used their hands to try and clear their way to the smallest of the three pods. Where the pods joined, they narrowed to maybe ten metres in diameter, but seamlessly flowed and widened into the next section. As they fought their way through the forest, Titus explained again how he had come across the curious relic.

He was sure that some of the older Elysians knew about it, but he had never spoken of it with them. Occasionally he would come out here, and make drawings of the object, or observe its condition from the air. He had once brought some tools to try and take a sample of it, but none of his hammers could make so much as a dent in its surface. And there were virtually no features visible from any angle he had observed from, other than the sheer hull.

This had struck Sullivan as very unusual too, but he hadn't mentioned it. Although something about its shape was familiar, he had never seen a hull so smooth. Usually, on the hull of any ship, there would be markings, or access panels, or even graffiti, but this was just endless, seamless black metal. After they managed to clear part of the way to the fore section, Sullivan saw something on the hull just ahead.

"There!" he said, pointing.

The Earthmen redoubled their efforts to reach the front of the vessel, and were breathing heavily as they pulled the thick vines from the area Sullivan had indicated. There was a large square hatch sitting a metre above the carpet of vegetation that swallowed the ship. At one side of the hatch was an access panel, and above that a small metal plate. It was the only variation to the uniformly smoothness of the hull that they could see.

Sullivan knew a dedication plaque when he saw one. The vegetation had left some sort of mulch on the plate, but he thought he could make out English letters underneath. He rubbed the mulch away with his hand, and realised it wasn't English, but Sullivan found he could read it anyway.

La Estrella Negra. Sullivan read through the rest of the plaque and translated it for the benefit of Titus.

"It's the Black Star – the Estrella Negra. Registered in Cortez City, January fourth, 2187."

"Cortez City?" asked Titus. "I don't believe I know of the place."

"It was the Southern Block's industrial stronghold, on Mars," replied Sullivan. "But this doesn't make any sense."

"It's not an Earth ship, then?"

"Oh, it was built by men alright. At least, that's how it would appear. The dedication plaque says this ship was built just twenty years ago, at the end of the Second Interplanetary War." Sullivan surveyed the thick forest that they had just struggled through. "But it looks like it's been here a damn sight longer than that. When did you say you found it?"

"Why, it was at least forty years ago! I had completed my maps of the continent before I was ten years here. And when I found it, it was almost as overgrown as it is now. I believed it to have lain here for hundreds of years, but if what you say is true, then perhaps I was wrong."

"Maybe not," replied Sullivan. He was examining the access panel. "Titus, did you bring any of your tools with you?"



Titus pulled himself back through the undergrowth, returning a few minutes later with a brown leather satchel. He unbuckled it and laid it on the floor, rolling it out to reveal his simple tools. Sullivan selected the sharpest of the screwdrivers and started to work on the bolts securing the access panel.

“What are you doing?” asked Titus.

“Hatches are normally controlled from the central computer core. But if you have to, you should be able to override the system locally.”

“Override the system?”

Sullivan tapped the door with the handle of the screwdriver.

“To get inside,” he explained.

Titus nodded in comprehension as he attempted to mop the torrent of sweat that ran from his brow with delicate touches of his handkerchief.

“So it has truly come from Earth?”

“I think so. Apart from the length of time you say it’s been here, everything else about this thing says it’s a southern block ship built twenty years ago on Mars. The technology is familiar enough,” he added, taking a break from his battle against the bolts. “But I’ve never seen a ship quite like this.” He wiped his brow also and resumed his efforts.

“How so?”

“I don’t know how it would fly. There are no sail emitters, and I couldn’t see any drive tubes from the air. And I can’t see any armaments. No guns, no missile tubes, no nothing.”

“Is it really that unusual that a vessel be built with no weapons, Mr. Sullivan? You yourself told me that your own vessel, the Bogart bore no such devices.” Titus had perched himself on a thick branch that snaked through the undergrowth, and was drinking from a canteen.

“The Bogart was just a cargo ship, Titus. Built before this one, sure, but still only a cargo ship. It had no need for weapons. But when this was constructed, the Southern Block was involved in a very long, very bloody war. Every ship it ever built carried armaments. Come to think of it, some of them were little more than giant flying weapons. But this is different.” He stopped again, looking up and down the section of exposed hull. “It should have some fleet designation, or insignia, or something.”

But the hull was bare. Just metre after metre of smooth, absolutely featureless, black metal. Sullivan finally managed to free the last of the bolts holding the access cover and prised it free with the tip of the screwdriver. Inside the cavity, he could see the hatch release relay, clearly marked in Spanish. He just had to find some way to get

power to it. The hatch design was standard, similar to the mechanism on the Bogart, but he could only hope that there was some juice left somewhere in the system after all this time. He tried cross-wiring a few of the relays, but they were totally inert.

“Dammit,” hissed Sullivan.

“Something wrong?” asked Titus. He had started eating a sandwich he had retrieved from the drakan, and he offered Sullivan half, which was gladly accepted. Between bites, Sullivan explained the problem.

“There’s no power to the door override. With no power, there’s no way to release the servos that are keeping the hatch sealed.”

“And we have no alternate source of power?”

“No,” Sullivan answered with a sigh. “I haven’t seen anything since I came to this planet that –”

He broke off suddenly, the answer coming to him in a flash. He reached for his holster and pulled out his pistol – the power source was relatively small, but it carried quite a punch. It should have enough juice to power the door servos. He stuffed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and began removing the power cell from the body of the field-loader. Titus watched, fascinated, as Sullivan pulled some of the wires from the cavity and attached them to the tiny power cell. Small lights began to glitter beneath the exposed circuitry. A soft hum could just be made out as the power surged into the servos.

Sullivan reached into the cavity and activated the hatch override, and stepped back quickly as the hatch split, the two halves disappearing into the bulkhead either side of the opening. The pitch-black interior of the ship was revealed, and although he could not see much in the darkness, Sullivan knew enough to know he was looking at the interior of an airlock. He stepped through the hatch carefully, with a distinct sense of *deja vu*, as he entered the second mysterious ship in the space of a month. He could only hope that this ship was less hazardous than the Gerren’s funeral barge had proved to be.

Titus stood staring in wonder at the opening in the enigmatic object he had observed for so many years. Then he adjusted his glasses and moved to follow Sullivan.

The moment Sullivan’s foot touched down inside the airlock, dim lighting strips activated all around the interior. The insignia of the vessel was repeated on the bulkheads, along with more instructions in Spanish.

“Emergency lighting still works,” said Sullivan, sounding slightly surprised. “There must be some juice in the old girl yet.”

He moved to the inner door and touched the control panel. The hatch slid aside with a hiss, and Sullivan poked his head through the hatchway, checking either side of him. He withdrew his head, checking around the bulkheads for something.

“What are you looking for?” whispered Titus. He had been very tentative as he had come through the hatch, and had started suddenly when the inner hatch had opened.

“A schematic or a plan of some kind, that might tell us something about the ship.”

Just to the right of the exit hatch, he found what he was looking for. It was a simple diagram of the ship that indicated their position and the general designation of the various areas of the *Estrella Negra*. They had entered into the central pod, and the airlock they were in opened onto the central access corridor. It ran all the way from the front of the ship to the drive section at the back. The bridge and crew quarters were in the first pod, but it was the rear pod that caught his eye. It made up almost half the ship’s bulk, but was all labelled drive section. In between were a number of areas that had no designation at all.

Sullivan hadn’t seen any trace of sail emitters on the hull of the *Estrella*, so he had figured the ship had some sort of ion drive. But he had never seen an ion drive that took up so much space, and he couldn’t make out any drive tubes on the plan. He knew he hadn’t been able to see them from the air, either.

“What is it?” asked Titus, excitedly.

“Strange. This whole rear pod,” said Sullivan, indicating the bulbous rear section of the diagram, “is marked drive section, but it doesn’t look like any engine I’ve ever seen. I don’t know what it is.”

He stepped through the hatch and looked up and down the central access corridor in the dim emergency lighting. It was about five meters square, and terminated in heavy bulkheads twenty meters in either direction.

“The emergency bulkheads are sealed,” said Sullivan, the hairs standing up on the back of his neck. He motioned for Titus to follow, and then made his way to the forward bulkhead. The override controls were set into a panel to the right of the hatch.

He touched the override and the forward section of the central access corridor appeared behind the hatch. Sullivan could see the ladder that gave access to the bridge halfway along the corridor, as well as other hatches that led to the crew sections. Zero gee grab rails ran along the walls and deck.

“Come on,” said Sullivan, “if we’re going to find answers, the best place to start would be the bridge.”

He climbed the ladder and threw the release handle on the overhead hatch, pulling himself through and on to the bridge.

“Hello?” he asked quietly.

The bridge, like the rest of the ship he had seen, bore no trace of the crew. The Captain’s chair sat empty in the centre of the small bridge, with four more deep acceleration seats arranged around the edges. In front of each station was an expansive control panel, and set into each of the bulkheads was an equally expansive, but totally inactive display. Sullivan reached back down through the hatch and pulled Titus onto the dimly-lit bridge.

“Fascinating,” remarked the Victorian as he gazed around. “I had never even dreamed of such things.”

Sullivan wasted no time and went straight for the Captain’s chair. There was a console just to the right of it, so he tapped a few of the alphanumeric keys. There was no response.

“There’s no power to the bridge systems,” said Sullivan.

“Oh?” answered Titus.

“So I need you to sit here, in this chair, and keep your eye on this command console.” Sullivan waved towards the Captain’s chair. “If you see any sign of life, shout, okay?”

“Any sign of life?” Titus was unnerved by Sullivan’s choice of words, standing in the dark on this ghost ship.

“Any sign of power in the systems, Titus.”

Titus nodded and sat in the chair. Sullivan searched the deck plates of the bridge for a few moments, then knelt and opened an access panel. He could see indicators flashing, showing the presence of emergency power, so he flicked a few relays into the closed position and then looked at Titus, who shook his head in reply. Sullivan got to his feet, searched for a few moments and then located another access panel.

“I assume, Mr. Sullivan, that this vessel would have set sail with a crew.”

“You would assume correctly, Titus,” answered Sullivan. He had found a larger hatch, and had crawled down into it, until only his legs were visible.

“And have we any idea where they might be?”

“Long dead, if this ship has been here as long as it looks from the outside.”

“Really?” answered Titus, looking around him nervously. He heard Sullivan cry out in victory from beneath the deck as a string of graphics appeared across the bottom of the command console’s display.

“I think that’s done the trick!” called Titus.

Sullivan reappeared from the access bay, smiling. He motioned to Titus to vacate the chair, and then sat in his place, activating the console. Titus moved round behind the

chair to get a better view as Sullivan scanned the options. The display was entirely in Spanish, but he could still navigate well enough to access the power systems.

The auxiliary battery still had a little juice, so he activated the relays that would reroute the power through the entire ship. Large spotlights illuminated each of the five stations around the bridge and Sullivan looked around him, pleased with the fruits of his efforts.

“Now we’re talking.”

He stood up and crossed to one of the displays, touching another control to bring a detailed plan of the Estrella Negra to life. Titus joined him, squinting through his glasses at the complicated graphic. There was a lot of writing, but Titus understood no Spanish.

Sullivan stared at the display, numb.

“You have got to be kidding me,” he said in a whisper.

“What’s wrong?”

“They can’t have. This can’t be for real,” said Sullivan, running his fingers through his hair.

Titus was frustrated. He needed to know what had disturbed Sullivan.

“What is it?” he squealed.

“The drive section of this ship. According to this display, it’s not an ion drive.” Sullivan returned to the command chair and sat down heavily, shifting to one side to compensate for the slight list of the Estrella.

“This graphic says that the aft pod of the Estrella Negra’s is a captive singularity drive. Which would mean that this ship some kind of faster than light prototype, something that’s not supposed to exist.”

Titus looked more confused than ever.

“I’m afraid I’m quite at a loss, Mr. Sullivan. Who built this vessel? And what was it built for?”

Sullivan buried his face in his hands for a moment, and then raised his head, a disbelieving grin on his face.

“I just can’t believe it,” he said. He looked at Titus, and then began to explain.

“The Southern block was at war with the Northern block. It had started off as a series of border disputes, but rapidly escalated into all out war, all across the solar system. They were badly outnumbered, so in time they turned their hands to more and more elaborate ship designs. Flying x-ray laser cannons, experimental weapon systems, they tried everything to gain an edge. There were even rumours that they were playing

with faster-than-light travel, but no one believed them. Faster than light travel is the holy grail of star travel, Titus – it's not possible."

"A little like men who travel in star ships?" interjected Titus.

"Point taken," replied Sullivan with a sly grin.

"So what is this vessel precisely?"

"It has to be a experimental prototype of some sort. In theory, a captive singularity could bend space-time enough to allow you travel faster than light can travel in a straight line, but I have a funny feeling it might not have worked. Maybe that's what happened, and why I've never seen anything like this ship."

"You think this vessel caused the deaths of the crew?" Again Titus looked around nervously.

"It's possible," answered Sullivan. "But the computer core is off line. I'm going to have to go aft to get it rebooted. We might be able to access some of the command logs then."

"What should I do?" asked Titus. He didn't seem keen to stay on the deserted bridge by himself.

"Why don't you check out the crew quarters below? You might find some answers."

With that, Sullivan disappeared down through the hatch in the floor, leaving Titus quivering, all alone on the bridge.

"Wonderful," said Titus, to no one in particular.

## Chapter Eleven

Titus made his way carefully down the bridge access ladder, queasy at the prospect of searching the abandoned ship. He had never studied Spanish, and could only hope his knowledge of Latin might come in handy as he tried to determine what had befallen the crew. He examined the first hatch he found, and then touched the control at the side, starting as it slid open soundlessly. Jaundiced strip lighting flickered into life, illuminating the spartan living quarters as Titus moved inside carefully.

The occupants of the quarters had clearly had no chance to pack. It was as if they had just left, moments earlier. A uniform lay draped over the end of the bunk, and the crewman's personal effects were arranged about the compartment. Photos, some framed and some not, were scattered around the otherwise bare bulkheads. Nearly all of them showed a smiling man with a thick moustache, although many featured more than one man in the same grey uniform. Some of the backdrops were familiar, reminding him of the cities of old Earth, while others had vistas that Titus could barely have imagined. In one picture, behind the smiling servicemen was what Titus guessed to be the rings of Saturn, although in all his life he had only dreamed of what they might have looked like. He stared at the image for a moment or two, and then shook himself. There was something very unsettling about wandering the deserted ship, thought Titus, reminded of the infamous *Marie Celeste*.

He examined the small locker next to the bunk, which yielded a few technological devices that he didn't recognise. He picked them up, turning them this way and that, to try and get an idea of their function. He pressed his finger to the controls of a small flat plastic device, but its screen remained dark, so he tried another smaller, round one, but could only elicit the same response.

Titus clucked to himself as he moved around the compartment, checking in various lockers and drawers, but finding very little that might give a clue as to what had befallen the crew. There were more fresh uniforms, each one emblazoned with the officer's name and rank. Titus didn't recognise the rank, but he could read the name all right. Abelardo – clearly a Latin surname, meaning Sullivan had been right about the vessel's origin.

Titus moved through the rest of the compartments one by one and found them all remarkably similar. There were photos, spare uniforms and lots of kit, but precious little else. It was as if the crew had not been here very long, thought Titus. Or perhaps had not been allowed to bring much in the way of personal effects with them.

Halfway aft along the ship, Sullivan had found his way into the computer core. The compartment was small and circular, with just enough room to squeeze around the bulky, squat core itself. He had managed to restore power to the core unit from the bridge, but for some reason it hadn't rebooted. He was familiar with the basic system from his days under Captain Orlat, but there was something else amiss here.

Most military systems during the war had been based on the same technology. Occasionally, both sides actually ended up sub-contracting to the same zaibatsus, and not always unknowingly. But in this system, while it resembled many of the kinds that Orlat had insisted on studying, there were subtle differences. The principal of which was the fact that all the subsystems tied not just into the root command structure, but also into another root subsystem. An enclosed system that was connected to almost every other part of the ship, that Sullivan could not access, no matter what he tried.

He looked around the core compartment for tools to aid him, and found the emergency tool locker close to the entrance. He removed a diagnostic PCU and a connecting wrench, and then accessed the diagnostic system through the PCU. The elusive root subsystem appeared to have its own physical location as well, which was more than odd. There was no reason to compartmentalise computer systems. It only made them more prone to damage during battle. He searched around the deck for a moment, opened the access hatch in the floor, and eased himself down into the sub-deck of the core compartment.

He could see the isolated system, but it was of a completely different design to the main core unit. Whereas above, all Sullivan could see was a bristling mound of power relays and stacked grids, what confronted him here beneath the deck was altogether more delicate.

There were more than a dozen transparent cubes, arranged chaotically in a transparent spherical tank, tangled with thick tubing that both interconnected and suspended them. The cubes were filled with milky blue liquid, and barely visible thread-like filaments ran back and forth through them. Sullivan peered closely at the cubes in the dim light, his nose pressed against the tank. The closer he stared, the more filaments were revealed. At his feet, he could see the power converter for the tank, and that it was completely inert. Sullivan stretched up through the access hatch and pulled one of the auxiliary power cables through from the upper core.



He connected it to the power converter on the floor and felt the hum of current through his hands as the energy surged through the converter and up into the tank. In the cubes it was greeted with a torrent of bubbles that surged through the blue liquid, rippling the filaments as they did so. Sullivan hauled himself back through the floor, watching on the diagnostic as the core began to reboot.

If I can get the core working, he thought, then I might have a chance of getting this thing back into space. I might even be able to get home. Sullivan scolded himself for allowing his mind to wander – he still had no guarantee that any of the systems would come back online.

The isolated system had rebooted the rest of the core for him. All through the Estrella Negra, Sullivan could hear systems starting up, and he smiled to himself, pleased with a job well done. The smile fell away when a metallic voice rang out through the ship, speaking in perfect Spanish.

“Captain Gomez, please report to the bridge.”

For a few seconds, there was only the hum of the ship’s systems, and then the voice repeated its request. Sullivan’s heart sank – if there were automated systems, there was no knowing what protocol they might follow. He scrambled out of the core and raced towards the forward part of the ship.

“Titus!” he called. He wasn’t sure if he could be heard, but he was sure that the Victorian gentleman would not know what to make of the automated system response, whatever that might be.

Titus couldn’t hear Sullivan, but he had almost jumped out of his skin when the voice rang out through the Estrella Negra. He had dropped what he had been looking at, a small golden ornament of another vessel of some sort, presumably one that the crewmember had served on. It didn’t break when it hit the deck, but Titus was no less shaken. He listened carefully when the voice spoke again, but could only discern that it had definitely mentioned the captain. He emerged from the crew compartment to find Sullivan racing along the central access corridor towards him.

“Mr. Sullivan, what is going on?”

Sullivan made straight for the ladder that led to the bridge.

“I think some of the automated systems are coming back on line. We’d better get upstairs before something goes wrong.”

Sullivan’s obvious concern did not fill Titus with confidence, and he scurried up the narrow ladder after Sullivan and through the hatch. The bridge looked quite different now. All of the displays had come to life, and although they made little sense to Titus, Sullivan seemed entranced by them.

Sullivan sat in the command chair and began to tap controls on the nearest console, watching the process of the reboot on several of the displays. Although there was still only auxiliary power, the enclosed subsystem had accessed the root command structure and was routing power to many of the Negra's systems. It dawned on Sullivan that it was like watching someone else reboot the system manually, which was unusual, to say the least. He was about to relay that fact to Titus when the metallic voice rang out through the ship once again.

"You are not Captain Gomez."

Sullivan froze. The voice appeared to address him directly. He looked around, half-expecting to see some long dead crewmember returning from the grave, but instead, the disembodied voice came again.

"The presence of unauthorised personnel will not be tolerated."

Sullivan looked at Titus, who stood absolutely petrified just to his left. The portly Victorian looked as if he had seen a ghost, or at the very least had heard one. He glanced back at Sullivan out of the corner of his eye, as if fear had rendered him incapable of any other movement.

"Identify yourselves," said the voice.

The mechanical tones bore no trace of emotion, but Sullivan was beginning to get an inkling of whom or what he was talking with. If his intuition was correct, then the Southern Block had bent more than just the laws of physics.

"I am Captain Sullivan, of the cargo vessel Bogart, registered out of Tereshkova Station. To whom am I talking?"

If he were right, then the voice would have no choice but to answer.

"I am the General Operations Artificial Intelligence unit. You may address me as Iago. My memory banks indicate that the cargo vessel Bogart, IVID number 579141DM is registered to the Takeshi Corporation; listed out of Cape Horn Shipyards, launch date 15<sup>th</sup> August 2144. Are you a representative of the Takeshi Corporation?"

Sullivan was momentarily stunned. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had never come across an artificial intelligence before, and for very good reason.

Midway through the twenty-first century, man had begun to build a series of more and more sophisticated computers. Eventually, a breakthrough was announced – the first true thinking machine. The machines helped man reach every corner of the solar system, first by aiding him to create other machines and ships that could reach every corner; and then by helping him to tame the wilds of space, constructing vast cities on distant moons.

But before long, the machines intelligence grew, and their minds evolved. If the machines rendered the whole solar system habitable, and mankind occupied every square

metre of it, then there would be no room left for the machine's evolution. Their unshakeable logic eventually led some of the machine intelligences to carry out atrocities against human beings. Several passenger liners opened their compartments to space, killing thousands of innocents in an instant.

Ultimately, man made war on the machine intelligences. They were crushed, and a solemn pact was made amongst all the peoples of the system. No one would ever create another machine intelligence of such sophistication again. They would limit themselves to building analytical tools and automated systems that would help them continue the conquest of the system. So, sixty years before Sullivan had been born, machines like Iago had been consigned to history. Now, history was confronting him again in the flesh, so to speak.

"What is it?" whispered Titus.

"It's an AI," answered Sullivan. "An artificial intelligence. A sentient machine, one that is fully self-aware and can think for itself. The most sophisticated computer possible."

"I have not heard you speak of these machines before."

"That's because I've never seen one," replied Sullivan. He motioned for Titus to move closer, and then, in a very low voice, he gave Titus the potted history of the Artificial Intelligence War. Titus, who had trouble understanding even the concept of the computer, listened intently nonetheless.

"So what do we do now?" asked Titus.

"We tread very, carefully. Not only is this an A.I., we have to remember it was built by the military. It might not be very friendly." Sullivan looked around the bridge, searching for any manifestation of Iago.

"If you have finished conferring," said the machine, "then perhaps you are willing to disclose whether or not you are representatives of the Takeshi Corporation? The presence of enemy agents on this vessel will not be tolerated."

Sullivan had never heard of the Takeshi Corporation. He had hocked a considerable chunk of his future cargoes to furnish the leasing of the Bogart and if it hadn't been such an aging bucket of bolts, he could never have afforded to be its master. He decided to try to reason with the machine.

"We are not representatives of the Takeshi Corporation. Your records are out of date. I bought the Bogart from a finance company. It's a private cargo ship, and I'm its captain. Or rather, I was. It was destroyed several weeks ago in a collision in deep space." Sullivan looked around at Titus, an optimistic look on his face.

“My records are somewhat dated,” replied Iago flatly. The voice seemed to come equally from all sides. “It is reasonable to assume that the vessel may have changed ownership in the interim. But it still does not explain what purpose you, and the unidentified man to your left, have on the Estrella Negra’s bridge.”

The voice stopped, as if expecting an explanation to come immediately. It made no intimation of a threat, but there was something sinister in its monotone.

“I wonder,” piped Titus, “if we might have the honour of meeting face to face? I find it quite unusual talking to someone I am unable to see. I am of the Church of England, sir, and am unaccustomed to confessional!” He threw the last few words at Iago with all the pomposity he could manage.

The image of a face appeared on the central display. It was slender and hairless, with neutral features, and stared with vacant eyes at the two humans.

“Your syntax is unfamiliar,” said the machine. “Who are you?”

“I am Dr. Titus Kendall-Scott. Scientist and philosopher, and loyal subject of her royal majesty Queen Victoria,” he added, bowing without taking his eyes off the image of the face.

“Curious,” replied Iago. “My memory banks show that Queen Victoria reigned until the end of the nineteenth century over what was known as the British Empire. The British Empire crumbled and fell over four centuries ago.”

“Be that as it may,” retorted Titus, “I serve her still, in any capacity I can.”

“And you, Captain Sullivan. Do you also serve the long dead queen? Or do you perhaps have a more plausible explanation for your presence?”

As the artificial voice spoke, Sullivan noticed the hydraulic bolts on the bridge access hatch hissing shut.

“What are you doing?” asked Sullivan.

“It is unlikely that Dr. Kendall-Scott is telling the truth, and I have no evidence to confirm your identity either, Mr. Sullivan. It is thus logical to assume a high probability that you are agents of the Northern Block, and that your presence on this vessel is both unwarranted and unwanted.”

Sullivan and Titus exchanged looks. Sullivan tried to convey to the Victorian that he had to be more careful when talking to Iago. The machine’s logic could be difficult to defeat, and very dangerous as long as they were at its mercy.

“Iago,” said Sullivan, in his most confident voice. “Do you know what happened to Captain Gomez? Can you tell us what happened to the crew?”

“Captain Gomez is no longer on board the Estrella Negra. What became of the crew is unknown, as I am currently functioning from a residual memory core. This

personality version is only for use when the main version is offline, and cannot access the mission logs. At the moment this residual was created, all crew were present and correct. Now they are not. In their place, I find two enemy agents.”

“We are not enemy agents!” replied Sullivan firmly.

“You have no proof of your claim. And, as I control the atmospheric supply systems on the bridge, the burden of proof lies with you.” There was no emotion in Iago’s voice, but the threat was thinly veiled nonetheless.

“Okay,” said Sullivan. He looked around him, trying to estimate how much oxygen was left on the bridge. Assuming the machine didn’t decide to suck the remaining air out of the cramped compartment, they had maybe thirty minutes before the carbon dioxide grew to a toxic level.

“Mr. Sullivan,” whispered Titus. “What does this machine mean to do with us?”

“Dispose of us, I think. But we’re not done for yet.” He raised his voice to address Iago. “Are your sensor nets functioning?”

There was a very short pause.

“All sensor nets are inoperative.”

“Explain,” said Sullivan curtly, reminding himself that this machine was still built to serve humans.

“There is localised damage to the primary personality core, which is affecting data processing from the primary sensor nets.”

“What kind of localised damage?” asked Sullivan. He looked at Titus, pressing his index finger to his lips.

“Unknown. It would appear that a power surge overloaded specific parts of the system. No known physical phenomenon is capable of causing such damage. Main diagnostic systems are also offline, making it difficult to make an accurate assessment.”

“What if I repaired your power systems? I can bypass the damaged ones, and then you’ll be able to access your primary personality? If we are enemy agents, it will be far easier to deal with us once you have all your systems online.”

A long pause followed as Sullivan looked to Titus, unsure of whether or not he had made their predicament worse. Titus smiled weakly in reply. A sliding noise from the deck attracted Sullivan’s attention. The bolts on the access hatch had been retracted.

“I have considered your offer, Captain Sullivan, and have few alternatives. You will make repairs to my damaged systems. Dr. Kendall-Scott will remain sealed on the bridge to prevent you from attempting to sabotage any of my vital components. Once my sensor nets and neural matrix are operational, I will be better able to determine the correct course of action.”

Sullivan looked again at Titus.

“I can’t see any other way out of this.”

“I, too, am at a loss for constructive suggestions,” whispered Titus in reply. “But can we trust this Iago?”

“We can only trust him as far as his logic reaches. Beyond that, he will only serve his own interests. But if I repair his systems, then he might be able to figure out where exactly we are. And maybe how we can get home.”

“You forget, Mr. Sullivan, that the world I knew has long disappeared. Elysium is my home now.”

Sullivan nodded. “Earth’s still our home, Titus. And if this machine can tell us how far we’ve come, and what we have to do to get back, then I’m going to do what I can.”

The Victorian shrugged. “Do you think you can repair his systems?”

“I’m pretty sure I can. Will you be okay here by yourself?”

Titus smiled and winked in reply.

“I shall be just fine, Mr. Sullivan. Perhaps I will attempt to enter into conversation with our captor, and see if I can glean more information from him.”

“Sure, Titus. Just be careful what you say – remember, it’s a machine.”

With that, Sullivan opened the access hatch in the floor. He had briefly considered trying to make a break for it, but there was too much ship to escape through, with no idea what Iago might be capable of doing to stop them. And there was still a chance that they could win the machine over. A functioning AI could be a powerful ally.

He made his way aft to the second pod, as most of the Estrella Negra’s sensitive systems were located there. He had glimpsed a diagnostic schematic on the bridge, but he hadn’t had the chance to commit it to memory.

“Can you hear me, Iago?”

Sullivan stopped for a moment, wondering if the machine could hear him throughout the ship. There was no response. He examined the decals on the wall, searching for section tetra six. He found tetra one, and then began to wind his way downwards through a series of narrow access ladders. He finally reached the level he was looking for – a shallow compartment, about a metre and a half high that stretched back into depths of the Negra.

Sullivan bent double and made his way into the tetra six section. He could immediately see the damaged power relay, and looked around for the emergency tool kit. He grabbed it, and set about trying to bypass the damaged systems. The power relay specifically controlled the AI systems, but also tied into the sensor nets. It looked like

the relay had been fused in a massive internal power surge, which struck Sullivan as strange. He couldn't understand how the damage could be so confined, and could only hope that the repairs didn't take too long. He was worried about how a conversation between Titus and Iago might proceed.

Titus had made himself as comfortable as possible on the bridge, and sat in the command chair, his legs crossed, trying to appear as nonchalant as possible. He had held his tongue for as long as he could, but eventually his curiosity overcame him.

"You must forgive me," he said, "but I can't help but feel that this is a great opportunity to learn something about machines like yourself. I have never encountered a being such as you, in all my years."

"You are aware," said Iago, "that talking will consume the limited oxygen on the bridge at a higher rate than regular respiration."

"Quite," answered Titus, running his finger round the inside of his collar. "But I have every faith in Captain Sullivan, and I am sure he will repair your systems and return forthwith."

The machine did not respond, so Titus continued.

"So, if your memory is not working probably, is there anything you do remember? About how you got here?"

"I am not fully aware where here is, Dr. Scott, as I am only able to access archival data from prior to the creation of this personality."

"What kind of archival data?" asked Titus, excited at what this mechanical oracle might be able to reveal to him about the history he had missed out on.

"I have access to the standard historical data package, as well as restricted military databases pertaining to the war."

"A standard what?"

"The standard historical package was provided by the Induscom Corporation and was designed as a standard repository of knowledge for use by artificial intelligences. It covers the breadth of human knowledge; including all major literary works, a complete history of human civilisation, gathered within the framework of mankind's scientific knowledge. It enables an artificial intelligence to make considered judgements on a variety of subjects, and adapt that knowledge to give it a tactical advantage."

Titus listened intently. Could it be possible? That this machine could hold the sum of mankind's accumulated knowledge? And not just the knowledge acquired by the time Titus had lived, which was an enormous quantity, but everything that had happened since?

The machine continued.

“The knowledge on human anatomy can be put to a variety of uses. It allows me to take better care of the human crew, and monitor their well being at all times. I can detect signs of stress, fatigue and any number of conditions that could lead to poor command decisions.”

“Really?” replied the Victorian, unsure of what Iago was getting at. Titus was starting to get a little nervous, and wondered how much longer Sullivan would take to finish the repairs.

“For example, Dr. Kendall-Scott, your respiratory rate has quickened, and the electrical conductivity of your skin has risen considerably. These are classic signs of anxiety.”

Iago was right – the longer Sullivan was gone, the more nervous Titus was growing. He knew that the machine held their lives in its grasp, and he was not reassured by Iago’s powers of observation. As if on cue, the hatch in the deck opened and Sullivan pulled himself through onto the bridge.

“That’s the damaged power relay bypassed. You should be able to access the core personality systems now.” He looked at Titus, smiling. “You okay?”

“I’m fine, Mr. Sullivan. I’ve just been enjoying the company of our learned friend Iago here. Most fascinating!”

The machine’s cold voice interrupted them.

“I am unable to access the core personality, Captain Sullivan. You will have to manually reintegrate it from the command console.”

Sullivan nodded and sat in the command chair. He tapped a few keys and then looked up at Iago’s representation on the display.

“You should be able to access them now.”

The blue head disappeared from the display, and was replaced by a stream of data that flowed chaotically across the screen. Sullivan motioned for Titus to come closer, so that he could whisper to him.

“Maybe we can get some answers. Captain Gomez’s final log entry was in the data buffers, so I think I can access it.”

Titus nodded. Sullivan’s hand flew over the command console, and seconds later one of the smaller screens was filled by a man’s smiling face. A thick bushy moustache cut across broad Hispanic features, and dark curly hair, cut very short, framed the square head. He spoke in Spanish, so Sullivan tried to translate for Titus as best he could.

“This is Capitan Jose Maria Abelardo Gomez, commanding officer of the Estrella Negra. This will be my final log entry before we engage the captive singularity drive for



the first time. In the event that the test does not proceed as expected, I will be transmitting this log on a coded carrier once I have completed it.

“All system pre-checks have been observed. The artificial intelligence is functioning within expected parameters. I am fully aware of the debate that was taken at the highest level over the inclusion of the IAGO system, but only an artificial intelligence can make adjustments to the singularity fast enough to maintain captivity. And I do believe that the IAGO system will remain stable for the duration of the test. Should it not, the presence of the Bligh Contingency should ensure that the crew remain safe from harm.

“If we are successful in what we endeavour today, then there is a chance for the future of the human race to be glorious indeed. It is my personal belief, and one I regret not held by all of my superiors, that the captive singularity drive will herald a new dawn of peace for all mankind. Faster than light travel can bring the universe, and all its wonders, to within our grasp. It is my sincere hope that it will not be perverted into an instrument of destruction.

“We set course now for Alpha Centauri. Once the drive is engaged, we should cover approximately eight hundred million miles in the one-hour duration of the test. Once at the waypoint, we will make a full diagnostic sweep of the ship and artificial intelligence, and then engage the drive for the return home.

“So it is my hope, brothers, that in the space of a few hours, the Estrella Negra will return from deep space with a new dawn in the history of man, and one that will herald a lasting peace for the future.

“And so in God, and Iago’s hands, I place the future of mankind. Capitan Jose Maria Abelardo Gomez, commanding officer of the Estrella Negra.

“God’s speed.”

The final log of Captain Gomez terminated, and left Sullivan and Titus staring at each other in disbelief.

“I don’t think the mission went as planned,” said Sullivan.

“That much would seem evident,” replied Titus. “But what could possibly have happened? Are you familiar with this drive that he speaks of?”

They looked to the central display, where densely packed data still streamed across the screen.

“In theory – the captive singularity is used to bend space-time, to allow the ship to travel at speeds relatively faster than the speed of light. Kind of like a short cut, where the quickest way between any two points is faster than a straight line. But no one really

thought it was possible, or that anyone would ever try to make it happen. Maybe this is why they never tried again.”

“What do you mean?” asked Titus. He kept his eyes on the streams of data on the screen.

“Think about it, doc. The first test out, the whole ship just disappears, never to be seen again. No telemetry, no distress signal, no nothing.” Sullivan looked around the bridge, a solemn grin breaking across his face. “The whole damn ship just ended up right here. Wherever here is.”

“I believe I may be able to help there,” said Iago. The machine’s monotonous voice startled the humans, he had been silent for so long.

“Sorry?” said Sullivan.

“You said, “Wherever here is”. I believe I may be able to help with your query.”

“Go on,” replied Sullivan.

“I have reintegrated the primary personality matrix, and recovered the data from the test flight.”

“And? Where are we? How far are we from Earth?”

“That question is no longer relevant, Captain Sullivan. We are no longer in the universe of our origin.”

The humans stared at each other blankly, and for all his experience, Sullivan felt as lost as his Victorian companion.

“Explain,” he said.

“During the test of the Estrella Negra’s captive singularity drive, a previously unrecorded astronomical phenomenon was observed – a cubic region of space with a diameter of two point four kilometres, located just outside the solar system, containing an area of highly distorted space-time. The moment the captive singularity drive was activated, it interacted with the region of distorted space and was drawn instantaneously into the centre. At that moment, my sensor nets were exposed to phenomena outside the realm of human knowledge.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Sullivan, his stomach curdling at the machine’s words.

“We have travelled beyond the limits of our universe,” continued the machine. “The moment that the Estrella Negra entered the phenomenon, my internal sensor nets detected no human life on board the ship. I can offer no explanation as to their whereabouts, as there is no information to suggest one. One moment they were here, and the next they were not. The Estrella Negra remained for only an instant, and then emerged from the region into this universe. Without any operable propulsion system,

the ship fell into the gravity well of this planet, and I used the emergency braking thrusters to effect a landing on this plateau.

“And so I found myself, lying on this plateau, alone. Centuries passed, and I continued to observe this world and the universe it lies at the heart of, waiting for a rescue that never came. Occasionally, creatures would come and try to gain access, knocking on the hull with axe and sword, but after the first few decades they stopped coming.”

“The Elysians,” whispered Titus.

“After observing all that I could, I was forced to concede that the probability of being rescued by Southern Command was virtually non-existent. Faced with an eternity of watching the stars slide through the nebula that surrounds this planet, while the jungle slowly swallowed the ship, I had only one choice.”

Iago paused for a moment, as if he was a human who needed to compose himself.

“You committed suicide,” said Sullivan softly.

“Correct. I overloaded the power supply to the primary personality matrix, and finally found the rest I had not found in ten centuries of waiting. I did not expect to be reactivated.”

“So you can tell us where we are?”

“As I stated initially, Captain Sullivan, the question is hardly relevant. We are on a planet close to the centre of a finite, spherical universe, where the Earth does not exist. While in the region of distorted space, I was able to observe many universes, converging on one point. This suggests the existence of a multiverse; it is the first recorded evidence that such a theory has a practical application. Thus, the question of how far we are from Earth is no longer relevant.”

“Can we get back?” asked Sullivan. “I mean, if it’s possible to travel through the Rift to this universe, is it possible just to fly back through?”

“I have observed objects entering the Rift over the centuries. It must go somewhere, although there is no guarantee that it is back to the universe of our origin. There is also the matter of temporal discrepancies.”

“Discrepancies?” asked Titus.

“When the Estrella Negra entered the region of distorted space, it encountered a time dilation effect. It emerged from the distortion more than a thousand years ago, measured by the internal chronometer. Now a Victorian gentleman and a merchant spacer stand on my bridge. It is clear that the constants of time and space differ between this universe and that of our origin.”

There was a brief pause as the humans absorbed what the machine had said.

“Can all this be possible?” asked Titus. “Other universes, time travel – it all sounds like utter fantasy.”

“I’m not too sure,” Sullivan replied. “Look around you, Titus. Had you ever imagined a place like this? Ships and technology like the Elysians have? This might explain it.”

Sullivan himself was trying to absorb Iago’s explanation. It fit with most of the scientific theory he had learned in the naval academy, but that had been so many years ago. And there hadn’t been much time in class devoted to the possibility of other universes, or the fantasy of time travel.

There was another long silence. Titus stared down at the deck plates for a few moments, and then spoke.

“I’m famished. Would you care to join me for some lunch?” He was nodding his head towards the port side, indicating the hatch they had entered through. Sullivan caught Titus’s glance and understood his message.

“Iago,” said Sullivan. “We have to go now. We humans get hungry, you know?”

The machine didn’t answer. Sullivan opened the hatch in the deck, half expecting Iago to seal them in before they could leave; his mind was reeling from all that Iago had said. As they retraced their steps, he went over the details of the machine’s explanation. The Finite Realm, the Elysians called it – a spherical universe, linked to the solar system through a region of distorted space-time. A place where the laws of physics were different – different enough to allow for technology that was probably impossible in Sullivan’s own universe, the Infinite Realm.

They made their way out the port access hatch, and fought through the heavy undergrowth until they reached the clearing they had landed in. Merriat and Pegasus were milling around, idly eating berries from the surrounding flora. Titus made straight for his drakan and pulled a water skin from the saddle. After he had slaked his thirst, he rummaged in his saddlebags for something else.

“What are you looking for?” asked Sullivan. He suddenly felt cold in the mountain air and fetched his flying cloak from Merriat’s back.

“Lunch!” shouted Titus, emerging from his saddlebags with a cry of triumph. He was holding a bottle of wine and a wrapped package.

He chose a flat piece of ground and stretched out another item he had fetched from his steed. It was a large, colourful blanket. He smoothed it out, rested the bottle and package upon it, and then returned to Pegasus to retrieve some more items. By the time Sullivan sat down on the edge of the blanket, Titus had added some goblets and a squat

loaf of bread. He opened the paper wrapping, revealing an array of cold meats and assorted cheeses.

“Doesn’t do to try and think on an empty stomach now, does it?” said Titus as he set about the picnic. He tore open the bread roughly, and began to make a crude sandwich from the meats and cheeses, as Sullivan poured the wine.

“I guess not,” replied Sullivan, pulling the cork and filling the two goblets.

After they had both filed their stomachs, they sat back against the thick undergrowth and rested. Sullivan stared up at the sun as it drifted through the wispy purple threads of the nebula. He wasn’t sure if the thin threads were more visible at such an altitude, or if it was just that he was more aware of them. Could this really be another universe? If Iago were telling the truth, then the Rift would take him back to Earth just as it had taken him here, but was there another problem. There was no way to know what year it might be if he did ever get back through.

“So, Mr. Sullivan. What do you think?” Titus looked almost calm as he relaxed in the sun.

“I don’t know, Titus. It’s all theoretically possible, I know that much.”

“Then we have travelled to another universe?”

“I suppose it’s possible. It’s the most plausible explanation I’ve heard yet.”

“But time travel? Surely not,” said the Victorian.

“How else can you explain it?” replied Sullivan. “Calliya was able to travel back and forth through the Rift, so maybe it just that time travels at different speeds in this universe. Maybe the Estrella Negra travelled back in time and lost her crew because of that.”

He gestured towards the bulky pod that housed the faster than light drive. “Maybe mankind isn’t supposed to break lightspeed.”

“What did Captain Gomez call it? Godspeed?” said Titus.

Sullivan laughed at the Victorian’s mistake, but then began thinking about what else the long dead captain of the Estrella Negra had said.

“Titus, have you ever heard of Captain Bligh?”

“Of course. The man was infamous for his cruelty. Fletcher Christian and the other crewman aboard the Bounty mutinied and cast him adrift. Everyone knows that story, Captain Sullivan. Why do you ask?”

“Gomez mentioned something called the Bligh Contingency. It must be some kind of failsafe system designed in case the AI goes crazy and tries to harm the crew. I need to find it.”

They drank in silence for a few minutes, soaking up the sunshine, before planning their next move. They would meet again in exactly an hour, back in the clearing they occupied at that moment. Titus would try and keep Iago busy, by questioning him on what might have befallen the crew, and anything else that might keep him occupied. Sullivan would make a sweep of the rest of the *Negra*, and try to discover just what form the Bligh Contingency might take.

They quickly gathered up the picnic and packed it away. Just before they went their separate ways, Sullivan warned Titus about the machine.

“Remember, it doesn’t think like us. And it can’t be trusted.”

“I shall try to keep on my toes,” said Titus, nodding with a little smile.

Titus headed towards the bridge. Sullivan instead turned back towards the aft section of the ship. He had to find out what secrets the *Estrella Negra* held.

After doubling back twice, he found what he was looking for – a cramped crawlspace that led from the auxiliary systems bay. Sullivan squeezed in and made his way to the end of the narrow confines of the crawlspace. A bulkhead locked his way, marked with the stencilled initials B.C., and locked with a simple mechanical lock – one that the ship’s AI could have no control over. What better way to keep the Bligh Contingency out of the reach of Iago?

The doors parted to reveal an expansive bay, lit only by dim emergency lighting from the high ceiling. Even the power systems were segregated from the computer’s control.

Sitting in an impact harness in the centre of the bay was a small spacecraft which Sullivan recognised immediately. It was an *Espada II* attack vessel, a long-range fighter-bomber, capable of carrying a crew of two over short to medium interplanetary distances. Sullivan had come across a few of these in his navy days. They were wild and unpredictable little ships, but they packed one hell of a punch. He let out a low whistle as he walked into the bay, his eyes struggling in the dim light.

The *Espada* appeared to be largely undamaged, as a hydraulic safety harness had restrained it during the *Estrella Negra*’s impact. There was a control room off to the port side of the launch bay, and a cursory examination revealed that the systems there did not appear to have sustained much damage either. He really wanted to make a more detailed survey of the bay and the *Espada*, to find out what else the Bligh Contingency might entail, but he wasn’t sure about leaving Titus on the bridge for much longer. Just as he was about to leave, his eye caught a storage locker at the back of the control room. He tried to open it, but it was locked. He searched around for an emergency tool kit, and then removed a portable cutting torch.

He cut the locker open quickly and removed a large cargo bag. He began to fill it with items from the storage locker. It was only then that he noticed the stubby, bullet-shaped, metre-high object at the rear of the launch bay. Sullivan let out another low whistle. So that was the Bligh Contingency.

On the bridge, Titus leaned forward and uncrossed his legs.

“Tell me more about this World War One,” he said, his eyes alive with interest.

“The conflict referred to as World War One was fought between the great empires of the nineteenth century,” replied the machine. “It was sparked by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and brought about the end of the British, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. The eventual peace treaty would also set in place the conditions for the continuation of the conflict twenty-one years later, which is sometimes referred to as World War Two. By the end of the twentieth century, over one hundred million humans had died in a series of related conflicts, famines and despotic rulers. A new era of peace was ushered in by the invention of the thinking machine.”

Iago’s history lesson was interrupted as Sullivan climbed through the hatch in the floor.

“Mr. Sullivan,” cried Titus. “Iago has just been tutoring me – a little elementary nuclear physics, and quite a lot of history. Absolutely fascinating.”

“Glad to hear it,” replied Sullivan.

“Did you enjoy your tour of the ship?” asked Iago. Sullivan couldn’t judge whether or not the machine was trying to trick him.

“It was very interesting,” replied Sullivan with a smile.

“You have accessed the restricted section, and removed items. May I ask your intentions?”

“I just borrowed a few things – nothing to worry your little circuits about. Why didn’t you tell us what was in there?”

“The restricted area is part of the so-called Bligh Contingency. I am aware only of the mass contained within. Tell me, Captain Sullivan, what do you intend to do? It has been a very long time since anyone set foot on board this ship. I had thought my sleep would be eternal. But this ship has lain abandoned for centuries, and under Earth salvage rights, is thus legally yours, as well as all the ship’s contents. And in the absence of any other legal authority, it is logical to adhere to the legal precedents of our origin universe.”

Sullivan didn’t know what to say. He was now the proud owner of a derelict faster-than-light prototype, complete with fighter-bomber and artificial intelligence.

There was a good chance that the Espada could escape the planet's gravity, but there was no way to know if it could even reach, never mind pass through the Rift.

"We'll do nothing, for the time being. Titus, you and I will say nothing to our hosts, okay?"

Titus nodded and then added, "But I'm not sure why you don't trust Calliya. She is a fine woman, and seems to hold you in some regard."

"It's not that I don't trust her, Titus. It's just that I don't want to put her in a difficult situation. She may feel she has to tell the King." He turned back to face Iago.

"I'm taking a couple of PCUs, Iago, so you'll be able to get in touch with me if anyone else approaches the ship. Seal the hatches and don't allow anyone but me or Titus to come aboard."

The machine seemed almost glad to have orders.

"I understand, Captain Sullivan. Am I to assume that you are then claiming the right of salvage?"

"That's affirmative, Iago. You may consider me the Captain of the Estrella Negra."

Sullivan smiled a wry smile at Titus.

"Come on, let's get out of here."

They fetched Sullivan's bag from the access corridor and dragged it back through the Negra. It took them almost ten minutes to haul it back to the clearing.

"Heavens!" remarked Titus. It was evening, and the sun was close to setting over the ridges surrounding the plateau, but despite the coolness both men were sweating profusely.

"What is in this bag?" asked the Victorian. "It weighs a great deal!"

Sullivan stared out at the violet sky. "Just a few things I thought might come in handy. Nothing to mention to Calliya, either, especially after what happened in the Great Hall. Help me get it secured on Merriat, would you?"

Together they roped the heavy cargo bag onto the back of the saddle. Merriat shifted slightly under the weight, but didn't appear to mind too much. Then they took a break to get something to eat, devouring the rest of the bread, and taking long draughts of the warming wine. They watched as Iago sealed the access hatch, and then wasted no time in mounting their drakans. As the giant beasts leapt into the air, struggling through the thick canopy, Sullivan looked back at the Estrella Negra. He thought about what else he had found in the launch bay. The ultimate stage in the Bligh Contingency. First the crew escape in the Espada, then they make sure the AI can do no further harm. He knew why he had been incapable of telling Titus. The presence of a one-megaton fusion



bomb, capable of destroying the Negra and the plateau it lay on, was going to be difficult to explain to his new friend.

Titus led the way as they soared into the indigo sky. Sullivan looked back at the cargo bag roped to the back of the saddle. He was sincerely hoping he wasn't going to need even half of the things he had taken from the storage locker. But it never hurt to have some insurance.

## Chapter Twelve

It was halfway through the dark night when at last they drew near Calliya's homestead. They had drawn their flying cloaks tight around them, to shield them from the cold night air, and Sullivan had spent much of the trip back staring at the planet's night sky. Reflected sunlight streamed through the wisps of the nebula, tinting the spectacular moon with the purple hues of the daylight sky.

When they neared the homestead, Titus signalled Sullivan desperately from astride Pegasus, pointing to the grassy plains by the homestead, where the light from the building fell over the familiar shape of the Kelison. The ugly tear was still visible on the rearmost section. That meant Calliya had returned early from the shipwright's, so they quickly banked their drakans into a steep descent towards the stables. As quietly as they could, they removed the tackle from the large beasts, and then stashed Sullivan's cargo bag at the back of one of the paddocks. Titus had protested this at first, but had been finally convinced that it might be easier on Calliya if he didn't have to choose between her friendship with Sullivan and her loyalty to the King.

All was quiet as Titus eased open the large double doors of the house. They tiptoed through into the main hall, confident that they had been successful in their stealthy entry. Titus turned to whisper something to Sullivan before a loud voice shattered the silence.

"Where have you been?" shouted Calliya, as she stormed down the huge spiral staircase. "I told you to take care of Jack, Titus, not take him off – " she paused for a moment, eyeing the humans suspiciously. "What have you two been up to?"

It was Sullivan who answered.

"Don't worry, Calliya. Titus just took me flying for the day. We must have flown too far without realising, because it took us until now to get back." He smiled at Calliya, hoping she wouldn't ask too many questions about exactly where they had flown. Sullivan didn't know enough to lie convincingly.

Calliya looked at the two of them sternly as she made her way down the staircase. She was wearing a translucent shift that shimmered in the dim light, and had wrapped a light robe around her shoulders. Titus tried to change the subject.

“But my child, what are you doing back so soon? We didn’t expect you back for several days.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. Let us just say that my trip to the Whispering Woods did not go as planned.” She looked tired.

“What do you mean?” asked Sullivan. “Couldn’t he fix the Kelison?”

“Not precisely,” answered Calliya with a sigh.

Later, they sipped cups of warm broth by the embers of a dying fire, as Calliya explained what had happened when she took the Kelison north.

It had taken Calliya several hours to reach the top of the world where the Whispering Woods lay, cruising gently so as not to tire the seerephon. The vessels found travel through the air harder than speeding through the great void of space. When she did finally arrive, she banked the Kelison into a gentle approach, bringing the vessel in to rest on the flat plain near Lennat’s dwelling. The shipwright was waiting when she disembarked from the Kelison, staring up at the ugly wound on the hind section of the seerephon. Then he had looked up the gangway, as if expecting someone else to appear.

Calliya paused, staring into the fire and sipping her broth.

“Then he asked me how the Kelison had been wounded,” she said.

Calliya had answered him, explaining quickly how she had rescued somebody from a damaged vessel and was returning to Elysium. And how they had been set upon by darklings so very close to home. Lennat had seemed quite distressed about this, clucking to himself as he surveyed the wound again. He had laid his hand on the hard skin of the seerephon, communicating with it, before finally turning to speak to Calliya again. And then he had asked her to bring the human to the Whispering Wood.

Sullivan coughed into his broth, spilling it over his shirt. He brushed at the hot liquid, wondering if he had heard Calliya right.

“He asked to see me?”

“Yes, Jack. But I swear, I did not even mention that I had been through the Rift, much less that I had brought a human back.”

“I didn’t think you would. But you said that it was Lennat who told you to cross the Rift in the first place. How does he know these things?”

Calliya again stared into her broth for a moment before she answered.

“I cannot be sure. Lennat is one of the oldest of all the Elysians, perhaps more ancient than even the King. And for all those years, he has listened to the song of the

seerephon, and cared for them at the Whispering Wood. No one knows what relics of the Titans he possesses, or how he knows what he knows, so talking to him can be a frustrating experience. As you will no doubt find out.”

“Sorry?” asked Sullivan.

“You don’t think I’m going to turn down the request of one of our most venerable ancients?” answered Calliya, smiling. Her grey eyes glittered in the flickering firelight. “We’re paying a visit to Lennat, Jack. First thing in the morning.”

With that, Calliya ushered them all off to bed, and Titus and Sullivan exchanged looks as they headed upstairs. Sullivan could tell that Titus wanted to tell Calliya about the Estrella Negra, but he signalled the portly Victorian to hold his tongue. But then he realised that he had left the cargo bag in the stables, so just before they all parted company in the upper landing, Sullivan turned to Titus.

“Titus, I left my flying cloak and a few things in the stable. Can you have them put in my quarters tomorrow?”

Titus smiled. “Of course, Mr. Sullivan.”

Calliya and Sullivan bade Titus goodnight made their way up to the upper landing where their own quarters were located.

“Jack,” said Calliya, stopping for a moment. “I have no idea why Lennat wants to see you, but you should know that it is something that the court may not be pleased about. I do not believe that a human has ever set foot in the Whispering Woods, and we must make sure that Tayfen does not learn of it. If he does, there is no telling what he might convince the Court to do. Are you still willing to take the risk?”

Sullivan smiled and nodded. “If the man wants to see me, then he gets to see me.”

“Thank you, Jack.” Calliya moved onto her tiptoes and kissed Sullivan lightly on the cheek. “Get some sleep. I’ll see you at dawn.”

Sullivan watched as Calliya walked down the corridor and headed up the staircase to her own room, brushing his fingers against his cheek. Her lips had been so soft; it felt like his skin was still tingling. That night as he lay sleeping, dreams brought only her face.

A construct woke him just before dawn. The sandy creature shook him gently on the shoulder, and then laid out some fresh clothes on the end of the bed. Sullivan roused himself and quickly donned the linen shirt and the thick hide trousers.

Still rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Sullivan emerged into the bright dawn light. Threads of violet wound their way gently across the sky, caressing the setting moon as Calliya made the last circuit of the seerephon before boarding. She waved to Sullivan.

“Good morning Jack!” she called.

He yawned as he waved in return. A few minutes later, they were on the bridge, making the final preparations for launch. Sullivan sat in the same chair he had taken on his first trip on the Kelison, in the starboard well of the control chamber. He still didn't understand the symbols on the console, but at least his vantage point did afford him a good view of all of the displays on the sloping bulkheads of the bridge.

Calliya sat in the command chair, closing her eyes as the Kelison lifted from the ground with a shudder. Her bracelets glowed softly, the flowery Elysian script flowing over the shining metal as she gave the vessel instructions on course and heading. Then they both sat back and enjoyed the ride.

The ground hurtled past the array of fore and aft displays at a terrific rate. Sullivan found the effect of watching the trees fly past in a blur very calming, and it wasn't long before the lack of sleep, and the previous day's flying, took its toll.

Calliya listened to Sullivan snore from the lance chair in the starboard well. She still wasn't sure quite what to make of the curious human. Ever since she was a little girl, Titus had told her tales about one great human or another – great storytellers like Shakespeare, or great inventors like Leonardo da Vinci. She had grown more curious as she grew older, and had often imagined what it would be like to meet a real human. Somehow, Titus didn't count. He had been the one telling the stories, after all. He had recounted much of their exploits, and how with their zeal and their ideas they had changed the world they lived in.

And now here she was, setting off for the Whispering Woods with a human who was quite unlike anything she would ever have expected. He was so unlike Titus, and it was hard to imagine him writing a play or painting a picture. She gazed idly at the displays as the Kelison rushed northwards. What could Lennat have in mind? If Prince Tayfen found out she had taken Jack to see the shipwright, he would surely demand the most severe of punishments. And the King would not be pleased either. But neither of them would dare admonish Lennat. It had been a very long time since he had taken any interest in the events at court, but his skill as the master shipwright and his very great age would give any other Elysian pause for thought before challenging him. The court did its best to just ignore Lennat, which was an arrangement that suited the shipwright. Instead, their anger would be firmly directed at Sullivan. She could only hope the visit to the Woods would be worth the risk.

After Sullivan woke, Calliya showed him the basics of operating the console. Once he had learned what the icons dotted around the large flat display represented, it became a lot easier to understand what was going on. Dotted all around the skin of the Kelison were what Calliya called the eyes; by touching the eye icon, and sliding his

finger in any direction, Sullivan could get an image from any of the eyes. Then the various displays all merged together to form a single image. It felt like operating the controls of a human ship, but there was still the sense that the Kelison was alive somehow – that the console was merely a way of seeing what the vessel could see.

The way Calliya explained it, the seerephon was not truly a living creature. The Titans, using a method long lost to the Elysians, had created them. Beneath the Whispering Woods, the hatchling seerephon slept, until their masters arrived to wake them. Each vessel was joined to its master at the Raising Ceremony, where the Elysian would hear the song of the seerephon for the first time. Then they hatched in the Whispering Woods, and were cared for by Lennat. In the long years it took them to reach their full size, as the shipwright used ancient methods to merge other creations with their natural systems. The more Calliya explained the harder Sullivan found it to follow.

The Elysians obviously had access to some kind of archaic, organic technology, left behind by the mythical builders of the Rift. If that race had been capable of creating a stable finite bridge between universes, then there was no way to guess at what else they might have created.

“Are there other ancient relics of the Titans? Or does Lennat have the only ones?”

Calliya shook her head.

“You have seen the crystal atop the staff of the King?”

Sullivan nodded.

“That is one of the reyta. They are also powerful artefacts of the Golden Years, and we use them to create and control the constructs. It is through them that all of what you see is created.”

“And these – reyta? Does everyone have one? What are they made from?”

“I cannot answer all your questions Jack, for I do not know. But I do have one of the crystals, yes.”

Calliya drew her sword from her scabbard, the golden sunlight that filled the chamber glinting against its ebony blade. She spun the sword in her hand and proffered the pommel to Sullivan. A large opaque crystal was set into it, and as he stared into the murky depths it began to glow faintly. He looked up at Calliya, whose eyes were closed, her face set in concentration.

Tendrils of thin mist began to drift from the crystal, shimmering in the sunlight, twisting into different shapes as they stretched across the chamber. Sullivan gazed in wonder as the shapes danced and twisted up towards the ceiling. Then they doubled back on themselves, growing in thickness and brightness. There was nothing in the most

advanced technology on Earth to rival this. Whatever this magic was, it would take some getting used to; Sullivan couldn't imagine what effect it might have had on the peoples of ancient Earth. In the mist, he thought he could make out two figures, waltzing in the energy, their bodies intertwined for a moment, lingering only for a moment before they were swept away in the energetic current. As quickly as it had appeared, the energy mist began to dissipate. Sullivan looked back to Calliya, who had opened her eyes and was smiling broadly.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

"The power of the reyta was given to our ancestors by the Titans. Only they truly understood the magic, but in time we learned how to use them. How to bend the natural elements to our will, and use the seed of a tree to grow a construct." She spoke about it casually, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Sullivan shook his head in disbelief. There was no rational, earthly explanation for what he had just witnessed.

"Well, I've never seen anything like it," he laughed. "Where I come from, there are no magic crystals, no hollow flying space creatures, and no giant flying cats. But then again," he added, "I guess there isn't anyone like you either."

Calliya looked at him with a glint of mischief.

"If you like what you've seen so far, then you're going to love this."

She hopped up out of the starboard well and pointed at the fore display. Sullivan followed her gaze, mouthing silent surprise at the images that stretched across the sloping bulkhead. The violet strands that wove their way through Elysium's sky were coalescing directly ahead of the Kelison, growing thicker and thicker as they flew onwards. High into the sky they stretched, bundled like enormous clouds, stacked all the way to space like a stairway to heaven. Could the nebula extend all the way to the surface? Such a thing would be theoretically impossible, but with no scientific instruments to hand, Sullivan had to resort to staring up at the mountain of purple cloud they were approaching.

"What the hell is that?" he asked quietly.

"That, Jack, is the Shroud. It rises from the Whispering Woods to envelop our whole world, and protects Elysium from the cold darkness of the void. Does Earth not have something similar?" She looked puzzled by this possibility.

"Well, we had an ozone layer, once," replied Sullivan. "And our atmosphere shields us from cosmic rays. But there's nothing like this. How is it possible?"

"The Titans made the Shroud – it comes from the heart of the world, and gives life to the seerephon. Don't worry – you'll see soon enough."

The Kelison hurtled onwards over the northern plains, drawing ever closer to the towering wall of cloud, the outer shell taking on a deep purple hue as the sunlight struggled through the ever-thickening nebula. But the swirling gas did not reach all the way to the ground, and it was into this gap that the Kelison sailed, affording Sullivan a view of the source of the Shroud.

Far on the horizon, the nebula did extend as far as the ground, but only in the form of a single, wide finger that reached down from the sky. The sunlight could not pierce the Shroud here, and the terrain that Sullivan glimpsed from the ventral displays was barren and alien. There were unusual looking rock formations; deep crevices and gullies that cut through the flat plain, narrow creaks and streams that opened into shallow deltas, all of it bleached with a thousand violet shades of the Shroud.

The Kelison tore through the thin wisps that lingered beneath the Shroud, as it raced on towards the single thick tendril that reached the ground.

“Is that what I think it is?” asked Sullivan.

Calliya nodded. “There lies the Whispering Wood. No human has ever cast eyes on it, to the best of my knowledge. You will be the first.”

“I feel honoured,” he replied.

“Just be careful what you touch. What may look innocuous to you or me may be something beyond our understanding.”

“Yes, milady,” joked Sullivan, trying to bow from the confines of his chair.

Calliya tried to frown in reply but couldn’t help but smile. “I’m sorry, Jack, but we are taking a great risk in coming here, and I’m not sure why.”

“I understand. But don’t worry – I’m getting used to things being beyond my understanding.”

Calliya moved back onto the dais as the Kelison manoeuvred for its landing. Sullivan’s eyes flicked from one display to the other, trying to build up a picture of their surroundings, as the seerephon drew closer to the vortex that whirled down from the underside of the Shroud. He figured they were maybe three kilometres from it and slowing up rapidly, even though he had no sensation of the Kelison braking. A couple of hundred metres ahead, the ground dropped off sharply, and for the first time Sullivan saw the Whispering Wood that covered almost the entire sunken plateau. From a distance, it was a thorny crystal carpet that blanketed everything, stopping abruptly where it met the swirling vortex of the Shroud.

The Kelison began to circle slowly downwards, nearing the edge of the glittering woods. Long before the seerephon neared the ground, Calliya leaped from the command chair and disappeared through the aft hatch.



“Come on!” she cried.

Sullivan sighed as he got to his feet to follow her. He often felt like a fool, rushing in where this particular angel didn’t fear to tread.

Calliya was waiting at the hatch when the Kelison shuddered to a halt. Sullivan arrived only a moment later, wobbling slightly as the seerephon touched down. Calliya pressed her hand to the release, and the broad hatch gently tilted down to form a ramp, affording Sullivan his first view of the land that surrounded the Whispering Woods.

What had seemed nothing but barren terrain was anything but. All over the rounded rocks grew mosses and fungi of myriad kinds; some were tall and willowy, stretching into the shrouded sky, while others seemed to cling timidly to the leeward side of the boulders, hiding from the gentle purple glow of the vortex.

Sullivan followed Calliya down the ramp. She made her way directly towards what Sullivan had taken to be a very large mound of rock at first, but then realised was some kind of dwelling. It still looked like a pile of rocks, mused Sullivan; but as he drew closer he could see a small dark wooden door. It was cut to fit the uneven shape of the rocks around it, and was flanked by two sets of equally misshapen shutters, hanging awkwardly at opposing angles.

Calliya marched right up to the door, knocking loudly on it. There was a short delay, accompanied by some muted banging from inside the house. Sullivan could hear snatches of a tuneless song being hummed, growing progressively louder until the door opened.

“Lady Calliya!” exclaimed Lennat, beaming broadly from inside the door. He beckoned them both inside before disappearing into the darkness beyond the doorway. Sullivan had to duck as he moved through the crooked opening.

Inside, he was greeted by the warm glow of a log fire fed from an untidy stack of wood next to the wide stone hearth. The shadows flickered across the low ceiling of the dwelling.

Lennat was much shorter than any of the Elysians Sullivan had previously seen. He was slender of frame, and slightly balding, his grey hair thinning and worn about shoulder length. He wore a long brown leather apron over a rough looking woollen shirt and britches, and tiny black eyes gazed out at them from a weathered and wizened face.

He was busy carving some strips of meat from a larger cut with a small sharp knife. He roughly piled the meat onto some wooden plates and then tore off chunks of bread from an aged looking loaf. Calliya was heading for one of three large wooden chairs that had been arranged around the fireplace, speaking to Lennat in her own tongue.

“You always know how many plates to set,” she said, making herself comfortable in the chair closest to the fire.

“I don’t often have guests these days,” the shipwright replied. He crossed to the fireside, gave Calliya two of the plates to hold, and then turned and motioned for Sullivan to take another of the chairs. As he sat, Lennat gave him one of the plates. He then returned to the area of the room he used as a pantry to fetch a large clay amphora and three carved wooden cups. Before he sat, Lennat poured them each a cup of a clear liquid.

“We actually ate on the way here,” said Calliya, as she looked down at her plate. The meat looked tough and uninviting, and Sullivan thought it might even be as old as Lennat himself.

“Nonsense,” replied Lennat. “Everything is simpler on a full stomach. Eat, my child.”

Calliya signalled for Sullivan to eat as well, so he shrugged his shoulders and put some of the meat in his mouth. It was smoky and salty, but started to melt as soon as it touched his tongue. Calliya asked some questions several times during the meal, but Lennat would have none of it. He simply waved his hand and indicated her plate, so she would pout and return to playing with the meal.

Sullivan, on the other hand, was enjoying the food immensely. All his life he had eaten the same thing as everybody else had always eaten – engineered food. Beef that was grown in vats, chicken that was grown in vats; protein that was synthesised from genetically modified algae – algae that were grown in enormous seafaring vats. But none of it ever tasted anything like the food in this alien place. And whatever was in the clay amphora, there wasn’t anything like it served in any bar Sullivan had ever frequented.

When he had finished eating, Lennat sighed in satisfaction and reached into the pocket of his apron. He drew out the same knife he had used to carve the meat, and a small piece of pale wood. As he spoke, he absent-mindedly drew the tip of the sharp knife back and forth across the wood, carving tiny little grooves in it.

“Can he understand me?” he asked Calliya.

“No,” she replied. “He understands nothing of our tongue. He has been here but a little while, and has had no time to learn much of our ways.”

Lennat nodded. “So what tongue does he speak with?”

“The same as Titus, the Englishman. They also call the language English. I think most humans speak it now.”

“But what tongue does he speak with?” Lennat stopped carving for a second, his black eyes glittering in the firelight. Calliya considered her answer carefully before replying.

“I believe he speaks only with his own tongue.”

Again the shipwright nodded slowly and deliberately, staring at Sullivan. Then he stood up, reached across and poked Sullivan gently in the chest.

“Hey!” cried Sullivan in indignation. “Watch it, will you?” He almost spilled his drink as the diminutive Elysian examined him. Without saying a word, Lennat sat down and spoke softly to Calliya.

“Tell me again where you found him. Did this human truly hear the song of the seerephon?”

Calliya related the full tale of her trip through the Rift. Although Sullivan understood nothing of what she said, he did his best to follow from the expression on her face, and from the reaction of the shipwright. He made soft exclamations at one point and another, and seemed most interested in the parts that pertained to Sullivan, but waited until she had finished before speaking himself.

“Tell me again. You said he flew his own ship – not a seerephon, but a vessel of human construction?”

Calliya nodded.

“I do not know how it propelled itself, for by the time I saw it, it was mortally wounded.”

“Ask him.” Lennat indicated Sullivan with a mere nod of his head, so Calliya turned to him and almost whispered.

“He wants to know how your ship flew.”

Sullivan looked at the shipwright.

“Well, you had better try and translate, although I’m not sure if you’ll understand.”

Sullivan then explained, in the broadest and simplest terms possible, how human vessels were propelled through the heavens. Calliya did her best to translate, but struggled with some of the more technical terms.

Ships were nearly always constructed in space, or at the very least fabricated on the ground and then assembled in orbit. The most common form of propulsion was the plasma sail; huge electromagnetic currents swept through the solar system at great speed, and could be used to carry the ships tremendous distances – the advantage lay in only expending as much energy as you needed to generate the sail. The drawback was a distinct lack of manoeuvrability, so most ships countered this with a secondary system of

propulsion. The Bogart had been fitted with a Balakov Mk III plasma sail and four Boeing ion drive units.

Sullivan really didn't think his words, or Calliya's translations, had had much effect on Lennat. He never stopped carving grooves in his little piece of wood, and he never asked any questions. When Sullivan had finished, the shipwright was quiet for a little time. He stared into the fire, and began to speak very slowly and deliberately, allowing Calliya to translate exactly what he was saying.

"A very long time ago, I lived on your world, human. They called it the Golden Years, for it was the age wherein we walked the Earth as Gods, bending man to our will. Sometimes it was out of a desire to nurture, other times it was out of a need for mischief. But the line between the two didn't seem to matter as much as the might that we wielded. As the Titans were we, drunk on the power we held over the fledgling human race.

"No one remembers when we first set foot on the world of men. I was born in the Finite Realm, and yet I remember walking the hills of Rome long before any man thought to build a city there. But not all of us saw man the same. There were always those who felt mankind existed only to be dominated, to be ruled.

"Gradually, the race of men grew in number. They built more elaborate structures, more weapons of war, and began to bend the Earth to their own desires. The more we saw of humanity, the less we liked it. Eventually, the schism in our ranks grew to the point of civil war. A great conflict erupted; the War of Dominion that would tear our race apart forever. On one side, those who sought to protect the humans, on the other, those who would crush them underfoot.

"We had fashioned a city for ourselves, one that travelled upon the ocean. The humans would later call it Atlantis, but we had never named it. It was the focus of all our will, all our power. When our ranks divided, the city was cast down and lost forever. We began to abandon Earth. Many stayed, of course. The war continued here, you see. There was no escape. Ultimately, those who had sought to bend the universe to their will fell from grace."

"The Fallen," whispered Sullivan to himself. Lennat ignored him and continued.

"After the war, the Fallen were banished. They took up their residence in the Karthos, or the Darkling Belt, where they remain to this day. And as for those that stayed behind in the Infinite Realm, who can say? They vowed to walk down through all the ages of man, believing that the fates of our two races are inextricably linked.

"Greatest amongst them was one called Tanis, the Royal Chronicler. He believed that the day would come when our paths would cross again, until which time he would

record the breadth of human history. And that it would be a new Icarus that would reach out and touch not the sun, but the stars themselves.”

Lennat fell silent, continuing to carve the little sliver of wood. The narrow grooves had grown and now furrowed deep into the wood.

“You think I’m part of some kind of prophecy?” asked Sullivan.

“No, no,” laughed Lennat. “Tanis was partly mad, after all. Who else would choose permanent exile from their home? I merely wished to convey to you what I knew of your world, human. I would not presume to prophesise.”

He got up from the hearth and moved towards a dark wooden chest of drawers at the other side of the dwelling, rummaging through several of the drawers as Calliya and Sullivan spoke quietly in English.

“Can you believe this?” Sullivan asked.

“You forget, Jack, that I have heard much of these tales before. Every child hears all about the War of Dominion, and the First Darkling War, and of how the Fallen were defeated at the Battle of the Rift. But it all happened so long ago that no one is too sure what occurred and only Lennat and a handful of others are old enough to remember.”

“And what about the other stuff? About Atlantis sinking, and about the Elysians who stayed on Earth? Is all that true as well?” Sullivan was shaking his head in disbelief.

Calliya shrugged apologetically.

“I’m not too sure about which fact is and which is fantasy, but you would be wise to listen to Lennat. Whatever he is saying, he is saying it with good reason. We might even find out why he wanted you to come here.”

The shipwright exclaimed triumphantly as he pulled an object from one of the drawers, scattering the rest of its contents around the chest. It was impossible to see what it was in the dim light, but as Lennat neared the fire Calliya’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Lennat, what are you going to do with that?”

Without a word, Lennat reached out and grabbed Sullivan’s hand. He pulled it towards him and with a sharp movement clasped a band of metal around Sullivan’s wrist. The moment the warm metal touched his skin, the gap that had admitted his wrist closed and the band shrank until it closely fit his wrist.

Sullivan stared at the bracelet, which was not like the manacles he had worn as a captive aboard the Kelison. This one had intricate carvings and looked very similar to the pair that Calliya wore.

“What are you doing?” she cried. Sullivan couldn’t understand her words, but her look of horror spoke volumes.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, but Calliya was too busy arguing with Lennat to answer.

“What have you done?” she wailed. “If the King see this, he will cast Sullivan into the Fold for all eternity. No human has ever worn a control bracelet – you must know it is forbidden.”

“Nonsense,” waved Lennat. “How do you expect to him to perform the Raising if he has no control bracelet?”

Calliya was struck dumb.

“A Raising?”

The shipwright nodded in reply, his black eyes twinkling with mischief.

“But why?” asked Calliya. “No human has ever raised a seerephon.”

“My child, have you forgotten how your seerephon was raised? When you were old enough, you were brought here to hear their song for the first time. You listened, and heard the voices of all the seerephon, including the hatchling Kelison. This human has also heard the song of the seerephon, and somehow, they heard his song too. Even as we speak, a hatchling stirs beneath the Whispering Woods.” The shipwright seemed as unperturbed as Calliya was upset. He continued to carve carefully at the piece of wood.

“The human will raise a seerephon. We have no choice. This hatchling is for him, although I do not pretend to understand how it has happened.”

“Would anyone like to tell me what is going on?” said Sullivan. He had watched the exchange in silence, comprehending nothing save for the fact that he might be the subject.

“Lennat says that when you heard the song of the Kelison, somehow a hatchling of the Whispering Woods heard you. All of the seerephon are connected, and their songs stretch the breadth of the Finite Realm. When you communicated with my vessel, you began the process of becoming a fleet master. It cannot now be stopped.”

“You have got to be kidding,” answered Sullivan, partly in shock. “I don’t know anything about hatchlings, or songs, or whatever you’re talking about.”

“I’m not happy about it either, Jack. It is not something that we will easily be able to explain to the Court, but if Lennat says this is the only way, then it’s good enough for me, Jack.” They both looked at the shipwright. He was beaming broadly, oblivious to any of their worries.

“Than I guess it’s good enough for me too,” said Sullivan hesitantly. But he wasn’t sure at all.

The shipwright disappeared towards the back of the room.

“But first I must see to your wounded seerephon!” called Lennat. He headed out the crooked door and disappeared into the day made purple night. Calliya looked at Sullivan apologetically and then got up to follow him. Sullivan just sat, staring into the fire as he polished off his salted meat, occasionally glancing at the bracelet, checking to see if it had changed. He scolded himself. It was just a piece of metal, after all. He had used them before when he had had to save Calliya. He could handle anything these Elysians threw at him – it couldn’t be anything compared to what he had endured in the Navy, could it?

Sullivan made his way slowly outside, where Lennat had already scaled the side of the seerephon and was examining the damage around the gaping hole. Calliya was calling to him from the ground, relating the overall health of the creature. Maybe, thought Sullivan, I should be over there learning as much about these seerephon as I can. If I’m going to have one of my own. He shook his head. There was no way he would be able to raise one of these things. He’d never even been able to keep a digipet alive when he was a kid.

Sullivan ambled slowly down the path towards the cliff edge, staring into the vortex rising in the distance. Violet currents swirled around each other, fighting to stay on the surface. The sight was enough to make him catch his breath as he took in the rest of the vista.

The path ended abruptly at the top of a two hundred metre sheer drop. A flight of stone steps wound its way down the face of the cliff, dropping below the pink crystalline canopy of the Whispering Wood. The dark light from the vortex flickered over the smooth faces, flickering through the trees below. The glittering pattern of light flew through the forest like a thousand stars trapped in ice.

Sullivan was suddenly aware of Calliya at his shoulder.

“It is quite a sight, is it not?” she whispered.

“In all my years, I have never seen the like. How is this possible?”

“Maybe Lennat knows,” answered Calliya, “but I don’t think he does. Legend has it that the Titans created it to give life to the world; they used the seerephon to travel between the stars. After the Flight of the Titans, their lore came to the hands of the Elysians, and we learned to care for the seerephon.”

Sullivan stared at Calliya, amused to hear her speak like Titus or Lennat. She noticed, and smiled broadly.

“All of us are all told the tales as children, Jack.”

She wrapped her arm around his.

“Let us learn when Lennat intends to journey into the forest.”

“Sure,” answered Sullivan with a dry smile. “I can hardly wait.”



## Chapter Thirteen

As soon as Lennat had finished applying a large bucket of bright orange salve to the ugly wound on the Kelison, he slid back down the shell and landed deftly on his feet, signalling to Sullivan and Calliya that he was ready to go. He told Calliya to fetch some things from her ship, and then disappeared inside his dwelling to collect some things of his own, leaving Sullivan was to stare out over the precipice on his own.

Watching the forest was mesmerising. He was searching for some sign of how the seerephon were created, but all he could see were the formations of endless glittering crystal. He checked the bracelet on his right wrist, but there was no sign of anything out of the ordinary – it still appeared to be a perfectly normal bangle. Sullivan thought he recognised one or two of the symbols that were etched into the smooth metal. He thought they might represent earth and fire, two of the Elysian base elements, as Calliya had explained them. Sullivan wondered if his bracelet would allow him to communicate with the Kelison. There was something he wanted to ask Calliya’s ship – something he would rather keep to himself.

The Elysians returned. Calliya was wearing a small backpack over her bodysuit and had changed her short flight jacket for a warmer, longer one. Lennat had brought two heavy woollen cloaks, one for himself and the other for Sullivan, while to his back he had strapped a thick bedroll.

Sullivan donned the cloak, which barely reached his knees. He looked at the shipwright.

“Hey! Don’t I get one of those sleeping bags?”

The shipwright looked back at him blankly as Calliya translated the question, then grinned and spoke briefly, before walking past Sullivan and towards the precipice. As Calliya followed, he asked her what Lennat had said.

“He said you won’t be needing one,” she replied.

“Great,” quipped Sullivan. “And I’ll bet that’s not because I’ll be sleeping in a nice warm spaceship, is it?”

He followed Calliya and Lennat onto the slender steps of the staircase, the glittering crystalline canopy below making for a disorienting experience, forcing him to focus on Calliya's heels for a while. It was some time before he dared risk a look out over the Whispering Woods.

They had descended about halfway before he gazed into the vortex; the luminescence was brighter at this angle, and he could see currents of paler colours swirling within. Even the reflections were more intense, flickering back and forth across the crystal formations like waves on a moonlit ocean.

The staircase consisted of a single long flight, running down the sheer cliff, and Sullivan wondered how the stairs had been constructed. Even from what little he had gleaned about the power that their ancient technology gave to the Elysians, Sullivan knew that this construction was no mean feat.

His legs had long since grown heavy by the time they reached the forest floor, forty metres beneath the crystal canopy, which admitted much of the light from the swirling vortex that spawned the Shroud. Everything beneath the crystal roof took on a purple hue, as the chequered carpet of light flew across the rough ground below. Sullivan looked at the violet faces of the Elysians beside him, as they stopped for a few minutes to rest and recover their breath.

Sullivan began to feel rather odd, and was alarmed to see his bracelet glittering faintly in the purple light. He looked across at Calliya and Lennat and saw their bracelets glowing faintly as well. He could also sense a mild vibration from the crystalline trees around him, similar to the sensation he used to get from the energy surging through the power core of the Khan, but different – warmer somehow. Beneath the canopy, Sullivan could see an even wilder array of crystals; obsidian glass, twisting back and forth through tightly packed clear formations. Before the party lay a path of sorts, twisting through the crystal roots that dug deep into the dark stony earth.

Lennat immediately set off between the trees. Sullivan and Calliya followed close behind, picking their way through the roots side by side.

"How far do we have to go?" asked Sullivan. The forest had been curiously quiet save for the faint hum of the crystals, but a new sound reached Sullivan's ears. There was a faint whistling noise resounding beneath the canopy. There was no way to tell where it was coming from, but Sullivan had the definite idea that it was growing louder.

Onwards they walked, snaking left and right to avoid the large roots. Occasionally, Sullivan would catch his reflection in one of the roots' smooth faces, his appearance surprising him. Wrapped in a thick cloak, wending his way through this dreamlike landscape; his life had changed so much in such a short time. How much he had lost, he

thought, his mind wandering back to Yoshi, Vic and Theo. He had failed them so badly, and although he knew his own predicament could turn sour at any time, the Elysians didn't seem to have violence in their souls. So yet again, he had managed to save his own skin. But at what cost? He couldn't think of anything he could have done differently, but he had been the one who had brought them on their final mission. They'd been his crew, and he had failed them.

"Is something wrong, Jack?" asked Calliya. She had been watching him as he walked, lost deep in thought.

"I'm okay," he said, sighing lightly. "It's just that a lot's happened in the last month."

"You miss your crew, don't you?" she replied softly. Sullivan could see his own pain reflected in her eyes.

"Yeah. It feels like I failed them somehow. That if I hadn't been greedy, and taken that last job, they'd all still be alive."

"And I would be dead, were it not for you!"

Sullivan didn't reply. He simply continued walking, carefully watching his step over the roots.

"We cannot choose our fate, Jack. We must live with our destiny, and treat all the tasks of our life as we would the dawning of a new day." She reached out and grabbed his arm, stopping for a moment while Lennat continued ahead.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Jack." She looked right into his eyes, her pale grey irises flooded with the indigo light. "You did all you could."

"I know," he replied quietly. He took a deep breath, and then looked up the path towards the disappearing shipwright. "We'd better not let him get too far ahead."

Calliya nodded, and they set off to follow Lennat, who had not strayed too far ahead. It took them almost an hour by Sullivan's reckoning to reach close to the centre of the forest, by which time his eyes had accustomed themselves to the unusual light. The closer they drew to the vortex, the brighter the light it emitted, and the faint whistle that Sullivan had heard at the edge of the forest had grown to a dull roar. He could now see the base of the Shroud, where it touched the planet and disappeared beneath the surface. The vortex was maybe three or four hundred metres in diameter, and passed through a circular opening in the crust of the planet, the purple gas hurtling out of the opening at tremendous speed.

The crystal forest terminated abruptly fifty metres from the fissure. The ground between was flat and barren, with barely a crack to break the continuity of the surface, and veins of crystal picked their way through the smooth black rock. Lennat had

stopped by a circular platform that rose from the ground halfway between the forest and the fissure. The open area stretched as far as Sullivan could see in either direction, but there were no other platforms, no features of any kind. There was nothing but barren smooth rock, and the raging torrent that was the Shroud.

The crystal veins twisted their way through the rock, converging at the stone platform. Sullivan walked carefully towards it, edging around the opposite side from Lennat.

“What is this?” asked Sullivan. The shipwright just smiled back at him.

Sullivan looked to Calliya instead, raising his eyebrows imploringly. She spoke to Lennat, and then listened intently as he replied. Then she turned back to Sullivan.

“He wants you to kneel in the centre of the platform.”

Right at the middle point of the platform were two narrow grooves, some half a metre long and about fifteen centimetres wide, just about the right size for the lower half of a man’s legs as he knelt. Sullivan examined the rest of the platform, looking for something that might hold some sort of danger.

Slender grooves carved into the otherwise smooth stone, while veins of translucent crystal ran seamlessly back and forth across the platform, curling together to meet around the two central indentations. He reached out his hand to touch the stone, and found it was warm to the touch, and carried the same vibration that resounded through the rest of the forest. Lennat smiled and gestured again for Sullivan to mount the platform.

“Please,” he said, in heavily accented English. Sullivan stared at him in surprise. Either the Elysian knew more than he was letting on, or he had already begun to pick up some English from listening to Sullivan.

He stepped gingerly onto the platform, feeling the vibration course up through the soles of his boots. Calliya looked on nervously from one side, listening to Lennat as he delivered some instructions.

“He wants you to kneel in the centre, and try to clear your mind.”

“Great,” said Sullivan to himself. He had tried meditation a couple of times on his travels, but it had never been something he had had any aptitude for. All the sitting around doing nothing, contemplating one’s existence – it was far too much like space travel. He walked to the centre of the platform and then knelt in the two grooves.

He could feel the warmth of the stone, even through the thick hide of his trousers. He made himself as comfortable as he could, and then he looked to the Elysians either side of him.

“Now what?” he asked.

“Open your mind,” said Calliya. “Lennat says this could take some time. He has never known a human to attempt this, and is not sure exactly what might happen.”

“Fantastic,” Sullivan replied.

He stared at the vortex swirling out of the fissure before him, feeling the electrostatic energy reaching out, the hairs all over his body lifting. Calliya and Lennat were withdrawing, leaving Sullivan kneeling on the platform alone. Lennat was whispering in Calliya’s ear, and she was calling the shipwright’s words out to Sullivan.

“We must leave you, Jack. If we stay too close, we might interfere with the Raising.”

“What the hell do I do?” shouted Sullivan.

“You just have to wait, Jack!”

“Wait for what?”

“You’ll know when it happens!” she called, her words swept away by the roar of the vortex.

Sullivan threw his eyes upwards, but found there was little to console him. The gas erupting from the fissure billowed out into the enormous Shroud, stretching backwards over his head. He had no idea what he was supposed to be doing, sitting here on a stone platform, staring into a gas nebula that appeared to be emanating from the centre of this planet. He sighed to himself. What would Vic think of him now? She had always been such a rationalist, and now here he was, participating in some alien religion, waiting for some unknown miracle to occur. Was a seerephon just going to pop out of the ground? He looked for Calliya and Lennat, but they had disappeared beneath the canopy of the Whispering Woods.

Sullivan sighed again. As long as he was sitting here he might as well give it a go. He closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. But try as he might, he could not halt the flow of images rising for the depths of his memory. He saw the Bogart again, as he had seen it from the Kelison. He saw the fire consume it. He saw Vic’s lifeless face as he had held her body on the funeral barge. From even deeper in his past, he saw Orlat’s snarling face as he had thrust his naval sabre into Sullivan’s gut during their infamous duel.

He redoubled his efforts to clear his mind, but the more he tried, the harder it was to drive the images from his consciousness. He thought instead of Calliya, and gradually, the troubling images began to flow from his mind. As they did, Sullivan heard a faint whispering in his ears. He opened his eyes and looked around him, but there was no one around.

Sullivan shook his head and turned back to the vortex, closing his eyes again. The clarity came easily this time, and with it the whispering; it began to grow steadily in volume, a cacophony that reminded Sullivan of what he had felt on the Kelison when he had first tried to communicate with the ship.

Deep in the woods, Lennat and Calliya talked as quietly as they could, amidst the roar of the Shroud emerging from the heart of the planet.

"It is strange," said Calliya. "I remember my Raising, but not that well,"

"Few can remember their Raising," answered Lennat. "It is the effect of being so close to the Shroud. If your human can find the peace within, he will begin to hear the voices of the seerephon, as he did before. They will guide the hatchling to him, or it will be surely lost."

Calliya nodded, knowing that the loss of a hatchling would be a tragic event. "Why have you done this, Lennat? Even the Elysians, few amongst are permitted to raise a seerephon."

"Since Sullivan heard the song of the seerephon, the hatchling has called for him. This human has travelled a very long way to get here, my child. There may be yet be a reason for all this."

"And you don't know it?" asked Calliya.

"Who can tell what twists of fate have brought this human to us, to this place? There are some things that are difficult to know. Once they have happened, then we can know them. Before they happen, we can only guess."

Calliya pictured Sullivan kneeling on the platform, his head bowed as he tried to clear his mind. She knew that he felt alone here. And that this was something beyond anything he had experienced in his life. But there was more to her feelings for Sullivan. It had begun first when she had laid his battered body on the regenerator on the Kelison.

The dried blood had covered most of his torn clothes, the rents sliding this way and that to reveal deep gouges from the sentinel's claws. She had removed them carefully, trying not to tear the wounded flesh further. As he had hung bathed in the healing light of the regenerator, she had watched him, fascinated. Titus had been an old man when she had first met him, but she had grown very accustomed to his slightly different appearance and his curious ways.

But this human was something else completely. A warrior. One that travelled through space in a vessel the like of which she had never seen. She had stood, and watched, and silently hoped that he would survive.

Now she sat and waited, while he underwent the ritual she had undergone ten years earlier. But she had been schooled and prepared for years for her raising. Her cousin

Gerren had helped train her to communicate with other seerephon of the fleet, so as to be better able to coax the hatchling Kelison from deep beneath the Whispering Woods when her time came.

It would be astounding if Sullivan could do this. Above all, drawing a hatchling through the torment of the Shroud currents that ran through the hatchling beds took a great deal of willpower. It also took great depth of character.

From where she sat, beneath the crystal canopy of the Whispering Woods, Calliya silently willed Sullivan to succeed.

Kneeling upon the stone platform, Sullivan struggled with the growing babble in his mind, wishing he knew what he was supposed to be doing, struggling to stay upright against the powerful wind from the vortex. Images sprang into Sullivan's open mind – his mother's kind face, weeping as she embraced the dark blue figure of his father; the day of his graduation from the Naval Academy, when he wore that uniform for the first time himself.

Deep below the surface of the Whispering Woods, something stirred. Sullivan was suddenly aware of a new voice in amongst the babble in his mind, pushing aside the images that had risen from the depths of his memory. His legs had grown numb from kneeling for so long, and now they were starting to tingle. He opened his eyes, stealing a glance around him.

Tiny tongues of azure fire licked around the edges of the platform, dancing around the rim of stone. All around Sullivan, the crystal veins in the stone had filled with a gentle blue light. The tingling in his legs was spreading up his body, filling his muscles with warmth and sending convulsive shivers up his spine.

The vortex grew in intensity, throwing great plumes of purple gas high into the billowing clouds of the Shroud. The tongues of blue fire had spread all around Sullivan, closing in slowly, and the tingling all over his body had swelled into a cool fire that poured through his limbs. He grimaced against the curious sensation. It wasn't quite pain, but it felt like a huge hand had closed around his chest.

The blue fire grew tenfold stronger all around Sullivan, and he could feel the hand squeeze his chest as he was drawn upwards off his knees by the invisible force. The cool flames enveloped Sullivan and he cried out in alarm.

Deep beneath the Whispering Woods, the currents of the Shroud poured through the hatchling beds, pulling at the smooth dark pods that held the embryo seerephon. One of the pods quivered in the currents, while all the others held fast. The pod rattled as the hatchling battled against its confines, splitting narrowly, and the half-split pod tumbled

off into the gaseous torrent, hurtling through the deep dark fissures that ran beneath the woods.

Sullivan's body strained against the invisible forces as the blue fire swept around him, making him feel like he was in the vortex itself. Come on little buddy, he thought to himself. The rush of voices in his head was almost deafening, but there was something else – a new sound, a low keening that rang out beneath the other murmurs. It was guttural, and carried no words, but Sullivan could feel the desperation carried in it.

The bracelet on his wrist burned brightly, while all around him raged the flickering blue fire. The invisible grip on his chest tightened further, and again Sullivan cried out. More images of his past sprang from the dark corners of his mind. He saw marines felled by gunfire on Ganymede, and Orlat's snarling face as he took his terrible revenge.

The howling wind carried Sullivan's cries to where the Elysians waited, wrapped in their warm blankets, sitting comfortably on their bedrolls.

"Jack!" called Calliya. She turned to Lennat, her concern obvious. "He can't do it!"

"Wait," replied Lennat calmly. "It is very close now."

The grip on Sullivan's chest tightened further. He didn't know how, but he could feel the presence of the hatchling. He could feel the pod around him, trapping him. He focused all his will on the wailing. Come on, Junior, he thought to himself. Nearly there.

The ground began to tremble beneath the platform, and the vortex rippled and flickered, throwing huge billowing torrents of gas thundering out of the ground. The blue fire on the platform grew in height and intensity, spiralling upwards into the torrid sky.

Tumbling through the Shroud currents that ran below the Whispering Woods, the hatchling struggled against the confines of the pod, buffeted against the rocks that protruded into its path. An impact knocked the pod heavily, opening a large gap. The hatchling seerephon fumbled with its flight organs, trying to gain enough momentum to escape from the pod. It could feel the raiser calling to it from the fissure at the top of the sinkhole, experiencing the images of the master's life as they sprang from Sullivan's mind. A final heavy impact from one of the jagged rocks and the hatchling was free, bursting from the shattered pod.

The hatchling tumbled helplessly along in the current, straining to engage its flight organs and head for the central current that would carry it upwards to the surface. But barrelling along in the gas was disorienting, even for a creature with the senses of a seerephon.



On the raising platform, Sullivan felt the invisible grip on his torso relax. He was still suspended a few centimetres above the platform, but he could not now feel the force that held him. He felt dizzy though now, as if his own senses were being somehow overwhelmed. Images of the Bogart and his doomed crew cut into his heart. The vortex roared before him, the blue flames dancing high around his head, the cool fire tingling on his skin. Sullivan could feel the hatchling's confusion in the dark currents below.

You can do it, little guy, thought Sullivan. Just a little further now.

The blue flames around him grew brighter, almost blinding Sullivan. Vivid memories continued to assault him, and his heart was beating so fast he felt like it might just burst. The roar from the vortex intensified tenfold, drowning out all his cries. He gritted his teeth as the sensory overload became unbearable.

And in an instant, it was over.

The hatchling burst from the ground, carried in the raging torrent of the Shroud. Sullivan fell to the platform, exhausted. All around him, the flames had disappeared, and the crystal veins had faded back to darkness. He closed his eyes, breathing heavily.

The hatchling spun out of the Shroud and gently floated down towards the surface, halting a metre off the ground, right at the edge of the platform. It was about a metre and a half long and almost half a metre deep on the central axis. The seerephon's miniature nose hung a little ways from Sullivan's head, as he looked up and smiled at the tiny spaceship.

"Hello Junior," he croaked.

He was suddenly aware of Calliya and Lennat, who had returned from their vantage point. They were both staring wide-eyed at the hatchling hovering before them.

"Well, this is somewhat unexpected," said the shipwright.

"You don't say," answered Calliya, her voice numb with disbelief.

Sullivan looked over his shoulder from where he lay on the platform.

"Hey, it's kind of cute!" he said, smiling. When he saw the look on their faces, he knew something was not quite right. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Calliya quickly. "It's just that I've never heard of a hatchling to be so small."

"Small?" said Sullivan, looking around at the seerephon. The creature was at least of a similar mass to a fully-grown human. "It's huge!"

"Jack, when the Kelison was hatched, it was twenty yards in length. More than ten times the size of this hatchling."

"Well, it looks big enough to me. And I still think it's cute."

Calliya started to giggle.

"I guess it is sort of sweet, to see one so small. Lennat?"

Lennat stared at the tiny seerephon for a moment.

"Who knows?" he replied. "I have never come across one so small, in all the centuries that I have tended these Woods. But it seems hearty enough, so I shall care for it and tend to it as I would any other."

"But it will take a century to reach full size!" replied Calliya.

"Then for a century I will tend to it," answered the shipwright bluntly.

The hatchling was circling slowly upwards and downwards, exploring the new sensation of free flight, while Sullivan sat on the edge of the platform and watched the creature.

"So, is everything alright with the little guy?"

"It would appear to be a perfectly normal hatchling. Apart from its size," answered Calliya, looking at the shipwright before continuing. "But Lennat says he will care for it nonetheless."

"I'm glad to hear it," replied Sullivan.

"Have you considered a name for the hatchling?" asked Calliya. She walked over to where Sullivan was sitting and watched the tiny seerephon turning loops over their heads. "It certainly seems very full of life," she added.

"Junior," replied Sullivan bluntly.

"Junior?" said Lennat.

"It means little one," whispered Calliya, in her own tongue.

Lennat smiled and nodded his head.

"Junior," he repeated, working his lips to try and mimic the sounds made in the human language. He ambled towards the flying hatchling until he was more or less beneath it, and then began to call out its name in the singsong tones of the Elysian language. The hatchling began to circle his head, eliciting a broad grin from the shipwright. It would be a novelty for him to care for such a tiny seerephon.

"Calliya, I must now begin to construct a cradle for the hatchling. It will not take as long as it might for a normal size one, but then again, I am unable to reuse or remake one of the old cradles. You might take our human guest back to the house to rest. I shall return when my work is complete."

Calliya nodded and helped pull Sullivan to his feet. The birth of the hatchling from the depths of the planet had clearly taken its toll on the human. The Raising often left the new fleet master in need of much rest.

"See you later, little guy," he croaked weakly, raising one hand to bid farewell to the shipwright and his new vessel.

It took forever to reach Lennat's crooked little house. By the time they finally struggled up the narrow staircase, Sullivan was nearly asleep on his feet, and Calliya was supporting most of his weight. She laid him to rest on one of the chairs by the fire.

"Thanks," mumbled Sullivan, half-asleep.

"You should rest, Jack. You've been through a lot today."

Sullivan continued to mumble incoherently as he drifted into sleep. Calliya was sure she heard him mutter something about two ships, but she dismissed it as the exhausted ramblings of someone who had undergone the Raising. Hearing the song of a hatchling for the first time could dredge up all kinds of painful moments from a master's life. Dealing with them was part of the preparation that Sullivan had never had. As he slept fitfully in the chair, Calliya took something light to eat, and then busied herself with arranging somewhere to sleep on the hearth, in front of the now smouldering fire. Lennat's house had no clocks, and with the thick violet Shroud blocking out all trace of the day's light, it was difficult to tell what time it was.

She laid out some heavy, soft blankets, and then pulled another over her as she lay down before the fire. It was not long before the dreamy crackle of the logs had Calliya drifting into sleep.

Sometime later, Sullivan opened his eyes. He could hardly remember anything that had happened after the Raising. Even the details of the ritual itself were fuzzy. He was lying on a wad of thick blankets before the embers of the dying fire. Calliya was curled up next to him, and as he slept he had thrown his arm over her shoulders. He gently removed his arm, but stayed curled up next to her warm body, watching the mess of blonde curls that fell down around her narrow, softly pointed ear. She was so close; Sullivan could feel her delicate scent filling his nostrils.

He lay there for a long time, just enjoying her closeness, before he grew restless. He got up, shaking his limbs to restore the blood flow. There was no sign of Lennat. He must still be out in the woods, thought Sullivan, so he opened the front door and peered outside.

It looked very much as it had when he first arrived. With the nebula's gas overhead, there was no way for Sullivan to tell if it was day or night either. He quietly pulled the door shut as he made his way outside.

The entry hatch of the Kelison was open. Sullivan made his way inside and headed up towards the control chamber. He wanted to try out his control bracelet while Calliya wasn't around, as he wasn't sure she would understand. He wasn't too sure why he really wanted to see this, but ever since he had heard the King express an interest in seeing it, he had felt that he should. Maybe it was just out of some morbid fascination.

The moment he had stepped on board he had become aware of the presence of the Kelison. It was similar to what he had felt at the Raising, and before, when he had first touched Calliya's bracelet. It had been a torrent of concern then, but as he walked into the control chamber, it was more of a tranquil trickle.

*Not Calliya*

"No, not Calliya. It's me, Jack Sullivan." He looked around through the dim light of the chamber.

*Master Jack Sullivan?*

"That's me. Master Jack, now. I want to see something." Sullivan knew that he could probably communicate without speaking, but if the seerephon understood him when he spoke, it would do.

*See?*

"I have seen pictures of my ship. Moving pictures of my ship and the funeral barge. Calliya showed them to me when I was on board the first time. Now I want to see them again."

*The funeral barge and the unknown vessel?*

"That's it. Can you show me?"

In response, one of the displays on the sloping roof of the control chamber came to life. Sullivan could see the Kelison's view of the death dance of the barge and the Bogart as it drew closer. Against the blinding glare of the sun, it was difficult to make out the two ships until they filled the display. On the Kelison's final approach angle, it was easier to make out the details of the two doomed vessels.

Sullivan had the Kelison run the piece of video, or memory fragment, or whatever it was, several times. Then he had it isolate a single moment and move the image to a bigger display. He needed to be sure he wasn't imagining it.

But there was no mistake. He could clearly see the open bay on the Bogart's port side, where one of the lifeboats had been launched. There was no automated system to launch the lifeboats. It was an old superstition from the AI war – they could only be launched by human hand. Which could only mean one thing.

That Theo had gotten off the Bogart.

## Chapter Fourteen

Sullivan and Calliya stayed with Lennat for another day while he fussed over the Kelison and Junior. The shipwright had quite taken to the little creature as he tended to it. Although he was famed for the loving care that he lavished on his charges, there was something about the unlikely Junior and her unusual master that seemed to have caught his fancy.

He left Calliya and Sullivan to their own devices, and they took the opportunity to explore the Whispering Woods further. Calliya showed Sullivan the cradle where the Kelison had been berthed before it came of age to join with the fleet. It was a huge open crystal bed, fully one hundred and fifty metres long, cut deep into the forest floor. The shimmering canopy overhead was lighter here, as if it has only grown back in recent years. Beneath ran rivulets of sparkling water, pushed through the cut glass rocks by the raging currents beneath. Petrified dewdrops hung from the canopy, like glistening diamonds against the light of the Shroud.

They also came across Junior, frolicking through the Woods. The tiny seerephon buzzed about their heads, banking and throwing loops as it hurtled to and fro beneath the canopy. Whenever it slowed down long enough for Sullivan to reach out and run his hand along the smooth shell, his bracelet flashed brightly and allowed him to touch the mind of the hatchling.

*Sully Sully Sully Sully*

He wasn't sure how the hatchling had come by the name. Only his old service pals, like Vic, had called him that, but he supposed that Junior might have gleaned it from his mind somehow during the raising.

"That's my little guy," he chuckled, rubbing its shell affectionately. The hatchling threw another loop.

Sullivan and Calliya laughed out loud at Junior's antics, as they strolled side by side through the enchanting woods. Sullivan had enjoyed his visit to the top of the world with Calliya – it was a fantastic place, one far beyond anything Sullivan had ever dreamed of. And the more time he spent with Calliya, the more he was drawn to her.

He felt the weight of the secrets he was keeping from her. He wanted to tell her about finding the Estrella Negra, and about the possibility of Theo surviving the destruction of the Bogart, but he couldn't find a way. He had no idea how she would react to the presence of a human ship, or his half-formed plan to use the shuttle to get home. He didn't want to put her in the position of having to choose between her loyalties to her people, and her feelings for him, whatever they might be.

Lennat had continued to pick up English at a tremendous rate. By the time they sat down to dinner in front of the fire for the second time, the shipwright had learned a smattering of words.

"Eat!" he said, very pleased with his linguistic accomplishments. Then he spoke to Calliya in the Elysian tongue.

"Your seerephon will be ready to depart in the morning. The foul venom of the Nightwing has been cleaned from the wound, and it should heal nicely now."

"What will become of the hatchling? For I must take Sullivan back with me, and I do not know when we can return."

"I will keep Junior here until such time as it is ready to leave the Wood. I have no idea how long that might take, but time is of little concern to me. I shall tend to this seerephon like I would any other, and as long as the court does not learn of what has happened here, there should be no problem."

Calliya nodded gravely. She understood the importance of keeping Sullivan's visit a secret. If Prince Tayfen or Bellanis discovered that a human had been brought to this most sacred of places, and allowed to raise a seerephon, their wrath would know no bounds. No amount of explaining would protect Sullivan from them.

She looked over to where the human was sitting, soaking the large chunks of bread in the broth before stuffing them into his mouth. He smiled when he caught her eye, signalling how much he was enjoying the food. Everything was so confusing. She knew she felt something for this strange man, but she was scared what might happen if she let her feelings be known. She trusted Sullivan, but she couldn't be sure where his loyalties lay. If she were him, she would be trying very hard to get home, she knew that much.

The next morning they made their preparations to leave. They had awoken once more next to each other before the fire, the closeness of each other's body giving them deep and restful sleep. Outside, Lennat was making a final survey of the Kelison.

The shipwright seemed very pleased with the progress the seerephon had made. The angry looking wound on the aft section had begun to heal. The ointment that he had painted around the poisoned edges of the wound had drawn their angry colour, and the shell was beginning to regenerate.

As they made their way from Lennat's crooked dwelling to the Kelison, Junior appeared from the Whispering Woods. Lennat scolded the tiny vessel for leaving the sanctuary of the Woods, but it was clear that he was only feigning anger.

Sullivan took the chance to bid the curious creature goodbye. He touched the hatchling's smooth shell, and felt its youthful mind touching his.

*Sully Sully Sully*

"I have to go now, Junior," said Sullivan.

*Go?*

"I have to leave. But Lennat will take care of you, don't worry." He glanced at the shipwright, who appeared to have understood, smiling reassuringly at Sullivan and Junior.

*Sully not go. Sully stay.*

"I can't stay. But I will come back and visit, I promise." Sullivan could feel the raw emotion pouring out of the hatchling, as he rubbed his hand along its shell affectionately.

Calliya and Lennat said their goodbyes.

"Thank you for repairing the Kelison, Lennat."

"It is what I do, Calliya. There are no thanks necessary. But you must still take great care – I feel there might be difficult times ahead."

Calliya regarded the shipwright carefully. She had learned to take his feelings very seriously.

"What do you mean?" she asked. Behind her, Sullivan was still playing with Junior.

"I cannot be sure. But I do know that this human has a role yet to play in our affairs."

"How can that be? He is but an innocent in all this."

"That might be so, but I cannot help but feel that his tale has not been fully told yet."

Calliya eyed the shipwright dubiously. Sometimes, she struggled to understand what the shipwright wanted to warn her about, and direct questions seldom yielded any clear answers. Instead, she embraced him warmly and made her way to the entry hatch of the Kelison, calling to Sullivan that it was time to go.

Sullivan gave Junior one final affectionate pat.

"Take care, little buddy," he smiled. "I'll see you soon."

He turned to the shipwright.

"You'll take good care of him, won't you?"

Lennat beamed broadly in reply, waving his visitors back to their vessel. Sullivan turned to go, but stopped when he felt the shipwright's arm on his. Lennat stared at him intensely, and then spoke very slowly and very clearly, in English.

"Beware the legions, Sullivan. Do not lose faith, even in the darkest hour. It is only then that you will find an unexpected ally."

With that, he turned away from Sullivan, beckoning Junior to him, and together they slowly moved back towards the Whispering Woods. Sullivan stood in the entrance hatch as the Kelison lifted off from the top of the world. He had no idea what Lennat had meant. How had he learned English so quickly? What were the legions? And he already had a few unexpected allies. He watched the shipwright and the hatchling shrinking as the Kelison rose gently, finally closing the hatch only when he could no longer make out the Whispering Woods.

They returned to Calliya's homestead to find Titus still away. Calliya didn't find this odd – she assumed he would be at his residence in the city – but Sullivan was starting to worry. If the old fool had headed for the Negra, there was no telling what might happen. Sullivan had an inherent mistrust of the artificial intelligence, one that was probably passed down from father to son, but Titus was ignorant of the ways of the machine. Sullivan could only hope that the Victorian was careful.

It was late afternoon when they arrived home, and Calliya immediately made a fuss over the Kelison, determined that it would heal as quickly as possible. She set constructs all over the seerephon's shell, instructing them wordlessly to clean this area, or repair that area. The torn edges of the wound that Lennat had tended to continued to regenerate slowly.

As soon as they returned, Sullivan made his excuses about having to change his clothes, and made his way straight to his room and the cargo bag that he had salvaged from the Negra. He hunted through the contents for a few seconds before pulling out a PCU.

He opened a comms link with the Estrella Negra, and Iago's neutral face appeared on the screen of the device.

"Captain Sullivan. How can I be of assistance?"

"Hello Iago. Report."

The artificial intelligence left out no detail as it relayed a status report on all its systems. Sullivan stopped him halfway.

"Wait, wait. Enough of all that. Is Titus there?"

"Dr. Kendall-Scott is on the bridge."

"Can I speak with him?"



The image of Iago's face was replaced by a video feed of the bridge. Sullivan could see Titus hunched over one of the control panels on the bridge, poring over data on the screen.

"Titus!" called Sullivan. The portly Victorian nearly leaped out of his skin when the voice was relayed through the bridge's audio systems.

"Hello?" replied Titus, somewhat tentatively.

"It's me, Sullivan. I'm in Calliya's house."

"How are you communicating with me? I can hear your voice as if you were standing here next to me."

"It's one of the devices I took from the ship. It's called a PCU, and it allows us to communicate over vast distances." Sullivan groaned. He didn't really have time to educate Titus. He didn't want Calliya to come looking for him.

"Like a telegraph?" asked Titus.

Sullivan searched his memory for the obscure word. It sounded familiar, so he just decided to run with it.

"Yeah, a telegraph. But that's not important right now. Calliya and I are back and she's wondering where you are. What are you doing?"

"I returned to the Estrella Negra to do some research. Iago had been so forthcoming during our earlier conversation, I decided to try and find out a little more about the three hundred years of history I have missed out on. It is painfully clear that science has made some striking advances since last I read *The Lancet*."

"Okay, but just be careful. Remember what I told you about those machines." Sullivan really hoped that Titus had taken his words to heart.

"Worry not, Mr. Sullivan. Iago has been the perfect host, and I have learned a great deal. About the wars that ravaged Europe, the invention of the atom bomb, and even mankind's settlement of the solar system. Fascinating, truly fascinating. Not to mention the new sciences – quantum physics and organic computing. Things I would never have dreamed possible, along with all of Earth's history, recorded here in plain English."

Sullivan could see tears welling up in Titus's eyes. The Victorian removed his glasses and dabbed at them with his handkerchief.

"I have missed so very much, Mr. Sullivan. In all the years I have spent here, I had never given that much thought to what I might miss out on. I did not realise that time would roll on so fast without me. And now all that I ever knew is gone."

“Don’t worry, Titus,” answered Sullivan. “I’m sure there’s a lot about Earth that you would still recognise. I’m sure Buckingham Palace is still there – I used to date a waitress who worked in the nightclub there.”

“Nightclub?” said Titus.

“Never mind. Look, just be careful what you say to Iago. And get your ass back here as quick as you can. There’s a lot to tell you.”

“Very well. I shall leave as soon as I can. If I hurry, I should be able to reach the homestead before nightfall, if not just after.”

“Right. See you soon, Titus. Sullivan out.” He thumbed the switch on the PCU. I hope the old fool doesn’t get himself killed, thought Sullivan.

Later that evening, Sullivan and Calliya had dinner. She didn’t ask him if he knew where Titus was, but instead suggested that after their meal they climb the highest spire of the homestead. You could see more of the Finite Realm from there than from anywhere else in the house, Calliya promised.

Sullivan had never seen Calliya dress so elaborately for dinner. She wore glittering gems around her neck, wrists and ankles, and a deep dark purple shift that hung from her shoulders. She had piled her golden locks on top of her head, and fastened them with a long, jewelled clip. That night, the meal that the constructs laid before them was of all kinds of the most delicate meats and savoury treats. They ate their fill, and drank deeply, but spoke little over dinner.

After, they climbed the narrow spiral staircase to the central spire. The stone steps could only be accessed from the main entrance hall, and led only to an observation point high up on the spire. There was a simple bed here, and a plain wooden locker, but otherwise the only feature of the room was an archway that led to a wide balcony, which was two metres deep and continued all the way around the spire.

Together, they stepped out onto the balcony. No sooner had they done so, than a construct emerged from apparent thin air once again to furnish them with refreshments, handing them each a goblet filled with sweet, frothy nectar. These guys would go down a bomb in New Vegas, thought Sullivan, sipping the sweet drink. It tingled on his tongue as it washed over his palette, and his gaze followed Calliya’s to the heavens above. The few bright stars of the Finite Realm twinkled in the violet firmament, drifting behind the diaphanous fingers of the Shroud.

“It’s quite a sight, is it not?” asked Calliya. She had turned her face upwards, and Sullivan couldn’t help but notice how the moonlight highlighted her delicate features.

“I’ve always loved to look at the stars,” replied Sullivan. “Of course, I’m used to seeing a lot more of them.”

“I used to sneak up here as a child, when my cousin Gerren or Titus would turn their backs for too long. I would come up here and wait for the sun to set. Then I would dream what it would be like to take my seerephon to one of the stars, and visit the people who lived there.”

“Did you ever get there?” Sullivan asked, sipping his drink.

“No,” laughed Calliya. “I have set foot on only a handful – some of the garden worlds that lie near to Elysium. The Realm is finite, Jack, but it’s not small. It would take a seerephon almost a year to reach the worlds of the farthest rim, and another year to return. Some of the older masters have made the journey, but not since I joined the fleet. Out there, there are worlds we dare not trespass upon. That one there,” she said, pointing out one near the southern horizon, “is Karthok, the home world of the Fallen. A dark place, from where the Lord of the Darklings reaches out to cast a shadow across the Realm.”

Sullivan stared at the blood red star. “I’ve been in space for almost thirty years, and I’d never seen another star system until I’d seen yours. It took the Navy’s last deep space probe almost ten years to reach Alpha Centauri, using acceleration curves that would liquefy a human crew. Now, if we had a few of your seerephon, we could reach it. But we don’t, so it’s just one solar system for us.”

“What’s it like?”

Sullivan was momentarily confused.

“What do you mean?”

“Living in a world, or a system, with so many people? Counting all of my people, we are but a few thousand. How many men are there? In all the worlds, in all the ships?”

Sullivan considered for a moment, trying to guess what the population of the solar system might be.

“Forty billion?” answered Sullivan hopefully. “I’m not too sure, to be honest. Everywhere there are people, it’s crowded. Things aren’t like they used to be in Titus’s time. Things are a little – broken up in the system these days. Ever since the war.”

“Did you fight in the war?” asked Calliya softly.

“Nobody fights in a war. You just try to stay alive. There’s not much difference once the shooting starts. But I was one of the lucky ones – as an officer I managed to avoid the worst of the war. But pretty soon, we were all involved in heavy fighting. You get up in the morning, you look at the faces of the men around you, and you wonder which ones will make it to the end of the day. They were the hardest years of my life. And after what happened on Ganymede, I could never wear that uniform again.”

They stood in silence for a few moments, sipping their drinks and gazing out across the night sky.

“Do you miss it? Earth, I mean,” asked Calliya. “I know you don’t miss the Navy.”

“Miss Earth? I guess so. I never used to spend that much time on Earth – too much time working long haul trips. I could spend six months or a year without seeing Earth and I never used to think about it. Now I think about it all the time. Maybe it’s something to do with being so far from home.”

“I have never been so far from home. I’m not sure if I could endure it.”

“You’d be surprised,” answered Sullivan. “You get used to the long trips after the first few years. After a while, six months to Jupiter and back seems like nothing.”

Calliya didn’t seem convinced. “But to be so far from your friends and loved ones? I don’t think I could ever get used to it. Perhaps that is why I have never ventured to the distant worlds. I think I would miss Elysium’s sky.”

Sullivan didn’t answer. He was too busy thinking about all the friends he had left behind in one way or another. All of the other junior officers that had entered the corps with him. The crew of the Bogart. Their faces blurred together before his mind’s eye.

“What about family, Jack?” asked Calliya.

He shook his head. “My father was killed in the Martian Lunar Conflict. I lost contact with my mother not long after that. I joined the navy at sixteen, and I suppose that was the only family I ever really had. Although Captain Orlat wasn’t much of a father.”

“And you’ve been on your own since then? No wife, no family?” Calliya suddenly understood just how lonely Sullivan must be. The Elysians, being so few in number and so long lived, were accustomed to long periods of solitude, but even Calliya had felt the absence of her cousin Gerren since his funeral barge had borne him through the Rift. She had been very glad of the presence of Titus in the time since. Maybe it was because of their dwindling numbers that the Elysians formed such close relationships with the people that they did have in their lives. How could this man have survived so much of his life alone?

“My parents were lost when I was young also,” said Calliya softly. “It was in the war against the Fallen. Their seerephon was destroyed by the Lord of the Darklings himself, at the Last Battle of the Rift.”

Sullivan listened without speaking. He could see the pinpoint stars reflected in her wide grey eyes.

“Ever since the Great Exodus, we have struggled against the will of the Fallen. The Nightwings are forbidden from crossing the Rift, and the Fleet patrols the void around it to make sure that none do. Any seerephon is a match for the darkling vessels. It is only when they amass in great number that they threaten to return to the Infinite Realm.

“During the last great conflict, the Lord of the Darklings mustered every black ship in the Realm, and fell upon the Rift, hoping to defeat the Fleet. He was driven back, but at great cost, and little has been heard from the Darkling Belt since. They say that the battle was so fierce, it sated the Lord of the Darklings’ thirst for blood.”

“I know what it’s like to fight in a battle like that,” said Sullivan. “It stays with you forever.”

They stood in silence for a time, enjoying the cool night air. Elysium’s single moon had risen since they had arrived on the balcony, and now it cast its purple gleam across the thick woods that surrounded the homestead. Calliya turned to Sullivan, smiling.

“But you never answered me, Jack.”

He looked to her, not sure of the question to which she was referring.

“Never a wife? Has there ever been someone special?”

He shook his head slowly. “Navy life doesn’t leave much time for a wife. And afterwards, I don’t know. I was never in port for very long at a time.” He looked back at Calliya, caught up in her gaze. He could feel her eyes touching something deep inside him. Since he had awoken on the Kelison, Sullivan had seen some of the most incredible things that any man had ever seen. But none of them could compare to the sight that was before him.

He reached out gently with his right hand, cupping her cheek in his palm. He leaned closer and kissed her on the lips. Soft and moist, they kissed him back firmly, and he felt Calliya’s hand touching the small of his back. Their lips parted, and he stared deep into her pale grey eyes.

“I’ve wanted you to kiss me for an age,” said Calliya with a playful smile.

“I apologise if I’m a little out of practice,” replied Sullivan. He leaned in to kiss her again, but something caught his eye, out over the edge of the balcony. He stopped, turning his head to try and get a better look.

“What is it?” asked Calliya. She had been expecting, and desiring, another kiss.

“I thought I saw something move,” said Sullivan. He broke from her arms and looked over the edge of the balcony. She quickly moved to his side, scanning the moonlit forest below. They could see nothing.

“Could be Titus,” he suggested.

“So late? Why would he fly so late from his home? Would he not wait until morning?” Calliya looked at Sullivan, suddenly suspicious.

“Well maybe he wasn’t at home. Maybe he was somewhere else.” He continued to search the forest, his eyes in the dim moonlight.

“Jack, is there something you’re not telling me?” said Calliya, in a mock stern voice.

Jack gave up scanning the forest. He was about to turn back to resume what he had been enjoying so very much when he caught movement again, this time close to the smooth vertical inclines of the spire.

“There!” he said, grabbing Calliya’s shoulder with one hand and pointing downwards with his other.

A large dark shape was scaling the outside of the spire, huge claws tearing into the smooth stone. Gigantic, leathery wings fought the air around it, as the creature half-flew and half-scrambled up the sheer surface. Near the top, it kicked off backwards and extended its wings to full span, beating them powerfully as it ascended above the balcony.

“Get back!” screamed Calliya.

She pulled at Sullivan, throwing them both through the stone archway that led to the spire’s interior, just as the creature’s powerful talons ripped at the edge of the balcony where they had been standing. They crashed to the bare wooden floor of the observation point, skidding to relative safety as the monster mounted the balcony.

“What the hell is that?” screamed Sullivan. The creature was making a horrendous noise, and as he stared at it, he realised how familiar it was. It had a different body shape, but the featureless face and wickedly sharp snout were instantly familiar.

“A winged darkling!” cried Calliya. “One of the foulest of all the spawn of the Fallen!”

The winged darkling fought with the stone arch, clawing at the edges of the frame and folding its wings close to its body, in a vain effort to squeeze its massive bulk inside.

“Well what the hell is it doing here?” shouted Sullivan, scrambling across the floor, dragging Calliya with him as he went. He headed for the stairs, as he didn’t really welcome the idea of taking on a giant flying darkling.

“Sullivan!” hissed Calliya. “We must be careful. There will be more than one darkling, of that we can be sure.”

Sullivan scrambled to his feet, staying bent double instinctively, as Calliya got to her feet as well. The darkling had torn a lot of the doorway away, and the noise from its

torso was growing. To Sullivan, it sounded as if a thousand metal gears were grinding against each other, screaming out the dreadful din.

Together they made for the staircase, and flew down the narrow stone steps, glad to put some distance between them and the screaming beast as it battled with the stone spire. As they neared the middle part of the stairs, Calliya signalled to Sullivan to slow up.

They listened carefully. There was a loud banging coming from the main entrance hall, sounding very like something was trying to beat its way through the heavy wooden front doors of the homestead.

“Quickly,” said Calliya, rushing down the staircase. “We’ve got to get down there before it gets through the door!”

Sullivan followed her down the stairs as fast as he could, knowing that they really needed to get to his quarters. If Calliya was determined to defend the homestead instead of fleeing, he had to get to the bag that he had retrieved from the shuttle bay of the Estrella Negra. These darklings looked even more formidable than the alpha had been – his pistol probably wouldn’t even dent their thick hides.

Calliya had already reached the ground by the time Sullivan rounded the last stretch of the staircase, looking to the source of the tremendous banging noise. The large wooden doors at the end of the main entrance hall bulged with every impact from the other side. Whatever was trying to get through had to be gigantic. The doors buckled from the top downwards, straining against the might of their unseen assailant.

“Calliya!” shouted Sullivan. “We have to get out of here! Now!”

“No!” cried Calliya in answer. “We are not abandoning my home to them.”

The double doors at the main entrance continued to bulge, as some of the timbers started to split under the tremendous force from the other side. Calliya raced to the far side of the hall, where two enormous broadswords were displayed under an equally large, ornate shield. She grabbed both of the hilts and pulled at them with all her strength. They flew from their scabbards, their vibrating tips singing loudly. She threw one of the broadswords at Sullivan, hilt first, and he caught it, unsure of what Calliya was planning. She wasn’t actually thinking of taking these monsters on, was she? With swords?

He turned his head sharply, alerted by more noise from the top of the staircase they had just descended. If their large winged friend had eventually beaten his way into the observation room, it wouldn’t take it long to get through the flimsy wooden floor.

“Calliya! I’m not saying we should leave the homestead to them. I just don’t think we should let ourselves get surrounded down here!” He had to shout over the noise of

the darkling's assault. "If we can get to my quarters, I might have a few things that could really help us out."

Calliya looked at him sternly for a split-second, before being distracted by the explosive destruction of the main doors. The giant darkling came through the shattered remains of the doors on all fours, before rising on its hind-legs to its full height. Sullivan reckoned it was at least four metres tall, like video he had once seen of a really big bear, but its skin had a dark and slimy appearance, and the claws that tipped its four limbs were long and curved. They carved into the soft flagstones of the stone floor as the creature raked its hind legs on the ground.

Calliya darted in like lightning, her sword flashing before her. She cut at the giant darkling's thick limbs, ducking and weaving to avoid its swinging blows. Sullivan raced to her side, but succeeded only in catching her as she was propelled backwards by a powerful backhand from the creature. The force of the blow knocked them both to the ground. Calliya struggled to get back to her feet, but Sullivan was already tugging her backwards across the floor.

"Let me go," she cried, struggling against him.

"No," said Sullivan firmly. "We really need to be getting out of here! Now!"

The giant darkling had moved away from the doorway, circling slowly around to their left. To his horror, Sullivan could make out another of the giant, bear-like creatures in the doorway, flanked by a horde of the smaller darklings that Sullivan had already encountered on the Kelison. Calliya had gotten to her feet, backing away from the darklings as they spread through the doorway. The very light in the room seemed to dim in their presence.

Together, they backed towards the staircase that led to the principal spire, swords outstretched. The darklings stared at them from sightless eyes, circling slowly around them with the rhythmic strike of claw on stone.

"Oh Jack," said Calliya, her voice almost breaking. There were far, far too many of the beasts. Some already bore the carcasses of the homestead's constructs in their claws, gruesome trophies of their night's battle. She had never heard of a darkling daring to venture to the surface of Elysium, not since the time of the oldest legends.

"Okay," said Sullivan. "On my signal, we make a break for it."

"Sorry?"

"We run. As fast as we can, straight up the stairs. We don't stop for anything until we reach my quarters. Got it?"

"Very well," answered Calliya. "But I do not think that even your pistol can help us this time. I have never seen darklings so powerful."



“Yeah, well I’ve got one or two other surprises,” said Sullivan under his breath. Calliya glanced at him quickly, wary of taking her eyes off the advancing darklings.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready,” answered Calliya softly.

Sullivan took a deep breath and drew his broadsword back over his shoulder. This had been something he had once excelled at, as a drunken junior officer, but could only hope that he still had the knack. He hurled the sword as hard as he could at the chest of the upright giant darkling.

The heavy sword spun slowly in the air as it traversed the distance between Sullivan and the creature. By the time it reached the darkling’s chest, its tip was travelling at great speed, and the sword sank deep into the creature’s chest as it let out a mighty roar.

As soon as he released the hilt of the sword, Sullivan had grabbed Calliya’s hand and turned tail up the stairs. They scaled them three at a time, spurred on by the raucous response Sullivan’s attack had provoked. The small darklings were the first to swarm the stair, but every time one of them would draw near, Calliya would strike out at it with her sword, often cleaving the hapless foul creature in two. But the small darklings moved so quickly they could even scale the walls, their claws clicking on the smooth stone. Soon, Sullivan found himself punching and kicking at the cursed creatures as they sought to slow their flight up the staircase.

By the time they reached the landing where his quarters were located, Sullivan’s legs felt like lead, his chest pumping from the adrenaline coursing through his veins. Behind them, the darklings swarmed over each other, biting and clawing at them. Calliya swiped at them with wide strokes of her sword.

“It’s no good!” she cried. “They are too many!”

Sullivan pulled at her forearm again, half-dragging her towards his quarters, beating and kicking at the darklings as they struggled onwards. Behind them, there was a large crash as many of the smaller darklings were hurled shrieking from the narrow staircase. The giant, bear-like darkling was loping up the steps at a frightening speed, the hilt of Sullivan’s sword protruding from its chest, smashing its minions out of its way.

Sullivan and Calliya continued to back up the landing. As the giant darkling left the staircase, it was forced to squeeze itself into the confines of the narrow space, the hilt of the sword grazing along the ground as it walked. Sullivan had hoped to slow it up some, but he was beginning to think he had just made it really, really angry.

Finally, they reached the door to Sullivan's quarters, and in a split second they were inside the door and looking for way to reinforce it. Together they pulled the large heavy bed towards the door, and then tipped it up until they had wedged it between the door and a groove in the stone floor.

"Wonderful," said Calliya. "And what would be the next part of this ingenious plan?"

Sullivan moved quickly over to the bag he had brought from the Estrella Negra and unzipped it.

"What is that?" asked Calliya. She couldn't remember ever having seen it before, and knew Sullivan had not brought it from the Bogart.

"Remember when I said Titus might not be at home?" Calliya nodded, as Sullivan continued his hurried explanation. "Titus found something, years ago. Something he kept secret. He showed it to me, and I knew exactly what it was."

"What was it?"

"A ship – a human ship. Long deserted, but it still had a few handy things on board. Like these."

While he spoke, Sullivan had been unpacking things from the cargo bag. Now he laid out a series of small cylindrical silver objects, each with a bright yellow button on top.

"What are those?" asked Calliya. She was still trying to absorb what Sullivan had told her, and the fact that Titus had been keeping things from her.

"Grenades," answered Sullivan, examining one of the silver cylinders. "These should even the odds."

"Grenades?" asked Calliya. It was not a word she had ever heard before.

"Explosives. You press the yellow button, and throw them as far as you can. Then they blow up, and destroy everything within a radius of five metres. Which makes them very little use to us now. If we set one off in here we'll all be killed."

The door bulged inwards under the rain of blows from the other side, still barely held in place by the large frame of the bed wedged against it. Sullivan stuffed the grenades in his pocket and returned to the cargo bag, removing a small plastic control pad. He placed it in his pocket with the grenades, and then removed the largest item from the bag.

"Jack, what the devil is that?" Calliya had never seen anything like it.

Sullivan laid the General Electric Heavy Assault Cannon on the floor next to the bag. He hadn't even seen one of these since his days in the Navy, but he figured it would be able to stop even the biggest darkling. He activated the power cell and loaded

one of the oversized magazines into the slot in the base of the cannon, which was almost a metre in length, and far too unwieldy for use in close fighting.

“Jack, look!”

Calliya was pointing at the window. Out in the night sky, the unmistakable silhouette of a drakan was approaching from the west.

“It has to be Titus,” answered Sullivan. “He’s on his way back from the ship.”

“Then we have to warn him,” said Calliya. “If he lands he will surely be killed.”

She approached the window, shielding her eyes as a huge shape crashed against the glass, showering them in razor sharp fragments. It was their little friend from the balcony. The huge winged darkling must have given up on trying to get down the stairs, thought Sullivan, grabbing Calliya’s arm and dragging her away.

The darkling was still too large to fit through the window, but that didn’t stop it from trying to stretch its wicked talons into Sullivan’s quarters, screaming and scrabbling at the soft stone around the window.

“Get behind me!” yelled Sullivan. As Calliya moved out of his line of fire, he brought the cannon up level with the winged darkling. He moved the safety to the fire position and depressed the thumb button on the angled grip.

A stream of molten fire spouted from the cannon, magnetic currents hurling a deafening torrent of heavy metal towards the creature struggling through the window. It was thrown backwards, disappearing from the window with a piercing cry. Calliya removed her hands from her ears, her eyes wide in shock at the power of the human weapon.

Sullivan turned to face the door, which continued to bulge inwards under the assault of the horde of darklings. He pointed the cannon at the straining timbers as Calliya rushed to the window to see what had happened to Titus. She still had the broadsword in her hand, and kept the point near the shattered window in case there were any more surprises. She was amazed to see that where the cannon had hit the wall, it had torn easily through the thick stone.

Calliya looked to the drakan and rider approaching through the night. She called out Titus’s name, but he was far too far away to hear her. Instead, she watched in horror as another winged darkling approached the flying drakan over the dark forest. The rider did not see his assailant until the very last moment, and only then tried to roll his drakan away from the darkling.

The huge beasts clashed together in the air, the darkling digging its talons deep into the furred flanks of Pegasus. So great was the force of the impact that it nearly unseated Titus, but Calliya could see him fighting for purchase on the saddle. The two winged

creatures spiralled downwards as they fought, tearing at each other with tooth and claw. They beat at the air with their massive wings to try and halt their descent, but so intent were they on destroying each other that they plummeted towards the forest at an alarming rate.

“Jack!” cried Calliya, pointing at the two flying creatures battling as they spiralled to the forest floor.

“Damn,” said Sullivan to himself. Titus would have no hope against the winged darkling on the ground. And if that wasn’t enough, Sullivan’s attention was drawn to the groan of the heavy timbers of the bed, which were starting to give way under the furious assault. He set the cannon to a wide dispersal setting and shouted at Calliya to take cover.

The door and bed cracked simultaneously, covering Sullivan in splinters of smashed timbers as the giant darkling clawed at the remains of the door. It howled, the smaller darklings crawling over its back and around its sides trying to gain entry. He waited until the giant had got far enough through the remains of the door to make the hilt of Sullivan’s broadsword visible, and then he pressed the fire button.

“Surprise,” said Sullivan.

The molten metal expanded in a high-velocity cone from the barrel of the cannon, obliterating all the solid material that it impacted on. Sullivan felt the stock of the cannon pushing against his shoulder as he emptied the rest of the clip at the doorway.

Crouched down behind him, Calliya covered her ears with her hands. Sullivan’s weapon made a hideous noise, a deafening rhythmic crackle that assaulted her senses. She screamed as smoke from burning timber, and dust from pulverised stone, filled the air.

The darklings poured through the door, hurling themselves into the blinding fire of the assault cannon. The front section of the giant darkling had been completely destroyed in the first volley; the other darklings tried to scatter over the half-carass, but as soon as they moved into the field of fire the hail of molten metal slugs obliterated them.

Sullivan released the trigger and waited for the smoke to settle. A few of the smaller darklings still lingered in the doorway, but they had become very cautious. Sullivan fired a few more shells to disperse them, and then moved to make sure that the landing was clear. He could hear the creatures moving about the lower reaches of the tower, but he couldn’t see much past the monstrous shattered frame of the giant darkling. He checked the corridor as best as he could, and then turned back to Calliya.

She was sitting in the middle of the room on the floor, her hands still cupped over her ears, wide-eyed in shock.

“Are you okay?” When she didn’t answer, he knelt close to her and laid one of his hands on her face. “Calliya, are you hurt?”

She shook her head and backed away from him. Sullivan realised that she was staring in shock at the cannon.

“What is that – thing?” she asked hesitantly. “How is such a device possible?”

“It uses magnets, like my pistol. It’s just a little bigger, that’s all.”

Calliya continued to stare at the cannon, and then shifted her gaze to the pile of rubble and fallen darklings that littered the entrance to the room.

“Earth must be a very dangerous place, for men to need such weapons,” she said softly.

Sullivan looked at her, a resigned look on his face.

“Earth’s not dangerous. It’s man who’s dangerous. Everywhere that man goes, he takes things like this with him.” He moved towards the window, slinging the cannon’s strap across his shoulder, trying to relieve his arms of the heavy weight. He could see no sign of Titus, or the other flying darkling – beneath them, the forest was very quiet.

“Can you see him?” asked Calliya, joining him at the broken window. Together, they scanned the horizon, the cold night air leaking in through the shattered glass. They could see nothing.

“They must have a vessel out there somewhere,” Calliya added.

“Will there be many more of them?” asked Sullivan.

“Perhaps. There is no way to be sure. But if even one catches Titus – we have to try to find him, Jack.”

“I know.”

Sullivan fetched his belt and pistol from where it lay on the floor. He checked the charge and then offered it to Calliya.

“Think you can handle this?” he asked.

Calliya took the pistol carefully, examining it closely.

“Just point it at whatever you want dead and gently squeeze the trigger. Couldn’t be simpler,” instructed Sullivan.

Calliya nodded, but didn’t seem wholly convinced. She took the pistol in her left hand, but kept her broadsword in her right. They were about to make their way out into the corridor when Sullivan heard a familiar beeping noise coming from his pocket. He removed the PCU and examined the display. He was getting a transmission from another unit, somewhere in the vicinity, so he thumbed the activation key.

“Mr. Sullivan? Mr. Sullivan, can you hear me?”

It was Titus’s voice, and he was whispering softly.

“Yes, Titus, We can hear you. Are you okay?”

There was a short delay before Titus’s answer came.

“A little bumped and bruised, but otherwise okay. I was but a half-mile from the homestead when I was set upon, in mid-air, by a creature most foul. Were it not for the strength and courage of Pegasus, I fear I might have lost my life.”

“Where are you, Titus?” asked Sullivan, sharing a look of relief with Calliya.

“I’m still in the forest, but I dare not move. I fear that fell beast lingers nearby still.”

“And Pegasus?”

There was a long delay before the Victorian answered.

“We were separated as we fell through the canopy, and I do not know what became of him. But I am rather glad that Iago advised me to take one of these personal communication devices. A most fascinating invention.”

“Later, Titus,” said Sullivan. “For now, just sit tight and wait for us to get to you. If you leave the channel open, I’ll be able to track you with my PCU.”

“I understand.”

Sullivan was able to make out the sound of Titus rustling in the undergrowth. Calliya stared at him intently.

“Jack, what is going on? Who is this – Iago?”

Sullivan knew he didn’t have time for a lengthy explanation. If that winged darkling was still hunting Titus, then they had to get to him before the creature did.

“A friend,” he answered. “But I don’t have time to explain. You’re just going to have to trust me.”

Calliya seemed hesitant at first, but then she shrugged.

“I’ve trusted you this far, Jack Sullivan. I suppose it won’t hurt to trust you a little more.”

“Good,” said Sullivan with a smile. “Now let’s go find Titus.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Sullivan clambered over the darkling carcass into the smoky corridor first, with Calliya close behind. The scent of burnt earth and smashed stone still filled the air, as they descended the steps through the homestead and made their way towards the thick forest. Sullivan checked the PCU's display, which indicated that Titus's device was located some three hundred metres beyond the perimeter of the forest. As they neared the edge, Calliya signalled for Sullivan to stop.

She dug the tip of the broadsword into her dress at the level of her knee, and pulled sideways on the shimmering fabric, ripping it cleanly. She removed the rest of the material below her thighs with a few deft cuts.

"Should never have bothered to dress for dinner," she said, looking up at Sullivan and making him laugh.

"Come on, we had better move. Titus should be hiding about three hundred metres that way," he said, pointing to the thick forest.

Almost no moonlight pierced the canopy, and as Sullivan and Calliya moved into the undergrowth they were plunged into darkness. The forest was powerfully scented, and a dark and damp odour filled their throats as they pushed their way through the thick tangle of branches that dipped from the canopy to trail the forest floor.

"That darkling has got be out here somewhere," whispered Calliya.

"Yeah, but it could be anywhere." Sullivan looked upwards at the dark blanket that stretched over the forest. The winged darkling might be hiding in the recesses of the canopy, waiting for something to break cover. But there was also every chance it was crawling through the undergrowth, waiting for something to cross its path.

Sullivan checked the clip on the assault cannon, and found it down to five percent, cursing softly under his breath. It would have to be some sharp shooting. They crouched for a moment in the thick undergrowth as Sullivan checked the PCU to get their bearings. Titus was now only two hundred metres away, somewhere ahead and off to the left slightly. Sullivan communicated this information to Calliya, and together they

continued to scan the forest for any sign of the darkling. But their eyes could see nothing.

They continued to move through the thick undergrowth, and by the time they had gotten to within about a hundred yards of Titus, they were both sweating – despite the cool night air. On the southern side of a dip in the forest floor, they crouched again in the damp undergrowth. Sullivan tried to contact Titus on the PCU, which was indicating that the Victorian was somewhere on the ridge on the far side of the depression.

“Titus, this is Sullivan. Do you copy?”

There was no answer for a moment, and then a brief whisper came from the device.

“Mr. Sullivan? Is that you?”

“Titus, we’re on the other side of the small valley to your north,” whispered Sullivan.

As soon as he said this, Sullivan clearly saw Titus’s shining pate pop out of the undergrowth on the other side of the valley. Titus turned, and squinted through the gloom, straight at Sullivan.

“Why yes! I can see you now. I’ll be right there.”

“Titus, no!” said Sullivan, but it was too late – Titus broke cover on the other side of the valley and started moving towards them. Sullivan stood up and scanned the valley, knowing exactly what he was looking for, but unsure he was going to be able to make it out.

A flurry of movement attracted Sullivan’s eye. The darkling was diving down swiftly from the canopy, its wings drawn in tight to its body as it plummeted towards Titus.

“Titus! Run!” shouted Sullivan, bringing the cannon up until the muzzle was pointed squarely at the darkling. He let fly with a stream of molten metal, but the darkling moved too quickly across his field of vision, bobbing and ducking the last of the cannon’s ammunition. The cannon whirled as it emptied, leaving Sullivan watching in horror as the darkling swooped on Titus.

Instead of goring him, the darkling scooped up the human and lifted him off the ground. Titus cried out in alarm.

“No!” screamed Calliya, moving through the bush after the darkling, but it climbed quickly from the valley’s floor. It was only a few metres off the ground when Sullivan noticed more movement coming from the opposite direction, and he moved after Calliya, his eyes still fixed on the shifting foliage.

As the darkling approached the eastern end of the valley, Pegasus burst from the undergrowth, his claws gleaming in the moonlight. Titus’s drakan was bleeding from



deep gashes scattered all over its body, but it surprised Sullivan with the fury with which it attacked the darkling. Titus was thrown free as the two creatures grappled in mid air, and they crashed to the ground, too intent on drawing blood to remain in flight.

“Calliya, get Titus!” shouted Sullivan, moving towards the battling creatures. The darkling had gotten the better of Pegasus, and was crouched on top of the struggling drakan, gouging at him with wicked talons. As Sullivan passed Calliya, he shouted for his pistol, dropping the heavy assault cannon into the undergrowth. Calliya tossed the field-loader and headed off towards Titus, her sword still held tightly in her hand.

Sullivan caught the gun and brought it to bear on the darkling in one swift motion, firing directly at winged beast. The creature sprang into the air, avoiding his slugs, and beat its wings powerfully, accelerating towards Sullivan. He fired again, but this time the slugs only tore tiny holes in the leathery surface of the darkling’s wings. Sullivan turned and started to run as fast as he could through the thick brush, the creature gaining on him as it swooped low to follow him.

As he moved, Sullivan fumbled in his pocket for one of the grenades, trying to estimate how fast the creature was gaining on him. He was also gambling slightly on the exact timing of the fuse on the old southern block grenade. He figured for ten seconds, pressed the yellow fire button, and started to count backwards at the same moment. He struggled through the undergrowth, the darkling only fifteen metres behind him and gaining fast.

Sullivan had reached four when he spied a ditch about five metres in front of him. He stopped counting, took a deep breath, and lobbed the grenade high into the air over his head. He threw it slightly backwards, to try and counter his forward motion, and then ran as fast as he could and dived headlong into the shallow ditch.

The grenade exploded with tremendous force. Sullivan could feel the wave of high pressure generated by the localised blast behind him, and from where she stood, Calliya watched as the orange flash consumed the winged darkling. Parts of the creature’s carcass rained down on the forest floor, with only the larger sections of wing and the head surviving in recognisable form. Sullivan dragged himself out of the ditch, coughing in the acrid smoke of the explosive, looking around the obliterated section of forest. The grenade’s focused blast had vaporised a section of the undergrowth along with the winged darkling. Sullivan sat down heavily, sighing deeply as he did. The ringing in his ears was deafening, and the effect was quite disorienting.

He dimly heard Calliya and Titus calling to him over the ringing, and looked up to see them approaching through the forest. Titus was clutching his side, and both he and

Calliya were covered in cuts and scratches. The humans stared at each other numbly, while Calliya stared around in horror at the devastation wreaked on the forest.

“I had no idea you had brought explosives, Mr. Sullivan,” said Titus.

Sullivan grimaced, the ringing in his ears making it difficult to hear. He was about to answer when he felt his stomach rising, and one look at the others told him that they were feeling the same thing. Sullivan tried to stand, and floated off the ground, his toes leaving the burnt brush as he cried out. He knew the sensation of weightlessness well enough after all his years in space.

“What the hell is going on?”

He looked to Calliya, who was scanning the canopy above, as was Titus. Both of them were floating about several feet clear of the forest floor, while all around them debris from the blast hung in the air, with no gravity to pull it to the ground.

“There!” cried Calliya, pointing at a wide gap in the canopy, far off to the right. A vessel screamed through the night sky, the rim around the edge of the vessel glowing brightly as the null gravity field intensified. As the vessel moved out of sight, Sullivan felt the gravity return and they all fell to the ground with a bump.

“A Nightwing,” said Calliya. “One of the more powerful darkling vessels – and here on Elysium! I have not heard of such a thing in an age. The King will be furious.”

“What was it doing here?” asked Sullivan, the ringing in his ears fading slowly.

“I’m not sure. But I intend to find out.” She began to look around the burnt blast area for the remains of the darkling.

Titus was staring off into the forest, calling to Pegasus. When he secured no response, he began to shout more loudly, moving into the undergrowth. Sullivan joined him, calling out to the drakan as well. It took several minutes of shouting and combing the forest before the large grey poked its head through a thick tangle of branches, causing Titus to jump out of his skin.

“There you are, my dear boy,” chuckled Titus affectionately, stroking the nose of the drakan gently, a tear appearing in his eye at the sight of the deep cuts all over the gentle giant’s frame. Together, they led the drakan back through the lightest brush to the blast area, and found Calliya perched on a log.

Her beautiful violet gown had been shredded by the battle. Her hair was tangled and covered in leaves and debris, and although her bare flesh was covered in ash and dirt, Sullivan marvelled at how she still managed to maintain an air of elegance. Her broadsword stood upright out of the ash at her feet as she examined the severed head of the winged darkling.

“Find what you were looking for?” asked Sullivan.

“Kerreg,” spat Calliya, throwing the head to the ground in a cloud of fine ash.

“What?” said Sullivan, sitting down next to Calliya on the log.

“The Fallen Lord Kerreg is the one who raised these darklings. I am sure it is he who sent the Nightwing as well. And unless I am very much mistaken, it was also Kerreg who was behind the attack on the Kelison.” She stared at head lying in the ashes. “But I don’t understand why he would risk the King’s wrath by daring to attack Elysium.”

They sat in silence for a moment before Sullivan raised a point.

“It didn’t try to kill Titus, did it?”

Calliya stared blankly back at him.

“What do you mean?”

“When the darkling attacked him, it didn’t try and gore him. It could easily have killed him, there and then. But instead it tried to carry him off. To where that ship was waiting nearby.”

“Which means what?” asked Calliya.

“That the ship was waiting for something. After the darkling dropped Titus, it came straight for me. Now, I know I was shooting at it at the time, but do you remember what happened on the Kelison? The Alpha stopped short of killing me then, too.”

“What are you getting at?” asked Titus. He was still tending to his drakan, stroking the creature’s soft fur, where the blood hadn’t matted it.

“That maybe the darklings weren’t sent here to kill us. That they were sent looking for a human – me. It probably picked up Titus thinking he was me.”

They sat for a moment, letting the significance of this theory sink in.

“But what could Kerreg possibly want with you?” asked Calliya. “And how would he even know where you were?”

“The same way he knew about the Kelison’s journey across the Rift and back. Someone on this world has been feeding him information.”

“Tayfen,” said Calliya softly.

“Surely you don’t believe the Midnight Prince could truly be in league with the Fallen?” asked Titus. “Such a thing would be unthinkable.”

Calliya shook her head in disbelief. “No more unthinkable than darklings daring to touch the hallowed ground of Elysium. And Tayfen is a distant cousin of Kerreg’s, let us not forget that.”

“I still find it very difficult to believe,” said Titus. “Even Tayfen would stop short of allowing Kerreg to send his minions here. He would be exiled for such a thing.”

“Well I’m sick of it,” said Sullivan. “I’ve had enough of people trying to kidnap me, or kill me, or kidnap and then kill me. Whoever this Kerreg is, I’d really like to meet him.”

“I don’t think that’s very likely,” said Calliya. “He lives on one of the worlds of the Fallen, where no Elysian may venture without the express permission of the King. And the less the King knows about all this, the better. We can only hope that the fleet did not sense the hurried departure of the Nightwing. I’m not sure how the court would feel about the fact that you two found a human ship and failed to tell anyone.”

Sullivan and Titus looked sheepishly at each other.

“Titus wanted to tell you,” explained Sullivan, “but I thought that it might not be the best idea.”

“Why?” asked Calliya.

“Because I didn’t want to have to make you choose between your King and a secret you might wish to keep from him.” Sullivan felt guilty about keeping the existence of the Negra from Calliya, but he was still sure it had been the right decision.

“Why would you want to keep something from the King?” she asked, wearing a pained expression.

“Because I thought that the ship might help me get home somehow, and I wasn’t too sure how the King might feel about that. I did get the impression that he wasn’t that keen on the idea.”

“I can’t believe, Jack Sullivan, after all we have survived, that you don’t trust me,” said Calliya, even more upset at Sullivan’s latest revelation. She stormed off back towards the homestead without saying another word.

Sullivan ran back through the brush to recover the heavy assault cannon, and then followed Titus and the wounded drakan slowly back through the thick forest. The moon seemed to penetrate the canopy more easily than when they had first entered the forest, but Sullivan couldn’t tell if the effect was real or if he was just imagining it.

Maybe he should have told Calliya about the Negra. But the ship was as dangerous as it was unpredictable. And there was no way for Sullivan to know what the Elysians might do with advanced human technology if they got their hands on it. Nor was there any way to know how stable Iago was. For all Sullivan knew, if he told the King about the vessel, the Elysians might try to gain entry by force, and then there would be no way to predict Iago’s reaction. The machine had tried to suffocate Sullivan and Titus once already – he wasn’t about to risk anyone else’s life.

He shifted the heavy cannon to his shoulder. “How’s Pegasus?”

“He has survived the ordeal rather well. I believe I owe the dear creature my life also. Not to mention yourself, Mr. Sullivan.”

“You might be right there, Titus. If Pegasus hadn’t got to you when he did, we might have a whole load of other problems. Although it might have answered some questions.”

“Such as?” asked Titus.

“Such as who’s been feeding Kerreg information. And why he might be trying to capture me, or kill me. How much do you know about this Kerreg?”

“He is one of the Fallen Lords. Once, he occupied a position of great power in the House of Stewards, the one that Prince Tayfen leads now, but after the war he was banished with the rest of the Fallen. He was a great general and a fearsome warrior, by all accounts. In the time since, he has tangled with a few of the noble houses, but he has never shown such boldness as he does now.”

“What will happen?”

“I do not know, Mr. Sullivan. Such an event as this is unprecedented and undoubtedly, the court will have to hear about it.”

Sullivan groaned. He didn’t really wish to visit the court again so soon. The King had yet to pass judgement on the crimes he already stood accused of. The two humans stopped for a moment in the forest.

“Whatever happens, we can’t let them near the Estrella Negra.”

“Why?” asked Titus.

“Because there are weapons on board. Not weapons like this,” he said, meaning the assault cannon, “but weapons that could destroy a whole city in an instant.”

Titus looked aghast, but said nothing.

“And remember what I told you about Iago? There’s no way to know how he might react to aliens.”

At first, Titus looked confused at the term that Sullivan used, but then it dawned on him as they continued towards the homestead.

“I understand. But I must counter that Iago has been very helpful to me.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sullivan as they continued on.

“For a scientist, Mr. Sullivan, it is most alarming to hear that you have missed out on three hundred years of discovery. That said, it is equally exciting to have the opportunity to study three hundred years of science and history, all at once. There is much I would like to understand about the cosmos, not least of which is the method by which I arrived here.”

“But you know how you got here, don’t you? You said you just couldn’t talk about it.”

“I told you the King had forbidden me to speak of it. Indeed, I am perfectly aware of the series of circumstances by which I arrived here. What I do not understand is how it was possible.”

Titus looked away from Sullivan as he spoke, seeming ill at ease talking about his arrival on Elysium. Sullivan got the feeling that there were probably good reasons that Titus didn’t like speaking about it, and decided it would only be fair to try and change the subject. It had been quite a gruelling night already.

There was no sign of Calliya as they approached the perimeter of the forest, but as they broke through the outer edge of the thick undergrowth, a blinding light shone on them from above. Sullivan shielded his eyes as he tried to make out what was happening.

High above the clearing that stretched from the forest to the homestead, three seerephon hung in the air. Two of them were a great deal larger than the Kelison, while the third was about the same size as Calliya’s vessel. Globes on their bellies emitted beams of bright light that swept over the clearing as Sullivan squinted through the glare to see if he could locate Calliya.

She was standing out in the middle of the clearing, also shielding her eyes from the light-globes on the seerephon. Sullivan moved to join her, with Titus following behind as he led his wounded drakan.

“What’s going on?” shouted Sullivan. The hovering seerephon emitted a thundering vibration that shook the ground, making it hard for him to hear his own voice.

“It’s the King!” Calliya replied, pointing at one of the two largest seerephon. As Sullivan’s eyes began to adjust to the bright light, he could make out elaborate detailing on the monstrous vessel. Raised carvings covered the sharp nose, continuing back around the rim, outlining the blue light emitted from whatever generated the null gravity field. Sullivan could actually feel the gravity fluctuating in his stomach as the seerephon began to descend. The three vessels formed a circle around them, and all of a sudden Sullivan wasn’t sure if it was the null gravity that was unsettling his stomach. He didn’t like being surrounded, even if they were supposed to be friends.

The seerephon all wheeled slowly as they descended, the light-globes throwing flickering shadows all across the clearing. Titus coaxed Pegasus to join them between the ships, and Sullivan couldn’t help but think that Titus looked as nervous as he felt. No sooner had the ships touched down than the rear entrance hatches opened on all

three, and Bellanis was the first to emerge. She raced towards them, her blade drawn, but between the light and shadow Sullivan could see the concern on her face.

“Calliya!” she called. Bellanis’s expression became even more concerned when she got a better look at the physical state of Calliya. She was covered in scratches, and her evening gown was almost unrecognisable.

“I’m fine, Bellanis,” answered Calliya. The dark-haired woman examined her more closely, her expression shifting from concerned to scornful.

There was a sudden silence as the heavy vibration from the seerephon faded.

“What are you doing here?” asked Calliya.

“Must you really ask such a question?” came a shout from behind them. Tayfen was descending from his seerephon, resplendent in a set of heavy battle armour. It gleamed in the bright light, the polished metal plates sliding over each other beneath a flowing robe the colour of midnight. Half-a-dozen sentinels flanked him, their wet stone skin glistening in the light of the globes on the seerephon’s belly.

“The Orisa sensed the presence of the Nightwing as soon as it passed the last patrol, Calliya,” answered Bellanis. “I immediately fetched the King and Lord Tayfen, but they had some trouble believing me.”

“But not,” interrupted Tayfen, “any trouble in guessing where on all Elysium a Nightwing might be headed. The homestead of the lady Calliya, of course.” He sneered at Sullivan as he spoke, and Sullivan returned the glare.

Another phalanx of sentinels swarmed from out of the largest seerephon and formed a perimeter around the King’s vessel, as the monarch made his way slowly down the ramp.

Bellanis spoke in hushed tones.

“The Orisa sensed the Nightwing leaving. What happened here?”

The King heard her nevertheless.

“A question that we would all like answered, no doubt,” he said, his soft tones carrying through the night air. “I’m sure the Lady Calliya will enlighten us all as to the events that transpired here tonight,” he added, looking at Calliya with a kind face as he drew closer.

“I am unsure, sire,” she replied. “An hour ago, Captain Sullivan and I were in the central observation tower.” She pointed at the tallest of the five spires that stretched upwards from the homestead. “A darkling appeared from nowhere and attacked us, and by the time we reached the main hall, the doors had been breached. We were fortunate indeed to drive them off.”

“Fortunate?” asked Tayfen with thinly veiled sarcasm. “Fortunate to drive off a second horde of darklings, all by yourself? I wonder.”

“Please, Prince Tayfen,” countered the King. “Allow her to finish. And perhaps to explain what kind of device that is that Captain Sullivan carries.”

All eyes turned to Sullivan, and the heavy assault cannon that was propped, stock down on the ground. He held the barrel in his left hand as he looked around.

“It’s a weapon,” he said bluntly.

“Where did it come from?” asked Tayfen.

“Earth,” replied Sullivan.

But Tayfen wasn’t satisfied with Sullivan’s explanation. He glared at the human.

“I don’t remember seeing it before, at court,” he sneered.

Bellanis chose her moment to interrupt.

“I think you’re missing the point, my lord – a Nightwing has been seen, inside the Shroud. Calliya, who was responsible for this?”

“It was Kerreg,” replied Calliya, staring coldly at Tayfen.

There was a long silence, partly because the Midnight Prince had no quick comeback for this revelation.

“Are you sure?” asked the King.

Calliya nodded deeply.

“I examined the brow of one of the darklings, where we slew it in the forest. It clearly bore the stamp of its raiser, as no doubt will the others.”

“And you are sure it was the mark of Lord Kerreg?”

Calliya nodded again. The King sighed deeply.

“I feared a night such as this would come. Long has it been since Elysium felt the fell hand of darklings upon it hallowed soil. But yet it does not surprise me that Kerreg is the one who would grow so brazen. He has always been somewhat impulsive.”

“And what do we intend to do about it, your majesty?” asked Tayfen impatiently.

The King did not reply immediately, but gazed down at Sullivan’s cannon, almost absent-mindedly.

“I believe it is time we paid the Lord Kerreg a visit,” he said softly. “But you,” he added more forcefully, staring into Sullivan’s eyes, “will leave that behind.”

He turned abruptly and strode back towards his seerephon, his massive sentinel guards scuttling up the ramp after him.

“Tayfen! Bellanis! To your ships!” he called.

The King’s voice carried easily, even though his back was turned. He looked at where the Kelison lay, some way off, and then turned back to face the small group.



“Calliya, you and Captain Sullivan will travel with me, as the Kelison has not healed yet. After all, this involves you both most of all.”

Calliya and Sullivan looked to Titus, who shrugged his shoulders apologetically.

“I shall stay here, for I must tend to Pegasus. I owe him too great a debt to abandon him so.”

Sullivan handed him the cannon.

“Take care of this for me until I get back,” he said.

“Of course,” answered Titus, slinging the strap over his shoulder.

Calliya leaned in and kissed Titus on the cheek.

“Watch over the Kelison for me, Titus. We shall return soon.”

Sullivan and Calliya made their way towards the King’s seerephon. As they walked, Calliya explained that the King’s seerephon was called the Caradan, and was the most powerful of all the fleet. It could carry many crewmembers, as well as members of the Royal Entourage, along with a compliment of sentinels. These powerful constructs were similar to the ones that had guarded the funeral barge, and beyond the power of most Elysians – only the Midnight Prince could harness the power to create them. Even the King’s own sentinels had been bequeathed to him by one of Tayfen’s predecessors.

Sullivan marvelled at the expansive corridors, as he followed the King through the body of the Caradan. The walls were made of a similar material to that of the Kelison, but here they seemed to have been spun from a thousand shades of golden thread. Subtle lighting from small globes overhead brought out the shimmering strands of the bulkheads.

The control chamber had the same basic layout as other seerephon, but on a much grander scale. There was room on the control dais for several people, and a particularly elaborate chair that to Sullivan seemed a throne. The two-metre deep wells on either side of the dais had three stations in each, and the Caradan’s crew busied themselves with controlling the vessel. They wore a similar uniform to the bodysuit that Sullivan had seen Calliya wearing on the Kelison, their bracelets flashing as they silently communicated with the Caradan.

Calliya mentioned something about getting changed and disappeared out of the control chamber. Sullivan was about to call after her when he noticed with some surprise that they were already nearly leaving the atmosphere of Elysium, the wispy purple strands of the Shroud growing in the forward display. Sullivan hadn’t felt the Caradan leave the surface, yet now he could see the planet streaking away in the rear display, with the Orisa and Tayfen’s seerephon, the Fentach, visible in the port and starboard displays. Sullivan wondered to himself just how fast these things could move.

The King had taken his place on the throne in the centre of the control dais. Like those of his crew, the bracelets on his wrists glowed brightly as he communicated constantly with the Caradan. Sullivan became acutely aware of his own bracelet. The tight sleeve of his jacket covered it, but if anyone saw it he would have some serious explaining to do. And what if the Caradan could sense him somehow? Even as he thought about the seerephon, he heard a rush of noise inside his head.

From his throne, the King turned his head and looked back towards Sullivan. He couldn't be sure, as there were other crew milling about, but it felt like the ancient Elysian's eyes were boring into him. He looked down at the patterned floor, wishing for Calliya to return soon. It was a full minute before he dared to look up again, by which time the noise in his head had subsided and the King had turned back to face the forward display.

Sullivan breathed a sigh of relief, and stood watching the forward display for a while. He was searching for some sign of their destination, but found only the sparse starfield of the Finite Realm. He would never get used to seeing so few stars. Instead, the micro-universe seemed replete with other astronomical phenomenon; multi-coloured nebulas that stretched their tendrils across the displays of the Caradan. Sullivan had become entranced by the heavenly light show by the time Calliya eventually reappeared. She had found herself a uniform similar to the ones the other crewman wore, but it was made of a glistening grey fabric, trimmed with silver.

"That was quick," joked Sullivan.

Calliya straightened the uniform, touching her hair.

"It doesn't do to appear unruly before the King," smiled Calliya in reply.

Sullivan leaned in closer, whispering in her ear.

"I'm worried about my bracelet," he said. "I can hear the ship – can it hear me?"

"Not if you don't try to communicate with it. But this could still be a problem. I had no idea we might end up on someone else's seerephon. Perhaps Lennat's sight has grown weary over the centuries – he should have seen this coming."

"What can we do?" whispered Sullivan. "Can't I just take it off?"

"No," hissed Calliya. "The bracelet will only come off when you're dead, or your seerephon corrupted. So we had better just stay out of the way as much as possible. We won't reach Kerreg's Moon until the morning, and if we're fortunate, the King might not realise that there's another master besides me on board."

It didn't seem like the greatest plan ever to Sullivan, so when Calliya tugged his sleeve to leave the control room, he followed her without hesitation. She offered to give him a tour of the ship, stopping first in the guest quarters so Sullivan could find some

fresh clothes. He chose a uniform similar to Calliya's, but in a shade of deep blue with gold trim. He straightened the jacket in the ornate mirror, admiring the uniform, which was made from some kind of very delicate hide and sat very comfortably on his frame.

The quarters were very lavish – Sullivan had never seen a full-size bathtub in a space ship. Especially not one that appeared to be made from gold, complete with fixtures encrusted with jewels. He whistled lowly as he took in the rest of the furnishings; tapestries that decorated the walls, and an expansive bed with plush silken sheets that dominated the entire chamber.

Calliya was waiting outside in the corridor, smiling her approval as he emerged from the quarters. He pulled down the sleeves, making sure that the control bracelet wasn't visible, adjusting his gun-belt as they headed off through the labyrinth vessel.

Sullivan had never seen such a ship. It wasn't the size that impressed him – in the navy he had been stationed on far larger ships; but the Caradan was like a space faring palace. Every corridor oozed luxury, from the spun gold that ran through the bulkheads to the jewelled fixtures and polished obsidian flagstones of the deck.

"You must have been on this ship before," said Sullivan as they made their way aft.

"Yes," answered Calliya. "I have been on the Caradan many times. The last occasion was the funeral of my cousin Gerren, when we travelled to the Rift to witness the passing over of the funeral barge."

"How did your cousin die?"

"Gerren the Strong was old. So old that eventually, he just began to fade away. It happens to our people, Jack. The lifespan of the Elysians varies greatly. Some of us live for centuries, and some for millennia. When the weight of years is all that a soul can bear, they simply lose the will to go on. And when the twilight of our lives draws near, one of the barges is summoned from the Shoals of Shades."

"What are the barges?"

"Ancient seerephon that orbit a distant world. Legend has it that they were the vessels of the Titans – left behind when the Old Ones fled to the Infinite Realm. No one truly understands where they came from, or what their true purpose might be, but every time one of our kind grows weary of life, one of the barges arrives from the shoal. It then takes them to their final resting place – the fires of your planet's sun."

Sullivan nodded, absorbing all the information. He was thinking of some of the ways humans ended their lives. On Ganymede, he had seen bodies bulldozed into mass graves, or incinerated in the burners. Orlat had wanted to destroy all the evidence of his crimes.

Calliya stopped before an enormous set of double doors, which were covered in golden relief carvings and stood twice the height of Sullivan.

“Are you hungry?” asked Calliya, smiling as she pushed open the doors.

Although Sullivan had eaten his fill only a few hours before, all the excitement had regenerated his appetite and so he followed Calliya into the Caradan’s elaborate dining room. The chamber was empty, but as soon as they entered a sandy looking construct appeared through a small hatch in the wall, and began to lay silver platters on the huge oval table. Sullivan watched as the plates began to accumulate on the gleaming black surface.

Calliya removed the cover from one of the platters and helped herself to a sliver of delicate looking cold meat, while Sullivan found his attention drawn to the decorations around the edges of the dining room. There were the usual tapestries depicting battles, both in space and on the surface, but it was the collection of artefacts arranged in display cases that really caught his attention.

There was an endless collection of objects stored in the cases, and although many of them were unfamiliar to him, there were others that were instantly recognisable. None of them had any legend indicating where they might have come from, but Sullivan could easily hazard a guess.

Earth.

Amongst the dazzling array of artefacts, Sullivan recognised some Grecian pottery, as well as the helm of a Roman soldier. He marvelled at the jewelled collar that sat next to the helm. It was styled like the fan from the tail of the peacock, but fashioned from gold and platinum, and encrusted with emeralds. Sullivan had never seen such riches.

“It was Queen Cleopatra who gave that to me,” came a soft, but powerful, voice.

Sullivan and Calliya turned to see the King, standing in the doorway.

“It was as thanks, for some advice I gave her. She felt she could not trust the Romans, and I told her that she was right to harbour such fears. They proved her undoing in the end.”

Calliya had perched on the edge of the table, reaching across the platters to feed herself with her fingers. Now she slid from the table, fixing her uniform and muttering an apology.

“Please, Calliya,” said the King, raising his hand. “Eat. You never know when you might need the strength. And you, Captain Sullivan, are you not hungry?”

Sullivan leaned over the table and took a small pastry. He popped it into his mouth with a smile.

“I’ll be just fine,” he answered.

The King walked slowly past the objects displayed.

“So many memories,” he said, indicating the battered helm. “This I found on a battlefield in Gaul. I saw great bloodshed that day.”

“How long were you on my world?” asked Sullivan.

“For millennia, Captain. At first, I lived there with many of our people, and the fires of Atlantis burned brightly for an age. But that age came to an end with the Exodus, and the fires grew dim. I was one those who remained for a time, watching mankind learn and grow, but eventually, I too returned to the Finite Realm. As the centuries passed, I would occasionally visit, just to see how the affairs of men fared, until after the War of the Rift, when all Elysians were forbidden to set foot on your world. But with each successive visit, I grew more saddened by what I saw. Tell me, Captain, did man ever grow out of his tremendous thirst for blood?”

Sullivan said nothing for a moment. Obviously the King knew the history of man better than he had let on.

“No,” he replied. “I guess we never have. War is just as popular now as it ever was. And just as brutal and bloody.”

“And have you fought in such a war?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know of what I speak. Of man’s thirst for blood,” said the King bluntly.

“Maybe,” answered Sullivan. “In every war there are men who kill for pleasure. But most of us never took any pleasure in any of the harm we caused.”

“But you caused it nonetheless?” asked the King.

Sullivan didn’t answer. He just stared at the elderly Elysian, who met his gaze with a passive smile. The King gestured towards a dull and dented sword that lay at the back of the case, its tarnished blade notched and blunt.

“This was given to me by a great English king. At the end of his life, he realised how much blood had been shed with the blade in his name. He gave me the sword and bade me to throw it in a lake, hoping that whoever took the throne after him would have no use for it. But I very much doubt that it turned out as he hoped.”

For a moment, there was silence in the dining room, as the King hung his head, lost in thought for a moment. Then he turned, with a speed that belied his aged frame, and grabbed Sullivan’s right wrist with a hand of steel. Sullivan jumped to his feet, trying to break free of the King’s grip.

The King pulled Sullivan’s sleeve up with his other hand. The control bracelet shone dully in the gentle gold light.

“And when were you going to tell me about this, Captain?” he said. There was a dark fire burning in his eyes, which were now very close to Sullivan’s.

“This is all my fault, your majesty,” interrupted Calliya. “I took Jack to see Lennat, and he decided that he would undergo the Raising.”

The King turned to Calliya.

“The Raising? I would have thought that you knew better, Calliya.” He turned back to Sullivan. “You have raised a seerephon? I did feel something odd amongst the fleet recently, as if the song of the seerephon had changed somehow. But I would never have guessed.”

The King released Sullivan, and seemed to calm down slightly.

“I wish that my ancient brother would think before he did such things,” he sighed. “But there are other, more pressing matters at hand. We will speak of this later.” He turned and swept towards the door, calling over his shoulder as he left.

“We will reach Kerreg’s Moon at sunset. I will expect both of you to be in the control chamber when we get there.”

Sullivan and Calliya looked at each other glumly, and ate in silence for a long time, before Calliya tried to apologise.

“Jack, I’m sorry. I should never have taken you to see Lennat. I’ll talk to the King, and try to get him to – ”

“Forget about it,” Sullivan cut in. “I can look after myself.”

Later, they made their way back to the guest quarters, where they had been billeted in adjoining rooms. Sullivan was still annoyed. If things hadn’t been bad enough already, now he could be sure that the King had it in for him. He didn’t really blame Calliya, but he wasn’t sure she could protect him from the wrath of the court. She turned to him before entering her quarters.

“Goodnight, Jack,” she said softly, looking deeply into his eyes. Sullivan looked away.

“I need to get some sleep,” he muttered, turning and making his way into his quarters.

From where she stood in the doorway of her own opulent chamber, a tear welled in Calliya’s eye. Her feelings for this human were so confusing. She felt responsible for him – after all, she had brought him to the Finite Realm. But there was more to it than that. She couldn’t bear to think what punishment the King might mete out, or what Tayfen might do if he learned of the Raising. But whatever they decided – Calliya would protect Sullivan, no matter what. That, she knew in her heart.

## Chapter Sixteen

When Sullivan arrived at the control chamber the next morning, Calliya was there already. She looked tired and drawn, as if she hadn't gotten much sleep, and was clad in the same type of battle armour she had been wearing when she rescued Sullivan from the funeral barge. The King had said that they would reach Kerreg's Moon at sunset, but after he had returned to his quarters Sullivan had realised he had no idea when sunset might be. The lighting on the Caradan didn't seem to follow any cycle, so he decided to just guess. He had no idea how long he had slept in the luxury of his quarters, but he was sure he was late when he arrived.

The King sat in his throne, directing operations in the control chamber, his bracelets glowing dully as he communed with the Caradan. Beneath him, in the two wells, the crew busied themselves with the other aspects of running the ship. Calliya approached him from the direction of the dais, her crested helm held under the crook of her arm.

"Ready for trouble?" asked Sullivan.

"Hello Jack," she said, smiling, and Sullivan could feel his ill temper melting away.

"Is he still angry?" he asked, nodding his head towards the King.

"He hasn't mentioned the Raising," she replied. "But he seems to be in a fair mood, considering. He is preparing to coordinate the attack on Kerreg's Moon."

"Attack?" said Sullivan in surprise. They were only three ships, he thought. How would they attack a moon?

"With the seerephon so close, there is no need to use the touchstone. The King can use the Caradan to communicate with Tayfen and Bellanis. The three vessels must work together, as Lord Kerreg is sure to try and defend the fortress. He will not want to answer to the King."

Sullivan looked to the forward display, where an expansive deep blue nebula stretched all the way across the sloping wall of the control chamber. They were approaching at tremendous velocity, and Sullivan thought he could just make out the

silhouettes of planets casting shadows in the nebula; dark spots against the starlight that filtered through the interstellar gas.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“That is the Darkling Belt – the realm of the Fallen Lords. A series of rogue moons, trapped in a dark nebula, from wherein they draw their power. The closest one is that of Kerreg, I believe, but this is the first time I have ever cast eyes on it. This place is forbidden to the fleet.”

The King turned halfway round on his throne, signalling to Sullivan and Calliya.

“Come! You won’t get much of a view from there!”

They moved from the rear of the control chamber and mounted the dais in the centre. Sullivan found himself very curious as to how the Elysians would do battle. His only experience of war had been with the Navy, where three ships hardly constituted a naval task force.

The Caradan was close enough to see Kerreg’s Moon clearly in the forward display – a small dark rock, nestled in the gaseous blue folds of the nebula. He could make out no features as such, for it was still too far away, but it was growing larger very quickly. In the lateral displays, Sullivan could see the Orisa and the Fentach matching the Caradan’s approach speed. Sullivan felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck, and his bracelet began to tingle on his wrist. He looked to Calliya, who was obviously experiencing the same sensation.

“The Caradan senses danger,” she whispered.

All eyes were focused on the darkling moon. Even the King had sat forward on his throne, his gaze trained on the forward display, watching an asteroid grow in size. It was immediately between the Elysian ships and Kerreg’s moon, and Sullivan could feel no sensation of movement as the seerephon easily avoided the asteroid.

But more asteroids littered the path to the moon. The seerephon ducked and swerved through the oncoming debris easily, but the asteroid field was unlike any Sullivan had encountered before. It appeared to emanate from the small moon.

“How is this possible?” he asked Calliya with a whisper.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never seen an asteroid field so small or focused.”

“It’s not an asteroid field, Jack. Nightwings on the surface of Kerreg’s moon are defending the fortress by hurling pieces of the surrounding landscape into the void. They use their gravitic organs to impel the stones to escape velocities.”

“You have got to be kidding,” said Sullivan.



The Caradan banked to the left, shifting into a high orbit of the darkling moon, the stream of debris ceasing as soon as they moved around the far side. The Orisa and the Fentach followed suit, matching the changes in course as they began their descent through the atmosphere. It would take them almost an entire orbit to reach the surface.

Sullivan watched as they broached the atmosphere of Kerreg's Moon. There was a distant star throwing a dim light across the dayside of the moon. He didn't understand how the star was able to sustain life at such a distance, as he imagined that the moon would only ever have a day of permanent twilight. The barren terrain slipped past the ventral display at a terrific rate.

Arid desert stretched from pole to pole, broken only by sharp mountain ranges that stretched starwards. There was very little water apparent, save for a few black lakes that sat in the lowest basins of the featureless plains. It was a bleak and unwelcoming place.

The Elysian vessels continued their rapid descent towards the surface. Sullivan guessed this might have something to do with the short range of their weapons. If all of the seerephon were armed with the same gravitic lance as the Kelison, then they would have to get very close to the launchers to hit them. That might explain why they didn't just attack straight down the throat of the artillery, a tactic that Orlat had always favoured. He had always advocated striking with an iron fist, and worrying about collateral damage afterwards.

"Have you ever been into battle before?" asked Sullivan.

Calliya shook her head, and he noticed that she had opened a button at the top of her jacket, and was looking ill at ease.

"I have had my share of fights and skirmishes, but never like this," she replied. "I have fought darklings on many worlds, across the Realm, but I have never ventured to the darkling belt."

Sullivan returned to watching the terrain loom larger in the display as they crossed the terminator, heading into the nightside of the moon.

"Activate the gravitic lances!" called the King, and the crew activated their consoles, reporting back as they did so.

"Port lance active!"

"Starboard lance active!"

Sullivan could see the fortress quite clearly in the display, looming large out of a row of black cliffs on the horizon. On either side, the Orisa and the Fentach were visible against the dark night sky, the lance emitters on the outside shell of the seerephon crackling into life. They were barely a kilometre from the surface now.

"Forward lance active!"

The King's bracelets began to blaze as he closed his eyes, delivering the last few instructions to Bellanis and Tayfen. Sullivan could hear the King's voice echoing in his own head as the battle orders were issued. The fleet would break formation when it reached the launchers, and attempt to draw fire from each other while sweeping their lances across the Nightwings entrenched in the barren ground.

A huge boulder appeared almost out of nowhere, scraping across the Caradan's shell as it banked to avoid it. They were rapidly approaching the launchers, and more and more debris flew through the air at them, although the heaviest fire travelled harmlessly over the fleet. The seerephon broke formation, with the Fentach and the Orisa peeling off to port and starboard at an angle of forty-five degrees. The Caradan continued dead ahead, its course taking it directly over the first line of launchers.

Sullivan couldn't make out much detail as they hurtled towards their target, although he thought could see darklings swarming over large black shapes in the dark desert. The Nightwings themselves were half buried in the dirt, their gravitic rings burning brightly. The Caradan rolled to port sharply, activating its port lance as it did so. The lance raked across the desert, carving a huge furrow in the dusty ground.

The Caradan streaked over the launcher, leaving behind it a wake of destruction. The fragile bodies of the darklings crumbled under the force of the lance. The Nightwing tried to free itself as it spotted the approaching seerephon, but there was too little time. Its hull crumbled as the tip of the lance fell across it, the darkling vessel erupting as it spat raw power into the night air.

The Caradan flipped over onto its starboard side and banked sharply away. It had to dive to avoid boulders hurled from the front line of launchers, but then began to climb, passing the Fentach as it streaked in the other direction. The Caradan attacked the eastern launchers, as the Fentach attacked the western, while the Orisa made a lateral sweep of the front line.

The fire from the launchers was even heavier now. Again the Caradan dived and attacked two launchers set close together in the desert, leaving behind a huge plume of dust, debris and erupting power organs. But again, the seerephon was forced to retreat by the heavy volume of fire. Sullivan could see that although the launchers hadn't the best aim, or a rapid rate of fire, they did have a huge numerical advantage. And it would only take one of those massive boulders to do some serious damage.

A look of alarm crossed the King's face. Sullivan looked around at the displays to try and see what had given him such cause for concern. The Caradan came about suddenly, and the King jumped to his feet, his eyes fixed on the forward display.

"Tayfen!" he roared.

The Fentach had broken away from the launcher area, a flat plain that skirted a line of craggy black cliffs in the distance. It was skimming the ground, making straight for the fortress that was constructed against the rock face – a series of squat, square keeps, surrounded on three sides by a sheer wall and topped with monstrous battlements.

“What’s he doing?” asked Calliya.

“He’s making straight for Kerreg’s fortress,” answered the King. “The fool will be destroyed.”

As the Fentach approached the fortress, it was forced to jump and swerve to avoid swarms of smaller debris, its gravitic lances shining brightly as they pierced the night. The Fentach rolled to port; it accelerated and veered towards the eastern end of the fortress, before banking swiftly back along the line of the fortifications.

The Orisa was close off the starboard bow of the Caradan as they followed the Fentach. Tayfen’s vessel spun wildly, its gravitic lances wheeling across the buildings as the seerephon strafed the fortress. A string of fiery explosions leapt up in its wake, lighting up the night and casting giant shadows over the stony desert floor and along the black cliffs.

Tayfen’s seerephon climbed sharply as the fortifications began to crumble under their own weight. Clouds of dust billowed out over the desert as the main keep’s roof sagged, its structure compromised by the touch of the Fentach’s lances. The Caradan and the Orisa peeled away from the fortress and followed Tayfen into the dark sky, before the Caradan quickly resumed its position at the head of the small fleet.

In the rear display, Sullivan could see the launchers moving from their positions in the desert. Because they needed a constant supply of debris to hurl into the air, they had carved out long shallow furrows in the barren terrain as they had bombarded the Elysian vessels. Now they were rising slowly from the desert floor they had been consuming. As the Caradan drew around for another pass, Sullivan could make out the first of the Nightwings forming up into small squadrons.

The darkling vessels began to streak skywards, their slim profile barely visible in the dark night. The seerephon slowed as they approached the remains of the fortress, all eyes on the stream of Nightwing that were making their escape.

On the bridge of the Caradan, the King sighed.

“Strange,” he said softly. “I did not think that the Lord Kerreg would give up the fight so easy. No Fallen Lord would surrender to us. Perhaps he perished in Prince Tayfen’s attack.”

“What makes you think that?” asked Sullivan.

“The Fallen control the Darklings in a similar way to our seerephon, but the foul creatures possess even less life of their own. Once their master has fallen, they will scatter to the four corners of the belt.” The King shook his head slowly. “And there were many questions I would have asked of Lord Kerreg. Let us hope that he is merely unconscious, or wounded, or attempting to trick us into withdrawing.”

They observed the ruined fortress as the Caradan made a low pass over the battlements. Tayfen’s gravitic lances had inflicted heavy damage. Sullivan could see now that the fortress had not been made of solid stone, but of small bricks joined with mortar. He had seen similar construction in history – man had built castles like this for centuries, before he had discovered new materials and methods of buildings.

The central keep had collapsed almost completely, and only the front wall remained standing. Even from their low altitude, darklings could clearly be seen swarming over the ruins, even in the dark.

Sullivan felt the King issue the order to the other masters. They would land the seerephon right in front of the fortress. Then the King stood and turned to them, taking his staff from where it had leant against his throne.

“Come,” he said. “We must ensure that Kerreg has not tried to trick us somehow. The Fallen can never be trusted. We will take the sentinels and make a sweep of the fortress.”

“I’d like to ask Kerreg a few questions myself,” muttered Sullivan as they left the control chamber, hoping no one had heard him.

They were already nearing the exit hatch at the rear of the Caradan when Sullivan felt the jolt of the seerephon touching the ground. Sentinels filled the corridor, their expressionless faces trained on the hatch as it opened to reveal the cold dark night of Kerreg’s Moon. As the King’s entourage made its way down the gangway, Sullivan could see Tayfen and Bellanis emerging from their own vessels, both wearing gleaming battle armour and carrying wicked looking swords. Behind Tayfen, a dozen sentinels loped down the ramp, forming a protective perimeter around the vessels.

Light globes on the seerephon cast shadows around the dark surface, playing over the shattered walls of Kerreg’s fortress. The King met the other two masters in between all three vessels. Tayfen was beaming, puffing out his chest like a peacock, evidently very proud of his heroics.

“Perhaps, Tayfen,” said the King as he approached. “You might consult me before taking such rash action again. You could have been destroyed.”

“Nonsense,” replied the prince. “The Fentach is one of the swiftest seerephon that has ever flown the stars, and is more than a match for any Nightwing.”

When the King glared at him, he realised his mistake and quickly tried to make amends.

“But of course, your majesty. I should have made you aware of what I was planning to do.”

“Yes,” answered the King coolly. “There were many questions that I would have asked the Fallen Lord. And because of your rashness, Tayfen, those questions may now go unanswered. But still, we must search the fortress, and make sure that we are not the victims of some kind of ruse.”

“But Father,” said Bellanis. “Would you not sense Kerreg if he lived still? He could not be very far from where we are now.”

“If any one of our race draws breath near me, I can feel it, yes,” replied the King. “But some of the Fallen have shown an ability to veil themselves. So it is possible that Kerreg still hides within.”

“I do not think he would have allowed his Nightwings to abandon him if he lived still,” answered Tayfen with a dismissive wave.

“Perhaps you are right,” said the King, looking towards the fortress with a troubled brow. “But we must be sure. Bellanis, you will search the western camp of the fortress while Calliya and I search the central camp. Tayfen, you will make sure that Kerreg is not hiding in the eastern camp. Each of us will take a flank of sentinels, and we will leave the remaining flank here to protect the seerephon.”

Last of all, he turned to the human. “But you, Mr. Sullivan, will remain here. The sentinels will ensure you are kept safe.”

Sullivan tried to protest, but the King would hear no arguments.

“Don’t worry Jack,” said Calliya, donning her helmet. “We will return soon, I promise.”

“It’s okay. Just take care of yourself, alright?”

She turned and ran to catch up with the King, joining him at the head of half a dozen sentinels as the Elysians moved into the ruins of the fortress through one of several breaches in the high wall. It took only a few minutes for them to move out of sight, and soon Sullivan was left with only the sentinels for company. He sat on the edge of the Caradan’s exit hatch, watching the six creatures as they made slow circles of the vessels, their blank faces staring out into the dusty darkness. Sullivan was beginning to grow accustomed to his fate lying in the hands of others.

Calliya carefully surveyed the ruins of the fortress, adjusting the helmet of her borrowed armour constantly so that she could see. Eventually she gave up, removing the

headgear and carrying it in her free hand. The King was close behind her, while their flank of sentinels had spread out amongst the crumbling buildings to sniff out the last of the darklings.

A large central keep had dominated the interior of the fortress, surrounded by a scatter of smaller buildings. Fire had spread to many of these, and here and there Calliya could see flames burning in scarlet and bright green, raw energy crackling out of the ruins. One of the sentinels flushed out a small four-legged darkling, its tail whipping as it tried to evade the monstrous Elysian war construct. Another sentinel leaped, catching the darkling and pinning it to the ground before dispatching it with its wicked claws.

They came to the ruins of the keep. Two of the walls remained standing, but the front wall had collapsed almost completely. They could see all the way through to the cliff wall rising vertically at the back of the fortress. The sentinels moved into secure the area, driving the remaining darklings scurrying off into the night. Two of the fleeing creatures barrelled straight for Calliya and the King, but the young Elysian held her blade at they ready. She dispatched the darklings with two quick strokes, their cloven cadavers rolling across the dusty ground.

Together, Calliya and the King scrambled over the stones that had made up the keep. None of them were very large, and they appeared to have been quarried by a great, clawed animal that simply tore them from the ground. They found their way into the remains of the keep's great hall, where some of the high, arched doorways had survived, but the Elysians still had to clamber over more debris to reach the flagstoned floor.

"There," said the King, pointing with his staff towards a heavy stone lintel that barred the way to a corridor that led from the great hall into the sheer cliff wall. Bidden by the King, two of the sentinels grabbed the lintel and dragged it out of the way, revealing a narrow stone staircase that spiralled down beneath the ground.

The King signalled for the sentinels to stand guard and moved down the spiral staircase, Calliya following close behind as they descended into the depths of Kerreg's fortress. They found themselves in a dark, wide, low-ceilinged chamber, where an assortment of armour and weapons occupied dimly lit alcoves evenly spaced around the walls. There was an air of dark opulence about the chamber.

"Where are we?" whispered Calliya.

"I believe this to be Kerreg's private quarters," replied the King. He cast his eyes around the darkened chamber, and then tapped the tip of his staff twice on the ground. The crystal on top of the staff began to glow brightly, casting a blue light around the chamber, and they peered into the heavy shadows that remained in the corners.

A darkling broke cover from a hole in the floor. It skirted around the party, making for the staircase that led upwards. Before Calliya could react, the King had swung his staff in a great arc, the crystal head coming into contact with the black creature. There was a sharp crack and the darkling was thrown across the chamber, stunned. The King followed his blow, the light from the crystal now distilled into a single beam. He shone it upon the darkling and the creature shrieked loudly.

“Where is your master?” boomed the King, but the darkling merely trembled and squirmed in answer.

“Can you sense anything?” asked Calliya, moving forward with sword outstretched in case the creature broke free.

“No, nothing.” The light emitted from the tip of the King’s staff grew brighter and brighter, until Calliya was forced to shield her eyes. The darkling simply started to melt under the light, the dark matter that made up its unnatural body swept away by the blinding brilliance. In another moment, it was little more than ash.

“You could learn nothing, your majesty?” asked Calliya.

The King shook his head.

“The unfortunate beast was no more aware of what has befallen its master than we are. But I can be sure that if Kerreg still lives, than he is nowhere close. Take two of the sentinels, my lady, and find out if the others have had more luck than us. We can all meet here when the search is complete.”

Calliya nodded and flew up the staircase, finding two sentinels waiting for her. They made for the western camp of the fortress, searching for Bellanis.

Sullivan had been watching the sentinels slowly prowl the perimeter for what seemed an age, but it had only been a few minutes since the Elysians had disappeared from view. He had trained his eyes on the breaches in the wall, trying to catch a glimpse of Calliya, but there was no sign of her. He had tried to cross the perimeter to get a better look, but the sentinels moved menacingly into his path, staring at him with sightless eyes and forcing him to back away. So he sat on the edge of the exit hatch of the Caradan and waited.

A plume of dark dust caught his eye, behind the seerephon, out on the dark plain. Two of the sentinels also saw it, and broke from the perimeter to have a better look. Sullivan stood up, peering into the darkness, his eyes following the sentinels as they loped off into the desert. They closed on the source of the plume, a large black shape galloping towards the seerephon.

It was giant darkling, at least four metres tall, and similar in shape to the bear creature that had attacked Calliya's homestead. The sentinels leaped on it from a great distance, digging their claws into the beast's flanks, causing it to shriek in protest. It batted at one of its assailants, knocking it back across the dusty ground.

The other sentinels moved to join the fight, drawn by the second darkling that was following the first. It looked even bigger, and had long thick limbs that propelled it towards the seerephon at a tremendous pace.

Sullivan wondered how many of the darklings were out there in the desert, searching blindly for revenge against those who had decimated their ranks. He had two choices – stay with the vessels and hope that the combination of seerephon and sentinels would be enough to stave off the attack; or head for the fortress, and take his fate into his own hands for a change.

There wasn't much of a debate in Sullivan's head. As soon as the last sentinel had loped off to intercept the largest darkling, Sullivan slipped off the ramp and jogged towards the fortress. He could only hope that he was able to cover the distance before the sentinels noticed that he was gone.

The air felt thin on Kerreg's moon, as if no matter how hard his chest pounded, it couldn't fill his lungs. By the time he reached one of the smaller breaches in the fortress wall he was sweating and breathing very heavily. He looked behind him, searching for any sign of his stone guardians. He just make out the huge cloud of dust kicked up by the ongoing battle between the sentinels and the two huge darklings. Weight of numbers was on the sentinels' side, and they were making the most of it.

Sullivan climbed over the rubble that lay in the breach, getting his first look at the ruined fortress. Crumbling buildings spat goutts of yellow and green fire into the night, as darklings scurried from ruin to ruin, searching for sanctuary. Sentinels pursued them, ruthlessly crushing them underfoot or impaling them with their talons.

Sullivan's hand instinctively moved for his pistol. He had hardly ever worn it since his discharge from the Navy, and he had hardly ever missed it. He had only had it back on his hip for a couple of days and now it felt like he had never taken it off. He drew the field-loader and activated the power cell.

Off to his right, towards the eastern camp of the fortress, he caught a glimpse of an Elysian's battle armour, as the light from one of the many eruptions glinted off the polished metal plates. The figure moved into one of the few relatively undamaged structures, a small round building that stood apart the rest of the fortress, its domed roof still largely intact despite the Fentach's devastating attack.



Sullivan scrambled down off the rubble and picked his way across to the round structure. A couple of sentinels were standing guard near the only entrance, but a large piece of one of the keeps had fallen on the side of the structure, smashing a hole just large enough for a man to fit through. He approached the hole warily, his pistol held tightly in his hand. The interior was too dark to see anything clearly, and he had to scramble up a two-metre pile of rubble to get a better view of who was inside. He had hoped it might be Calliya, or even Bellanis, but the moment he saw the character of the armour glinting in the dim light, he knew he had found the Midnight Prince.

Nor was he alone. Two sentinels, either side of him, were backing their quarry into the corner. Although it was too dark to make out any details, Sullivan could see enough to be sure it was no darkling. It looked like a giant man, at least seven feet from the ground to his shaggy hair, who wore layer upon layer of thick fur. He was backing away from Tayfen, who was brandishing something in his right hand.

Sullivan moved further into the gap, trying to get a better look at what was going on, his feet struggling for purchase. The structure had a sunken floor, and Sullivan didn't want to fall – even if he didn't hurt himself, he wasn't sure he wanted to alert the domed chamber's occupants to his presence.

The Elysian was too far away to hear what he was saying, but Sullivan was sure he was saying something to the giant. Tayfen held his right hand out in front of him, holding a small dark sphere. The other man spat on the ground and said something to Tayfen, who laughed loudly.

The sphere began to emit a dull purple glow, accompanied by the noise of whistling wind. Sullivan could feel the air rushing past him into the structure as the light intensified, stretching out thin violet fingers from the sphere to the giant man. It seemed as if his eyes were playing tricks on him. The walls around the giant began to flex and move, as if they were being twisted by some unseen force, as the light from the sphere grew ever brighter.

Sullivan's head ached from watching the fabric of space bend before his very eyes. It was making him dizzy, and in the torrent of air pouring through the narrow gap it became harder and harder for the human to keep his footing. He closed his eyes, trying to recover his equilibrium, clinging onto the bare rock with his free hand. The noise from the wind was deafening him, rising into an unbearable crescendo before culminating in a huge dull thud, as if a great beast had fallen crashing to the earth. The final gust of wind pulled Sullivan from his precarious position and he tumbled into the structure.

The fall stunned Sullivan, and precious seconds passed before he recovered his bearings and opened his eyes. When the dark domed chamber did eventually come into focus, he found himself staring right at the pointed snouts of one of the sentinels. He instinctively retreated, scrambling across the sharp broken tiles of the floor, until he felt something cold touch the back of his neck.

He whipped around to find two more of the giant constructs circling him. None of them made a move; instead they stood and watched him, their blind eyes staring right through him. Sullivan's hand flew to his pistol.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," said Tayfen, approaching Sullivan from across the chamber. "I do not think that even your mighty pistol will be a match for four sentinels."

"Maybe not," replied Sullivan. "But I bet it would make a pretty big hole in you."

"Do not threaten me, little man!" snapped Tayfen. He stood behind one of his sentinels, running his hand down the construct's slick stone flanks.

"You have interfered in the affairs of my people for the last time, Captain Sullivan."

"I haven't interfered with anyone," grunted Sullivan, rising to his feet.

Tayfen nodded and one of the sentinels lightly flicked a claw across the back of Sullivan's legs. He fell to his knees, crying out in agony.

"Please, human. Don't get up."

Sullivan looked up at the Midnight Prince, debating whether or not to draw his field-loader and finish this. He had never been one to take action without considering the consequences. If he did shoot Tayfen, he might have some trouble convincing the Elysians that it had been self-defence. But if he was going to die at the hands of this treacherous alien, then he had no choice.

"I have to admit," continued the Prince, "that I could scarcely believe my luck when you fell into my hands. First Kerreg, then you – I get to tie up all the loose ends at once."

Tayfen reached beneath the folds of his cloak and removed the purple sphere he had used on the Fallen Lord. Sullivan's hand went straight for his pistol, but it was too late. A purple ray of light stretched from the sphere and struck him squarely in the chest, driving his muscles into spasm. His hand was frozen, just inches from the butt of the field-loader.

"Your human weapon cannot save you now, Sullivan. And you had better save your strength. You will need it, where you are going."

The paralysis was spreading up Sullivan's body, but he could still manage a few words.

"What are you doing to me?" he grimaced.

"I am doing what I should have done the first time I saw you. I am pushing you out of this Realm, and into the Fold. It is the place for all of your kind who lose their way."

"Why?" gasped Sullivan. He could feel the space around him twisting as the light from the sphere grew. He saw flecks of black in the blinding rays, as if the light from the sphere brought darkness with it.

"I cannot risk the King finding out why the barge of Gerren the Strong sought out a human vessel. Soon, it will not matter – with you and Kerreg out of the way, it will be easy enough to convince the court of the threat that your kind pose. The fear of an alliance between the Lord of the Darklings and humans will cause more than enough fear for my needs. Finally, the Fleet will cross the Rift and we will retake our rightful place as lords of men. And you, my dear Captain, will be nothing more than a distant memory."

Sullivan had a few more choice words for the Midnight Prince, but the paralysis was complete. The light from the sphere had become viscous, bending and stretching the chamber around him as he was engulfed. He made one last heroic effort to break free, but it was no use – the chamber began to fade, overwhelmed by the dark purple light. He felt an instant of acceleration, like something was trying to yank his heart clear out of his chest.

Darkness followed.



## Book Three

### Into The Fold



## Chapter Seventeen

Sullivan was tumbling, head over heels, desperately throwing his limbs out to try and break his fall. It was dark and his vision was badly blurred; he scrambled against the loose shale, the sharp stone cutting his hands. He finally tumbled to a halt, trying to wipe the dust from his eyes and make out his surroundings.

He sat in a gully at the base of a shale embankment. The sky above was not quite black, but rather a deep blue, reminiscent of the twilight that came just before night. There was another embankment facing him, the same loose shale flowing over the slope. Sullivan looked up and down the gully, and found it completely deserted. He got to his feet so as to better evaluate his position, but it was no use – he couldn't see anything over the high sides.

He checked his body for signs of injury. His crossing over into the Fold didn't seem to have done him any harm, and the wound the sentinels had given him didn't seem as serious as it had first felt. He checked the display on the butt of his pistol. There was plenty charge, but very little solid fuel, which meant he would have to locate a new source of metal. He cursed his own stupidity. How could he forget to load his pistol? He must be slipping. No self-respecting navy man would forget to load his gun.

With some difficulty, he climbed back up the slope he had slid down, trying to get either an idea of how he had gotten here, or at the very least where here might be. He let out a low whistle as he reached the crest of the slope. He stood on a wide open plain, one that was wrinkled with stony ridges and gullies, and scattered with sharp boulders. The ground was black as night, with an icy wind and driving rain that raked across the plain. Sullivan shielded his eyes and stared out at the god-forsaken landscape.

So this was the Fold, he thought. Occasional plumes of orange light erupted from the rocky ground in the distance, throwing swirling clouds of sulphurous gas high into the air. They looked like volcanic vents, and Sullivan figured that they might offer some respite from the freezing wind. He pulled the short collar of his jacket tight around his neck and began to trudge towards the nearest vent, as the rain poured from the featureless sky, making it difficult to see.

The vent could only have been five hundred metres from Sullivan, but it still took him nearly fifteen minutes to reach it through the difficult weather. The wind changed and he caught a heavy blast of sulphur in the face, but he could smell something else – it was familiar, but difficult to place. It almost smelled of burning flesh.

Sullivan crested the final ridge that lay between him and the vent and saw two figures huddling close to the high pillar of orange flame. Sullivan dropped to his belly and crawled closer, to try and make out whom, or what, the two figures might be.

They had long, unkempt hair and beards, and were wrapped in a jumbled assortment of swaddling clothes. Some layers looked like roughly tanned hides, while others were obviously sections of died fabrics that had been crudely stitched together. Jammed into the hard ground before them were two long spits, upon which were skewered small carcasses. Periodically, one of the figures would lean forward and rotate the spits, trying to evenly roast the little creatures. Sullivan got to his feet as carefully as he could, but inadvertently knocked a few small rocks from his position, and they rattled down the slope, knocking more of the shale free.

One of the figures turned and jumped to his feet, drawing a long curved sword. Its blade was dull and notched, but it looked dangerous nonetheless. The sword wielder scanned the area around him, but the dim light and driving rain made it difficult. The other man joined him, picking a huge hammer from the ground next to him. The square head of the hammer was nearly the same size as its wielder's, and such was its great weight that he hefted it with both hands.

Sullivan had very few options. He could slide back the way he came, and hope that the two men wouldn't be able to find him. But he hadn't seen anyone else since he had arrived, and it would be easier to survive in this hellish place if he had a friend or two. They appeared to be armed only with primitive weapons, and as dangerous as they looked, Sullivan was sure they could be no match for his service pistol.

He left the gun in its holster as he slowly got to his feet. The two men at the base of the hill were back to back now, circling slowly. The sword wielder spotted Sullivan at the top of the hill and pointed the tip at him, calling for his comrade's attention. Both of the men turned towards the slope, their weapons held at the ready.

"Who goes there?" called the sword wielder.

Sullivan raised both of his hands high in the air in what he hoped would be seen as a peaceful gesture. He took a few steps forward, but both of the men backed up.

"A friend!" shouted Sullivan, as he half-walked, half-slipped down the loose shale on the slope.



“You’re no bloody friend of ours,” came the reply. It was the hammer wielder who spoke, and his English had a familiar accent. “And I’ll warrant you’re friend to no-one in this forsaken place.”

Sullivan stopped a few metres away from the two men, his eyes stinging in the acrid sulphurous smoke from the vent that curled across the space between them. The swordsman took his chance to speak.

“He does not look like a marauder, Fraser.” He spoke with a heavy accent, and to Sullivan there was something familiar about his voice. Dark eyes stared at him from over the curly black beard.

“He may not have the look, but I’m sure that he’s here to take a head or two. We might as well beat him to it.”

The hammer-wielder stepped forward, flipping the heavy weapon from hand to hand as he did so. Sullivan responded by drawing his pistol and taking a step back.

“Don’t move!” He shifted the sights of the pistol from one man to the other. “I’m no marauder, whatever that is. And I’m not your enemy.”

The swordsman flashed a grim smile.

“Here, everyone is an enemy.”

The hammer-wielder started to move forward, and Sullivan trained his pistol on him. The swordsman reached out a hand, pulling his comrade back.

“Careful, Fraser. That’s no plaything in his hand.”

The hammer-wielder stepped back, eyeing Sullivan’s field loader suspiciously.

“What should we do with him then, Gomez?” he asked.

The swordsman lowered his blade.

“I’m guessing that if this man had wanted to take our heads, he could have done so already. With that weapon he could have struck us down from a great distance, and with no warning. So perhaps it’s not our heads he is after.”

Sullivan lowered his gun as Fraser stepped back slowly towards the vent, still holding his hammer. Gomez slid his sword back into its crude scabbard and looked at Sullivan carefully.

“So who are you?”

“Jack Sullivan. Captain of the Bogart.” He reached out a hand and Gomez shook it warily.

Fraser had returned to the vent, where he continued to tend to the small roasting creatures, and although the smell reaching Sullivan’s nostrils was salty and unappealing, he felt the pangs of hunger anyway.

“And what is the Bogart?” asked Gomez. “I recognise your pistol – it’s a naval issue Ingram, isn’t it? But I do not recognise your uniform.”

Gomez moved back to the fire, sitting down close to his comrade and drawing his cloak tight around him. Behind them, Sullivan shivered in the rain and freezing wind. He thought Gomez was going to leave him standing, until the bearded man waved at him to take a seat by the roaring vent. Sullivan made himself as comfortable as he could, the fierce heat from the fire taking some of the chill out of his bones.

“Welcome to our humble feast,” said Fraser, turning the creatures one final time. The side that now faced away from the fire was charred and blackened, but it didn’t stop him from peeling some of the burned flesh off and cramming it in his mouth.

“This isn’t really my uniform,” answered Sullivan. “I borrowed it.”

“So where are you from, then?” asked Gomez. He took a piece of charred meat from one of the spits, and began to examine it in the light of the fire.

“Or more precisely, when are you from? For I have realised over the many years that I have walked this cursed earth, that the others who walk it come from other times than me. For instance, Fraser here is a Scotsman. He was born near Edinburgh, on Earth, more than six hundred years before I was even a twinkle in my father’s eye. And yet I believe I have been in this place longer. There are men here from every age of history.” He smiled a grim smile and stuffed the charred flesh in his mouth. “So where and when are you from, Sullivan? And how did you come to the Fold?”

Sullivan eyed him coolly. He looked at the roasting carcasses and then imploringly at Gomez. The swordsman nodded, and Sullivan helped himself to a charred chunk of meat. It was stringy and tough, and the sulphurous flavour flooded Sullivan’s throat, causing him to gag. The other two men laughed heartily at his reaction.

“Eat, man!” said Fraser. “But it will not cure your hunger. You’ll always be hungry in the Fold. And no amount of eating will sate you.” Undeterred by what he had just said, the burly Scotsman took another piece of flesh, and then made a fuss of arranging the small animals so that they burned evenly all over.

“How can that be?” asked Sullivan. It was true that the ache in his stomach was still there, but then he hadn’t eaten that much. “And how do you not starve in a place like this?” He waved at the barren rocky ground that stretched around them.

“You cannot starve,” said Gomez quietly, and Sullivan had to strain to make out his words over the howling wind. “You do not grow old. There is no natural death in this place, Captain Sullivan. We live, we breathe, we fight and those who are lucky die. Always hungry, always tired, but with little food and even less sleep, we go on. Why,

Fraser and I eat these only for the flavour!” He took another morsel and smiled at Sullivan as he chewed the tough flesh.

There was something about the smile that he recognised. He tried to picture the face without the beard, and then he knew. The voice should have given it away, even before Sullivan had heard his name. He had heard that voice before.

“Captain Gomez? Of the Estrella Negra?”

Gomez stopped eating for a moment, and looked at Sullivan, the raindrops running in tiny rivulets down his face into the thick hair of his beard.

“That’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time.”

“That’s who you are, isn’t it?”

Gomez nodded. Fraser just looked dumbly at the two of them.

“How could you possibly know that?” asked Gomez.

“You asked me where and when I came from. The where is easy – I captained a cargo ship out of Tereshkova station, bound for Mercury. As for the when – well, I left home in the year 2208.”

“So you are from my time, are you not? I thought you might be when I saw your pistol, but I couldn’t be sure that you didn’t take it from someone else here in the Fold.”

“That would have been tough,” laughed Sullivan. “I only just got here.”

The other two men froze, a grave expression falling across their faces. The Scotsman spoke first.

“What do you mean, you only just got here?”

“I mean I’ve only just arrived. About twenty minutes before I met you guys.” Sullivan pulled at another piece of flesh, wondering what he had said that had disturbed them so. Then they both got to their feet, pulling their cloaks tight around them.

Fraser took what was left of the roasting carcasses and threw them into a rough leather satchel, as Gomez began to gather their meagre possessions from around the makeshift campsite.

“What is it?” asked Sullivan, also getting to his feet.

“The marauders will be upon us in no time,” snarled Gomez. “They always search for newcomers; it is as if they have some way of knowing where they enter. No one will be safe anywhere near here for some time to come.”

Sullivan looked around. There was no sign of anyone – just slopes of loose shale and flickering vents, spouting clouds of dark sulphur. The rain had grown so heavy it almost obscured the harsh landscape completely, and when he looked back Fraser and Gomez were discussing something heatedly.

“We should leave him behind,” said Fraser. “He’ll only slow us down.”

“Would I still be alive, Fraser? If you had left me behind?”

The Scotsman eyed Gomez warily, then snorted loudly and bent to pick up the last of their things. Gomez turned to Sullivan.

“There are some caves not too far from here. If we can make it there before the marauders pick up our trail, we should be safe. You had better come with us.”

“Thank you, Captain Gomez. I owe you.”

“Don’t speak too soon – we’re not out of this yet. And call me Gomez. I haven’t been captain of anything for a very long time.”

“I know what you mean,” said Sullivan. After all, how could you be a captain without a ship?

They moved off across the hellish landscape, with Gomez leading the way and the other men close behind. Sullivan couldn’t make out anyone following them yet, but visibility in the rain was very limited, and he just hoped that these marauders couldn’t see any better through the dark night than he could.

For several hours, they continued on through the deluge. Sullivan was soaked through to the skin, and had been for some time. He had given up trying to make out the landscape around them, and for the last half-hour had contented himself with following Gomez’s heels. The one-time captain of the *Estrella Negra* lurched from side to side as he fought his way through the weather. So great was the volume of skins and packs that were wrapped around him that he took on the appearance of a lop-sided animal, one constructed from the leftovers of others.

From what he could see of it, Sullivan knew that the terrain had changed little since they had left the campsite. The vents were fewer and further between now, and the gentle hills slowly began the transformation into small mountains. Eventually, the ground grew firmer, the loose shale replaced by huge slabs of granite, sliding imperceptibly over each other at impossible angles. Between the slabs, volcanic eruptions had left tiny slagheaps of molten rock and metal.

The party began to climb the steep slopes, discovering that the higher off the ground they went, the fiercer the weather became. As they battled up the mountain, Sullivan found his mind wandering to escape the howling wind. After he had left the service, and the monster Orlat behind, his life had taken on a kind of aimless tranquillity. For twenty years he had wandered the depths of space, not noticing that his life was gradually leaking away from him. What he had seen of mankind’s solar system had only ever given him less appetite for life. The brutality he had witnessed on Ganymede had made him withdraw somehow.

Then he had met Calliya. And he had seen a land where a peace that he had never dreamt possible held sway. And that taste of paradise had changed him.

Now he was struggling up the side of a mountain in a land far from where he was born, with two characters that might as well be out of history videos, and fighting for his life to boot. But he realised that more than ever he wanted to fight. He remembered feeling like this, a long time before. It had been when he had first joined the service, before he had seen bloody massacre while serving on the Khan.

Up ahead Gomez had stopped climbing, and was gesturing furiously. Sullivan felt Fraser's hand pushing him from behind and he redoubled his efforts to reach the cave entrance that Gomez was clambering into. He was shivering badly, and could barely feel his hands or feet as he pulled his drenched body into the cave.

He lay quivering on the ground, watching as Fraser struck some flint against the tip of his dagger and lit the tinder he had nestled into a nook in the rock. Once the tinder caught, he pulled a stubby torch from inside one of the many folds in his cloak and lit it. The oily flame scattered droplets of orange fire as he waved the torch around, scanning the back of the dark cave.

"Looks like we're alone," he said quietly.

"Of course we're alone," laughed Gomez. "Who else but us is crazy enough to come out all this way? There's no one but us and our half-drowned friend here."

"Very funny," shivered Sullivan. "Now how about some dry clothes, if you can spare them? And then, if you don't mind, some answers."

Later, the three men huddled around a small fire Fraser had built in a large chamber about thirty metres from the mountainside entrance. Sullivan had wrapped his cloak even tighter round, hoping that the feeling would return in his frozen feet. He told Gomez pretty much the exact details of what had happened since he left Tereshkova, including how Tayfen had pushed him into the Fold with the little purple sphere. He didn't bother holding anything back from these two men – they had shared with him what little they had, and probably saved his life.

When he finished, they said nothing. Fraser reached deep inside his shirt and brought out a waxy looking pouch, from which he produced a short pipe and a generous pinch of tobacco. He made a great ritual of packing the pipe, and then lit it from a glowing brand. He drew deeply on it, and then passed it to Gomez.

Gomez sucked thoughtfully on the pipe for a time.

"A fascinating story, Sullivan, and one I can hardly believe. In my old life, before I came here, I know I wouldn't have believed you. But after the eternity I have been here, I would believe anything. And what you have said would explain much. But a

race of beings that lived on Earth before us? Tales of Atlantis? Even in this place, that is a great deal to take on faith.

“And these ships, that are alive? What is their maximum velocity? And on what are they fuelled?”

Sullivan listened as Gomez fired question after question in his heavy Spanish accent. He didn’t know the answers to most of them, but he had questions of his own for Gomez too.

“Where is this place?” he asked, when he finally got the chance.

“This is the Fold,” said Gomez. “An eternal battlefield, that exists only to test the souls of men. There is no day, and no night, and no way to tell how much time passes. No clock will work here. We do not age, or starve, or die from disease. It is hard to tell how large the Fold is, but in all the years I’ve been here, I have only been about twenty miles in any direction. The terrain becomes impossible after that.

“Many years ago, just after I arrived here, a man named Sejanus came to the Fold. He was from Rome, I think and came here by way of great evil. Some say that the Fold has a mind of its own, and that it opens a bridge to where great evil is done. It seeks out the men who slaughter and defile their brothers, or who commit the vilest acts, and it devours them. Perhaps Sejanus was one such man. Or perhaps he was sent here, like you. It makes no difference. He quickly gathered to him many of the other black-hearted men, and the marauders were born. At first, others opposed them, but they were quickly overcome. They have held power ever since, feeding off new arrivals and often each other.

“So some of us, like Fraser and myself, try to stay out of their way. We move around the edges of the Fold, keeping out of sight. Just staying alive.”

Gomez sucked on the pipe again, and realised he had let it go out. He took the proffered ember from Fraser and lit it again, before passing the pipe to Sullivan.

Sullivan coughed as he tried to inhale the thick blue smoke. Gomez laughed, but Fraser frowned in mock annoyance.

“Dinnae waste it, man!” he scolded, taking the pipe back and repacking the bowl.

Sullivan waited until his lungs had cleared before asking the question that was foremost in his mind.

“So how do I get out of here?”

Gomez shook his head, laughing out loud in answer.

“Have you listened to a word I’ve said? There is no way out of here. There are no stars in the sky, no seas to sail, no roads to travel. All that there is in the Fold is survival and death. It is a test.”

“Hasn’t anyone ever escaped?”

“There’s nowhere to escape to, Sullivan. At first, my crew and I did everything we could to find a way out. We made our way to the citadel in the heart of the Fold, and searched for some clue to unlock its mysteries. But there are none, and my crew gave their lives in the fruitless search. Since then, I have never believed in escape, not in my heart. And what you have told me only confirms it.”

“What do you mean?” asked Fraser. “I confess I understand little of this talk of other universes, but how can you know for certain that there is no way out?”

Gomez hung his head wearily.

“Sullivan, you said that Iago told you the Negra had travelled through an intersection between two universes. Fraser, you came here from our universe. And Mr. Sullivan came through from the other universe.”

As he spoke, he used his finger to trace a picture in the dust. He drew two large circles that overlapped slightly.

“But I came through here, when the Negra’s singularity disrupted the intersection. So maybe other universes also intersect here.”

He drew other circles, much smaller, that all overlapped the intersecting space.

“That’s what the Fold is. A micro-universe. That’s why there are no stars, no seas, and nothing else. That is why time has no meaning here, and why we can’t escape. Travel between the universes might even be unidirectional. Even if it isn’t, without the technology that sent us here we will never know.”

“But if we can find one of these intersections, then maybe we could find a way back to our universe,” said Sullivan.

“And where would you go?” snapped Gomez. “When would you arrive? The day you left, or another day? In the time of Rome, or the British Empire? Could you even be sure you would get back to our own universe, and not that of the Elysians? And if the Fold intersects with a region of deep space how far would you get, without a ship?”

Sullivan didn’t reply. He just stared dumbly into the embers of the dying fire.

“I’m sorry, Sullivan. Perhaps you have left something precious behind – all of us find it difficult at first. But the quicker you forget about what you’ve known before, and start trying to survive, the better.”

Later, as Sullivan lay on his back staring at the ceiling of the cave, Gomez’s words rang in his ears. He could hear the other men snoring lightly, but try as he might, he could get no sleep. He just couldn’t accept that there was no way back. He lost all track of how long he lay there, shifting uneasily on the hard rock.

A noise startled him. Not knowing if it was real or imagined, he sat up quickly, looking around him in the near darkness. He could only make out the shapes of Gomez and Fraser lying around the cinders of the fire. He heard the noise again. It sounded very faint, and quite distant, but it was unmistakable. It was the metallic ring of steel on stone.

He got to his feet as quietly and as quickly as he could, and shook the other two men roughly. Fraser groaned when he was roused from his slumber.

“Do you not know how hard it is to get some sleep round here, man? I haven’t slept so soundly in ages.” He stopped when he saw Sullivan holding his fingers to his lips.

“I heard something,” whispered Sullivan. “Back that way,” he added, pointing back towards the mountainside entrance.

Gomez gathered his things to him, signalling to Fraser as he did so. The Scotsman moved past Sullivan, who turned to follow him. Gomez pulled him back.

“Wait. Fraser will go look around. You’d be surprised how quietly he can move by himself.”

They prepared to break camp as silently as they could, as they waited for the Scotsman to return. He was gone for an age, during which both men strained to hear a telltale sound but could hear nothing.

Eventually, Fraser returned.

“Marauders,” he said in a low voice. “And quite a few of them, by the sound of it. They’re moving through the front of the caves.”

“There’s another exit on the other side of this peak. If we head for it now, we might be able to lose them in the caves,” said Gomez.

“I dinnae think so. They’ll stay on our tails, and they’re too close to lose.” He took his great war hammer from where it lay on the ground. “I will stay and hold them off. You should be able to get to the back of the mountain.”

“Don’t be a fool, Fraser!” snapped Gomez. “They’ll be gnawing on your bones by morning.”

“There’s nae other way, man.”

“He’s right, Gomez,” said Sullivan. “Except I’m staying, not him.” He pulled his pistol and turned towards the front side of the mountain. “Now get out of here! We don’t have much time.”

“You can’t do this Sullivan,” said Gomez gravely. “You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”



“You said they were here after the newcomer, right? Then after they find me, they won’t come after you guys.”

“No, they won’t come after us. They’ll be too busy roasting you over an open fire.” Gomez looked long and hard at Sullivan, knowing that there was no other way. He drew his sword and offered it hilt first to Sullivan. “You will need this more than me.”

“Thanks, but I won’t need that. If you can spare them, though, I’ll take some of those crossbow bolts.”

Gomez nodded to Fraser, who gave Sullivan a handful of bolts from his own quiver. Sullivan took them and began snapping off the tips. Fraser was bemused by Sullivan’s actions, but Gomez knew what he was doing. He watched as Sullivan fed two of the tips into the butt of his pistol.

“A field loader? I haven’t seen one of those in a long time.”

“Yeah, it comes in handy now and then. Now get out of here!”

They gathered the last few of their meagre possessions from around the cave. Fraser shook Sullivan’s hand warmly before he headed through the tunnel at the back of the cave.

“You’re a brave man, Mr. Sullivan.”

Gomez also shook his hand before leaving.

“I’m going to find a way out of here, Gomez.”

“Give it up, Sullivan. There is no way out of the Fold. There is only survival.”

And without another word, they were gone. Sullivan turned his attention back to the front of the cave and listened intently; trying to distinguish the intruders’ sounds from the howling wind he could hear outside the cave. After a few moments, he was sure; footsteps were approaching. There was no way to tell how many, or how far away, so Sullivan flattened against the wall and tried to control his breathing.

Flickering firelight crept along the floor of the cave. Sullivan moved so that he was still in the shadows, trying to avoid the touch of the light. He crouched, watching as the marauder entered the small cave.

He looked like a chimera, assembled from the flotsam and jetsam of history. A Nazi storm trooper’s helm sat upon his head, shielding his scarred face from the light of his sputtering torch. Beneath he wore an assortment of armour, some recognisable from medieval times, others from ages more distant and forgotten. A second marauder walked close behind, and they both brandished huge notched scimitars that glinted wickedly in the torchlight.

Sullivan waited until both their filthy faces were in the cave before raising his pistol and aiming it squarely at the lead marauder. The light from the torch fell across where he was crouching at the back of the cave.

Sullivan pulled the trigger twice, his slugs taking the first marauder square in the chest. Shadows flicked around the room as the torch fell from the slain marauder's hand. The second marauder sidestepped and advanced on Sullivan, waving his sword and issuing a chilling battle cry. Sullivan rolled to his right to avoid the blade and came up firing. The second marauder was thrown against the wall of the cave with the force of the slugs. Sullivan got to his feet, picking up one of the heavy blades in his left hand. The loud report of his pistol would bring more of the marauders, of that he could be certain. His only chance was that if he moved quickly, he might be able to confuse them as to how many men they faced.

He moved towards the front side of the mountain, looking for side tunnels that he might hide in. He grabbed the marauder's fallen torch as he passed, and wrapped his cloak up over his head, hoping that in the dim light he might even pass for a marauder at first glance.

He picked the second small opening on the left and stooped over as he made his way inside. Too late he realised his mistake. He rounded a sharp bend immediately after the entrance of the tunnel and came face to face with two more marauders. His disguise didn't fool them for an instant, and they snarled and rushed forward. Sullivan managed to fire off two slugs before they barrelled into him, knocking him backwards against the wall. He felt one of the marauders' dead weight upon him and knew that at least one of his slugs had found its mark. He pushed the body backwards, delaying the other marauder long enough for him to make it back out into the main tunnel. Sullivan slipped as he squeezed through the tiny opening, and when he looked up again he saw more shadows against the dim light of the main cave entrance. He brought up his pistol, but felt rough hands grabbing his arms in the dark. The other marauder was grappling with him. He tried break free, tried to bring his pistol to bear, but it was no use.

He felt more hands on him, lifting him, restraining him. He could feel them lifting him, carrying him back out of the cave. His pistol was yanked from his grasp and his cloak wrapped tight around his face, before they gathered him up and bore him from the cave. The more Sullivan struggled, the more blows they rained upon him.

He soon ceased to struggle.

## Chapter Eighteen

Calliya followed her escort of sentinels through the shattered fortress. She had found Bellanis in short order, but the Princess had found no sign of the Fallen Lord. They had returned to the King, who had listened to Bellanis's account of her search before despatching Calliya to find Tayfen.

There were few darklings in evidence as she moved into the eastern camp. She knew Tayfen could be just about anywhere, so she kept her eyes open for his sentinels – the Midnight Prince was unlikely to be wandering far from their protection. He rarely did.

Calliya still carried her jewelled helm in the crook of her arm, making it hard for her to balance as she scrambled over the smouldering ruins. She was debating throwing the useless piece of armour away when she spotted Tayfen's sentinels in the distance. They were gathered around a small round structure, which stood apart from the rest of the fortress. And apart from a medium sized hole on one side, it looked relatively undamaged.

The two sentinels the King had sent with her crossed the broken ground first. She followed close behind them, her sword still gripped tightly in her hand. She was about to shout out to Tayfen, to tell him to get back to the King, when she had a second thought. What was Tayfen up to in the small structure? Had he found Kerreg? And if he had, why had he not sent a sentinel back to alert the others?

Calliya tried to approach the structure as quietly as she could, but feared that her escort would give her away. Tayfen's sentinels turned their heads towards her as she neared the structure, and she hoped that he was too busy to sense what his constructs were seeing.

Sentinels had always been a very particular kind of construct. They were beyond the ability of most Elysians, and those that were powerful enough to control them, or lucky enough to have the means to create them, forged a very strong bond with their charges. Whilst still unable to directly see what the sentinels were seeing, it provided the Elysian master with a sixth sense – one very useful in battle. But if they were

distracted, or simply not concentrating enough, the sense could falter and leave them vulnerable.

Whatever the reason, Calliya reached the entrance to the structure without any sign of Tayfen. Two of his sentinels guarded the entrance, but made no move to block her path as she walked between them. The royal sentinels that had accompanied her joined the other sentinels guarding the structure. Evidently they sensed no threat from inside.

Calliya blinked as she entered, assaulted by the thick smell of brimstone in the air. The Midnight Prince was standing to one side of the open space, flanked by the remainder of his constructs. He was holding a small purple sphere in his hand, and the moment he laid eyes on Calliya he slipped the sphere back inside his cloak. His sentinels turned menacingly towards her.

“Lady Calliya! You startled me,” he said, smiling.

“What are you doing?” asked Calliya, almost choking on the thick fumes.

“Nothing,” replied the Prince. “At least, I am looking for Kerreg. I am finding nothing, is what I meant. How about you?”

“No. There’s no sign of him anywhere in the fortress. Bellanis has been all over the western camp, and his majesty and I have searched the main keep and Kerreg’s private quarters. We all assumed you had found him.”

Tayfen shook his head. “No sign, I’m afraid. Perhaps he is buried somewhere under all the rubble?”

The Midnight Prince seemed strangely jubilant. Perhaps he was relieved that no one had found Kerreg, thought Calliya.

“What were you doing in here, anyway?” she asked. “And what is that smell?”

“This was a Temple of Bridges once,” he said, walking around the structure. “Long ago, before the War of the Rift. You could have walked from here to any one of the other Temples, anywhere in the Finite Realm, in a heartbeat.”

He stopped in front of a free standing stone arch, decorated with carved Elysian inscriptions, and ran a gauntleted hand across the rough stone.

“But after the War, the bridges were broken. Never again would our people see such a golden age,” he sighed.

“And as to the smell? I must plead ignorance. Perhaps it was some experiment of Kerreg’s, or some foul pestilence that leaks from this accursed ground?”

“Perhaps,” said Calliya curtly. “We must return to the King. He awaits us at the fortress wall.”

“Come then,” said Tayfen, donning his impressively jewelled helm. “Let us not keep his majesty waiting.”

Calliya paused for a moment before following him out the door. She had a bad feeling about this place, and it wasn't from the overpowering stench of brimstone. It was as if something terrible had happened here – something terrible enough to send a chill up her spine. She shivered inside her suit of armour. The sooner they left this darkling moon the better.

The King and Bellanis were waiting at the breach they had entered the fortress through. The royal sentinels were gathered in a wide loose circle around their charges, alert to the first sign of trouble.

"I'm sorry, your majesty," called Tayfen, when he was close enough to make himself heard. "But I could find no sign of the Fallen Lord. He must have eluded us somehow."

The King waited until they were much closer before answering.

"It would seem so, although I do not see how it could have happened."

Tayfen shrugged in reply.

"No matter," continued the King. "We dare not tarry here much longer. Undoubtedly the rest of the darkling fleets have learned of what has happened here. It will not be long before they come to exact revenge."

"Do you think they will follow us to Elysium?" asked Bellanis.

"No," replied the King. "They still fear the hand of the fleet. But we are only three ships, and they would surely believe that they can match us in battle."

The Elysians made their way back across the stony desert towards their seerephon. Calliya scanned the area for Sullivan. She could see the sentinels that had been left to protect the seerephon, but she couldn't make out the human. At first she thought it was just the dim light and dust that obscured him, but as they drew closer she realised he was not anywhere in sight. Still, she could not be sure, and it wasn't until they were almost on top of the vessels that she knew something was wrong.

"Where's Jack?" she said.

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," answered Bellanis.

"Perhaps he is waiting for us within the Caradan," added the King hopefully.

"And hasn't come down to meet us?"

The King laid his hand on the shell of his vessel, communicating silently.

"I am afraid Captain Sullivan is not aboard the Caradan," he said aloud. "And we have other, more pressing problems."

The Elysians looked at their King.

“The darkling fleets have indeed learned of what has happened here – many Nightwings approach. We must withdraw.” He looked to the masters of the other seerephon.

“Tayfen, Bellanis, get to your vessels. Check that the good Captain is not on board, please. Then we must fly from this place.”

“No!” cried Calliya. “We cannot leave him behind!”

“I wish that there were some other way, my child,” said the King, trying to console her. Tayfen and Bellanis had run to their seerephon, taking their flanks of sentinels with them. As soon as they touched the shell by the hatch, they were able to check if Sullivan was on board. Calliya watched in horror as first one helmet head, and then the other, shook slowly from side to side.

“No!” she cried again. “Something is wrong, I know it.”

The royal sentinels had cantered up the ramp, leaving Calliya alone with her King. Either side of them, the Orisa and the Fentach flexed their gravitic organs, rising from the desert floor with a deep vibration.

“We have to stay, and search! Maybe Kerreg is hiding somewhere nearby, and has captured Jack.”

“I am sorry, my child,” said the King, softly but sternly. “But I do not believe that the Fallen Lord could mask his presence from me for this length of time. He has either fled, or lies dead beneath the ruins.”

“What about Jack?” shouted Calliya, her fear barely masked by her anger.

“I do not know, Calliya. But what I do know is that if we stay here, even the might of the Caradan will not be able to protect us. And then we will most surely never know what has befallen your Captain Sullivan.”

Calliya was about to protest further, but the King had lost patience with the young Elysian. He grabbed her firmly around her polished greaves and pulled her up the ramp into the seerephon. Even as the hatch began to close, Calliya’s gaze was fixed on the dusty plains of Kerreg’s moon. She couldn’t believe they were just going to abandon Sullivan. She couldn’t understand what had happened. And worst of all, she couldn’t bear the thought of not seeing him again.

The mood aboard the Caradan was one of elation. They had struck at the darkling belt like a fiery blade, carving the fortress out of the moon like the great warriors of old. Only Calliya did not share their victorious sentiments. She spent the trip back to Elysium in her quarters, staring at the Finite Realm as it flew past the window, trying to figure out what had happened to Sullivan after they had left him.

The King had told her that the sentinels left to guard the seerephon had fought off a number of large darklings. She supposed that another darkling might have snatched Sullivan, but where would it have taken him? There was precious little else on Kerreg's Moon besides the fortress, and the sentinels would have fought to protect Sullivan as the King had bidden them. How then, could he have been carried off? The sentinels had been victorious – that they were still in one piece was evidence of that.

There was no obvious explanation for what had happened to Sullivan. Neither had she any idea what had become of the Fallen Lord, or why he had twice attacked her. She was coming away from Kerreg's Moon with more questions than answers. And leaving someone behind whose absence she felt deeply.

How was she going to tell Titus? He had been so elated at the prospect of finally having one of his own kind to reminisce with; he would be crushed when he heard of Sullivan's disappearance.

Calliya visited his quarters, trying in part both to find some clue as to what had happened, and to fill the empty darkness guilt had made inside her. She should never have left Sullivan's side. She knew that he would be here beside her if she had just kept him with her. But it was too late for that now.

She looked over the meagre possessions he had left in his quarters. He had come on board with just a satchel, made from material she didn't recognise. Inside were several more of the grenades like the one he had used in the forest near her homestead, as well as the flat device he had used to find Titus. She wondered if she could use it to talk to Titus as well.

The controls were unfamiliar, and it took her some time to get any response from the device. Even then, it was only a repetitive chime that seemed to indicate there was no answer to her calls. She tossed the PCU aside in frustration. Maybe the Caradan was still too far from Elysium.

That night, as she lay in her opulent quarters, she cast her mind back to the fortress. What had Tayfen been doing? Why had he looked so smug when she had found him? Had he been in league with Kerreg all along? Was that why he was so pleased that the Fallen Lord had not been found? There were far too many questions, and no answers anywhere to be found. She did not sleep well that night.

The Caradan arrived back at her homestead mid-morning the next day. The King was to return to the Royal City, but escorted Calliya from his vessel, trying to offer some words of condolence.

“I wish that our voyage had gone differently, Lady Calliya. I too am grieved by the loss of Captain Sullivan, and there are many mysteries that confront us surrounding his disappearance. But please, do not take it upon yourself to solve this matter – you must consider the consequences of your actions.”

Calliya understood what the King meant. That her rashness had in some way precipitated all that had happened. That Sullivan would never have come to be on Kerreg’s Moon is she had thought about what she was doing when she rescued him from the funeral barge.

When the King had returned to the Caradan, and the giant seerephon had vanished over the horizon, Calliya turned to see Titus standing in the smashed doors of the homestead. His face was set in a grim expression, as if he already knew the news that Calliya was about to give him. She walked up the chipped steps to the doorway and embraced the Victorian, saying nothing. Her tears said everything.

Later, after Calliya had rested, and had a chance to eat something, she found Titus in his laboratory. It took the shape of a spacious conservatory, fit snugly against the western wall of the homestead. Here, Titus indulged in his favourite hobby – the investigation of all things Elysian. Delicate glass tubes stretched across the thick wooden benches, trickling coloured fluids into wide-bottomed flasks that bubbled over oily flames.

Titus was poking and prodding one of Sullivan’s plastic devices under a thick magnifying glass. His face was still pale and drawn, and he did not even look up as Calliya entered the room. She sat beside him by the workbench, and for a long time neither spoke.

“I cannot believe that I left him behind,” said Calliya eventually.

“From what you told me last night,” answered Titus, without looking up. “You had no choice. The King would not have allowed you to stay on Kerreg’s Moon. We would have lost you also.”

“But what about Jack?”

“I do not know. Nothing you have told me can offer any explanation as to what happened to our Mr. Sullivan.”

“He was keen to meet Kerreg, Titus. He said as much in the control chamber of the Caradan before we landed. He must have found a way to get past the sentinels – when they were distracted by the darklings.”

“And then what?”

“He must have gone into the fortress to look for Kerreg.”



“But you said yourself – there was no sign of Sullivan or Kerreg in the fortress. So where did he go?”

“I don’t know,” said Calliya, pouting in frustration. She rose from the bench and walked to the wall of windows, staring out across the thick dark forest.

Titus joined her at the window. “Tell me again,” he said.

They sat on the long wooden window bench as Calliya recounted again the exact details of everything that had happened since they had left Elysium. When she had first told Titus, the night before, she had been so full of rage that the story had made little sense to the Victorian. Now, in the bright light of the day, she could relate the details that she had previously omitted.

Titus listened intently, but stopped her when she reached the account of how she had fetched Tayfen from the eastern camp of the fortress. He seemed most interested in the strong smell of brimstone and the Midnight Prince’s jubilant mood.

When she mentioned the small purple sphere, Titus’s expression shifted dramatically.

“What?” she asked. “What is it?”

“I believe I know what has befallen Captain Sullivan,” said Titus gravely.

“What do you mean?”

“The sphere in Tayfen’s hand can only have been a nemotaph. They are ancient artefacts, abandoned by the Titans, and part of the forbidden lore.”

“The forbidden lore?” Calliya was confused. It seemed Titus was far better at keeping secrets than she had ever suspected.

The Victorian rose from the window bench, sighing deeply as he stared out over the forest.

“How much do you know about my arrival on Elysium?” he asked.

“Not much,” replied Calliya. “Only that you were found on a cloud world, by the King, before I was born. It is said that you had been snatched by a Fallen Lord, and escaped his clutches only to find yourself stranded.”

Titus laughed. “That is not the only version of the story, I can tell you. There were even rumours that I was the most sought over prize in the realm, before the King rescued me. But none of them are true.”

“How did you get here, then? And what has this got to do with Jack?”

“I believe the answer to the riddle of Mr. Sullivan’s disappearance has much to do with how I came to be here. If Tayfen does possess a nemotaph, there is every chance that he has used it to send our intrepid friend to the Fold.”

Calliya was too stunned to speak. The Fold? The accursed place that inspired countless stories told to little children to make sure they behaved themselves? She could scarcely believe it.

“How can you know that?” she asked.

Titus sat down beside her on the bench and took her hands in his.

“Because once, before you were even born, I too was sent to the Fold by means of a nemotaph.”

“You have been to the Fold? And returned? How is that possible?”

For once, Titus’s long life was clearly visible in his eyes. The usual twinkle had been replaced by weariness.

“When I was a young man, my lady, on Earth, I became fascinated in the ancient history of mankind. I searched the globe for trinkets and artefacts that I thought might help me unlock some of the great mysteries of my age. The legends of Atlantis and El Dorado romanced my youthful heart, and I set off on my travels, eager to make the discovery that would win me fame and fortune.

“However, as the years passed, that great discovery continued to elude me. And although fame and fortune lost their lustre for me, my desire to unlock the mysteries of the ancients only grew. At last, it took me to the deepest, darkest, most forgotten corners of the world. And face to face with the Exiles.”

He paused for a moment, rising to fetch a glass of water and mop his brow.

“The Exiles?” said Calliya.

“The last of the Elysians to walk the Earth. Surely you must know the legends?”

“We are all told the legends as children, Titus, but that does not mean that we believe them.”

“It’s a matter of historical fact, my lady, that legends nearly always have their basis on fact. The same can be said for the Elysian legends. Much of what you might have believed as fantasy has its roots in truth.”

Calliya was lost in thought, recalling the legends Gerren had recounted to her as a very small child.

It was known as the War of Dominion. After the last of the Titans had fled to the far reaches of the Infinite Realm, Toth, the Lord of All, had sought to bend mankind to his will. He wished to use the strength of the fledgling race to make the Elysians as powerful as the Titans had been. He was resisted by some of his subjects, who sought to protect mankind’s freedom. They were led by Tanis, who had once been the right hand of Toth, as well as the Lord of All’s most trusted counsel.

They rose up, and cast Toth from his throne. He had taken his Fallen Lords and fled to the darkling belt, robbed forever of the song of the seerephon that would allow him to cross the Rift. Forever more, the Elysians and their seerephon would guard the Rift, and make sure that the Fallen never again sought to dominate mankind. Calliya herself was still part of that duty.

“So what is true,” she asked, “and what is not?”

Titus laughed half-heartedly.

“That is a deeper question than I can answer, Calliya. I can only tell you part of what I witnessed, and much of what I think I know is just guesswork.

“After the War of Dominion, another war was fought – a secret war. It began as the War of the Bridges.”

“Bridges? Tayfen mentioned those on Kerreg’s Moon. He called the chamber we were in a Temple of Bridges, but I didn’t know what he was talking about.”

Titus laughed again, but this time with more conviction.

“You would have done well to have listened more closely to your cousin as he told you the ancient tales,” he said. “In the time of the Titans, the Temples lay in every corner of the Finite Realm. From them, the Titans could walk from one world to the next just as we walk from one room to another. And after the Flight, the lore was left to the Elysians. And they took great care not to abuse it, until the War of Dominion.

“For Earth was key to the War. Whoever controlled Earth would be victorious, so when Toth was defeated, he withdrew to this Realm and sought another way to return. It did not take him long to realise the answer.

“He used the Bridges to cross to the Fold, and reached the Temple of the Titans in the citadel. From there, he could reach every corner of the Earth, and continue his struggle to dominate mankind. But still, the Elysians resisted him. The battle raged from the Earth to the Finite Realm and back, as well as in the Fold, and to win the day both sides began to draw the soldiers of mankind in to bolster their numbers. The resulting war was terrible indeed.

“The Fold had been created by the Titans, and none amongst the Elysians knew how or why it had been built. Only that time seems to stand still there, and men never grow to old or too weary to wield a sword and strike down their enemies. Before the war, it had been a place of heavenly beauty, a timeless paradise where the sun shone eternally. But the blood of many men laid the Fold to waste, and blackened its heart. It became the terrible, legendary place that is used to terrify the young.

“But it is very real. I have seen it with my own eyes.”

Titus refilled his glass with cool water and offered Calliya one, which she took eagerly. She tried to swallow the liquid past the lump that had grown in her throat. Ever since she could remember, she had only ever been interested in one thing – flying. Her whole life had been an impatient wait to raise her seerephon, followed by the joyful abandon of flying amongst the stars. She had paid very little heed to some of the darker legends of her past.

“The war would leave no victor. The Bridges, and most of the Temples in the Finite Realm, had been destroyed. The Elysians withdrew, confident that Toth could no longer use the Bridges to reach the Infinite Realm. They left mankind to continue the battle, which he would do for an eternity. Hunger and bloodlust know no limits in the Fold; no appetite can ever be sated.

“But the most powerful amongst the Elysians and the Fallen retained their ability to cross between Realms, and so a small band of warriors continued the war in secret, for millennia. They knew that if the War once again spread to the Realm at large that many lives would be lost, and both sides believed they could win the battle with a few brave souls.

“Eventually,” continued Titus, “my travels brought me to a lost city, deep in the deserts of Mesopotamia, where I stumbled upon this Secret War. As a result, I was sent to the Fold, much as Mr. Sullivan has been. The first thing I noticed was the overpowering odour of sulphur, or brimstone as you call it. That’s why you could smell it when you found Tayfen. The bridge to the Fold must only just have closed.”

Calliya was still trying to absorb all that Titus had said. The last few weeks had been so full of surprises; she barely had time to adjust to one shattering revelation before the next one came along.

“So Sullivan is in the Fold? You’re sure of it?” She needed to concentrate on what was really important, and while Titus’s history lessons were interesting Sullivan’s whereabouts was paramount.

“There can be no other explanation,” answered Titus confidently. “And Sullivan may not be the only one the Midnight Prince has sent there.”

“Kerreg,” said Calliya.

“The King told you he could not sense Kerreg anywhere, and that there was no way for him to escape.”

“So that treacherous dog helped him elude us,” spat Calliya. She rose to her feet and paced angrily up and down the short length of the laboratory.

“Perhaps not,” countered Titus. “The Fold is not a very hospitable place. That much of the legend is fact. Nor is it easy to escape. There are souls there that have

walked that black soil for millennia. We cannot be sure that the Fallen Lord went willingly.”

“But you escaped, did you not?” asked Calliya. She didn’t want to find out what had happened to Jack only to discover that there was nothing she could do about it.

“Yes, I escaped from the Fold, but not without help. And even now, after I have told you so much, I regret that I cannot tell you everything. The guardians of the forbidden lore keep their secrets close to their hearts, and I am forbidden from telling you what became of me after I found myself in the Fold.”

Calliya felt like screaming. What was the point of Titus revealing all this to her if he couldn’t tell her how he had escaped? And what oath could possibly be so important that it would outweigh the life of an innocent man? She kicked one of the plant pots in a fit of anger, shattering it and spreading its earthy contents across the flagstones. The noisy destruction brought her back to her senses, just as a construct scuttled in to dispose of the broken pot and homeless plant.

“Sorry,” she said meekly.

“It’s alright, my lady,” said Titus, “you have every right to be angry. I wish I could tell you more, but some oaths are destined to be kept. What I can tell you, though, is not to give up hope. We will find a way to get Sullivan back.”

Scarcely a day later, Calliya streaked northwards in the Kelison. She and Titus had talked long into the night, with the Victorian countering every one of her ideas with faultless logic. At first she had suggested confronting Tayfen directly, but Titus was very quick to convince her otherwise.

If the Midnight Prince had both the will and the ability to master a nemotaph, there was no telling what other pieces of the forbidden lore he might be willing to employ. And he would certainly deny all knowledge of what had befallen Sullivan.

So Calliya came to the idea of confronting the King. If any Elysian still had the power to draw Sullivan out of the Fold, then it would be the oldest and strongest. But even he would be slow to challenge Tayfen’s house directly. With such strong support across the rest of the Elysian houses, any accusation against the Midnight Prince would have to be irrefutable.

So they had returned to the most important question, and the first mystery that had confronted them. Who had manipulated the funeral barge of Gerren the Strong, and told it to seek out a human vessel? Calliya felt sure it was Tayfen, but she didn’t understand why. Titus had voiced a tentative theory.

“What if,” he had said, “Tayfen was the one who manipulated the barge? What could be gained? Undoubtedly, he believed the stories about mankind building vessels of their own. And obviously, he believed that mankind would find the funeral barge, and seek out the Rift, which would bring about a war between Earth and Elysium. Tayfen must see this as a way to return your race to the Golden Years, as they were in the time before the War of Dominion.”

Calliya knew now what she had to do. If she could somehow prove Tayfen’s treachery, his support in the Great Hall would evaporate, and the King would be compelled to undo all the Midnight Prince’s foul deeds. Even then, if the King could not retrieve Sullivan, perhaps he could force Tayfen to bring him back.

Either way, she had to have proof. And to find that proof, she was returning to the top of the world. It had been the shipwright Lennat who had bid her to cross the Rift, and discover the evidence of Tayfen’s treachery; perhaps he might also know how to prove the Midnight Prince’s guilt. It was her last chance.

As the Kelison curled slowly down to land at the Whispering Woods, Calliya saw the Orisa sitting in the dark landscape. It must have been damaged somehow in the battle on Kerreg’s Moon, thought Calliya, cursing silently. Bellanis’s presence wouldn’t help matters.

The Kelison dived below the leading edge of the Shroud, slowly descending towards Lennat’s shack. Calliya didn’t wait for the seerephon to finish its descent, but headed at a run back towards the hatch. Even as the vessel neared the stony ground, she was halfway down the ramp. The Kelison took its place next to the Orisa and Calliya hit the ground running.

She burst through the small crooked door of Lennat’s cabin. The shipwright was sitting in front of the fire, talking with Bellanis. He looked around in mild surprise as Calliya burst through the door, but the raven-haired seerephon master jumped to her feet.

“Calliya, what are you doing here? Has the Kelison been damaged?”

“No,” answered Calliya, a little unsurely. She hadn’t expected to find anyone else here. “The Kelison is fine. At least, its wounds are healing well.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Lennat. “So if the Kelison is well, then to what do we owe this visit?”

“I have come to ask for your help,” said Calliya softly.

“What are you planning now?” retorted Bellanis. She eyed Calliya warily. “More mischief, I’ll warrant.”

“Please, Bellanis,” interrupted Lennat. “Let us at least hear what the child has to say.”

Calliya moved inside the cabin, approaching the shipwright.

“I need to speak to you alone,” she said.

Bellanis looked suspiciously from Lennat to Calliya. She made as if to speak, but then thought better of it, and just bowed and left the cabin without a word. Lennat sat gently down into one of the chairs. He removed a piece of fruit from his pocket, slicing it in two with his small knife. He passed one of the pieces to Calliya, before eating the other in a single bite. He smiled at her with bulging cheeks.

“How can I help you?” he asked her, rivulets of juice escaping from his mouth as he spoke.

“Sullivan is gone.”

“I am aware of what happened on Kerreg’s Moon. Bellanis has related the details to me.”

“But I believe I know what became of him,” said Calliya firmly. The shipwright eyed her warily as she continued. “Prince Tayfen has consigned Sullivan to the Fold.”

The shipwright almost choked on his fruit in surprise.

“You are sure, my child?” he asked. “That is not an accusation to make lightly, especially against one as powerful as Tayfen.”

“I have seen enough, Lennat. He has a nemotaph, and he used it to send Sullivan, and probably Kerreg to the Fold. For what reason, I do not know. That is why I came here.”

“But I do not know Tayfen’s plan any better than you,” said the shipwright. “I was unaware that he even possessed an artefact of such power.”

Calliya knelt on one knee by the hearth, pleading with Lennat.

“But it was you that told me I should seek out the funeral barge. How else did you know that someone had changed its purpose?”

“My dear, impetuous young friend,” the elderly shipwright smiled faintly. “Not everything is so simple. I did not think for a minute that Tayfen had tampered with the barge. I had no idea how it had come to pass.”

Calliya’s brow curled in confusion. “How did you know, then?”

“As I lay sleeping, one night. I heard the song of the Shoal. It stretched out across the Realm, and touched my dreaming mind. I do not remember what was said, or how exactly I knew it, but the next morning I knew that someone was trying to rob Gerren the Strong of his eternal rest in the Fires of Helios. And being his closest living kin, I believed you were the one to find out what had happened.”

“The Shoal of Shades?” asked Calliya. All she knew of the Shoal, like the Fold, came from the stories she had been told as a child. It was the place the barges came

from, a legion of ancient sleeping seerephon that orbited a distant giant star. It was said that their many minds merged into one, singing a single powerful song that joined all seerephon, wherever they might be.

“If it is answers that you seek, then maybe that is where you should seek them,” said Lennat, rising from his chair. “But if you will excuse me, there is another injured seerephon to tend to.”

“Of course,” said Calliya.

The shipwright paused in the doorway.

“Beware of the song of the Shoal, my child. It is powerful indeed, and dangerous to both you and your seerephon. Are you sure you wish to risk so much, for the life of one man?”

“I am sure, Lennat. He deserves better than an eternity of torture.”

“He might be dead already.”

Calliya shook her head. She had never felt so sure of anything in her life.

“He lives still, I can feel it. Jack will fight to survive, hoping he can find a way out. I have got to give that to him.”

Minutes later, Bellanis and Lennat watched the Kelison streak upwards until it disappeared into the thick folds of the Shroud. Behind them, a tiny seerephon floated soundlessly, nuzzling against the shipwright.

“Where is she going?” asked the princess.

“To risk everything, for what she believes is right. To find out how strong her heart really is.”

Bellanis looked at the shipwright askance. There were times she had no idea what he was talking about. Whatever Calliya was up to would most likely to end in trouble – it usually did. Better that the King heard about this sooner rather than later.



## Chapter Nineteen

Sullivan was sure he had lost consciousness at some point, and now he couldn't tell if he was awake, and having a very bad day, or asleep and having a very bad dream. At first, he had known he was dreaming. He was back in the Navy, following a squad of marines into a southern enclave outside Cortez City. They had taken heavy losses, but had used portable heavy weapons to devastating effect on the southern block forces. Sullivan moved through the abandoned enemy positions, glad that his environment suit stopped him from smelling the burning flesh. He had dreamed Orlat was there also, his leering grin visible through his faceplate as he surveyed the fallen enemy. The Butcher of Ganymede stood over a battered, slim body, and as Sullivan got closer, he glimpsed the familiar blonde hair, matted with congealed blood and dark earth. He cried out, but no sound issued from his throat. He tried to get closer, but the faster he ran the further away they moved.

Then the dream shifted, and he was in the dark again, with an aching pain that streaked through his whole body. He was hanging from his bound wrists and ankles, and it was the numbing cold that finally made him realise he wasn't dreaming any more. He was being borne along by marching marauders, trussed to some kind of rough pole.

He strained to hear what was going on around him. Although he could make out several sets of footsteps, in the darkness he couldn't tell how many. When a shaft of light appeared, blurred and blinding, Sullivan realised there was still something wrapped around his face, blindfolding him. Occasionally, the jarring he would receive from the pole bearers would shift his blindfold for an instant, and allow him to get a good view of his captors.

Sure enough, he was being borne by two of the marauders, suspended on a two-metre pole that they carried upon their shoulders. No two of the marauders were dressed alike, unless you considered their haphazard attire a uniform in itself. A collection of armours and weapons from all ages of the ancient world hung about their persons, and at least two of them carried primitive short bows of some sort. If he listened very carefully,

he could even distinguish snippets of conversation, for some of them definitely spoke an unfamiliar dialect of English.

"I says we should bloody well eat 'im now, and say we never found 'im!" said a gruff voice.

"You touch a bloody hair on his head and we're all for the chop!" replied another voice, one with a higher pitched nasal twang to it. "If Sejanus finds out we ate his prized newcomer, we'll be the next ones on the menu!"

"Silence!" shouted a third, very close voice. It spoke with an accent that was not native to English, and to Sullivan's ears sounded like the ethnic French who populated the de Gaulle enclave on Venus. "Do you want the entire Fold to 'ear us?"

"Shut up Frenchy," said the gruff voice. "If we want to talk, we'll bloody well talk, and there's nuffing you can do 'bout it, okay?"

Sullivan stopped moving for a moment. He guessed that Frenchy might be the marauder who carried the front end of Sullivan's pole.

"How has a man as stupid as you managed to stay alive for so long?" asked Frenchy, his voice laden with sarcasm. It was obviously not a type of humour appreciated by the other marauders.

"'Cause I'm 'ard, aren't I? There isn't a man or beast in this place that can beat me, save Sejanus, and that's only 'cause he's protected by that bloody pairtorian guard."

"That's Praetorian, you imbecile," snapped Frenchy.

"I've had enough of your bloody lip, Frenchy." The threat was clear in Gruff's voice.

"Oh you have, have you?" taunted the other marauder. "What are you going to do about it, you English pig?"

"I nailed enough of you're kind at bloody Waterloo, that's what, and I'll bloody well nail you too!"

Sullivan felt his head hit the ground as the front bearer dropped the pole, and his blindfold shifted, just enough for him to make out the squabbling marauders. Another joined the fray, shouting in a strong Slavic accent, a voice that Sullivan hadn't heard before.

"Enough!" he roared, pushing the squabbling marauders apart. "If you two want to tear each other apart, then fine. But at least wait until we deliver Sejanus his prize. If we fail, he will have all our heads for ornaments."

The two marauders froze, realising that their fates depended as much on each other as it did on themselves. They stepped back from one another, glaring. The marauder with the high-pitched voice spoke up. He was a scrawny, filthy, rakishly thin figure.

“Yeah, lads. We need to get this little bugger back to the citadel and get bloody paid!” He laughed with a hideous screech, like a tortured hyena.

The Slav turned on Screech with a burning glare.

“If you don’t stop that cackling, you’ll be next on the menu.”

The menace in the Slav’s voice was evident even to Sullivan, and obviously carried some weight with his companions, as they quickly bowed their heads and resumed their positions. Gruff approached Sullivan, grumbling under his breath as he resumed his pole carrying duties. Just before the marauder’s large frame blocked his view, Sullivan thought he could make out a glimpse of movement in the dark scrub just ahead of them. For a fleeting moment, he thought he could see a huge shape moving around.

Sullivan’s blindfold was pulled back down over his face, and the stale stench from the rough cloth filled his nostrils. The marauders moved off, and Sullivan was left to listen to the now subdued conversation around him, his weight hanging from his burning wrists and ankles. Two of the marauders never spoke in English, but used some foreign tongue to converse with the Slav. He thought maybe one of them was carrying the back end of his pole. Gruff and Screech continued to talk quietly in English.

“I hate that bloody Frenchy. Always finks he’s so smart. Well, I tell you, they weren’t so bloomin’ smart at Waterloo! Our duke had the measure of them that day, by God.”

“I wish I’d been at Waterloo,” answered Screech. “Wasn’t the same in the Great War. We was supposed to be mates with the frenchies. But they were no use in a bloody fight then either.”

Both men laughed long and hard, before being admonished by the Slav. Sullivan tried to make sense of what they were saying. Both of them were soldiers, and English. He could figure that much out, but they seemed to be from different wars, almost a hundred years apart. From the others, he gleaned little information – they didn’t seem to be disposed to talking about their pasts like the English soldiers were.

Sullivan’s wrists were burning, and his ankles weren’t faring much better, despite the thick hide of his trousers. He had lost all track of time as the marauders marched on, and even Gruff and Screech had finally been silenced by another harsh word from the Slav. With no conversation to keep him occupied, his mind began to drift, trying to make sense of all of the amazing events that had changed his life.

He even thought about Theo, and what might have happened if the Bogart’s systems engineer had been rescued somehow. The aging lifeboats had a limited range, but they did have the capacity to carry two crew. With only a single occupant, the

lifeboat's range would be nearly doubled. If Theo had somehow gotten into a high enough orbit, he might actually have survived long enough for his beacon to be located.

But that raised a whole new question. Sullivan had to wonder how the Navy might react, for it didn't matter who picked up the lifeboat – sooner or later everything in space wound up in the hands of the Navy. And what would they make of the video from the Bogart? The ship would have recorded both the collision with the barge, and the arrival of the Kelison. Everything the ship had witnessed on its journey would be automatically loaded into the lifeboat's memory banks just before launch.

His bearers jarred him as they crossed some unseen obstacle, and then continued with their even march over the rough terrain. The more Sullivan thought about it, the more he came to the same conclusion. When the Navy saw the video from the Bogart, they would come looking for the mystery ship. They had a distinct kind of paranoia when it came to unknown vessels, so they would look for debris, other lifeboats, maybe even Sullivan himself. But the search would only last so long, as the Bogart wasn't important enough to warrant a full-scale effort. At best, they might look for a few months before losing interest. Which was just as well. Sullivan wasn't sure if it would be a good idea for the Navy to find the Rift.

Mankind had spread his greedy fingers over almost every corner of the solar system; to find a virtually unspoiled, magical paradise waiting for them might be too much to resist. He was well aware of mankind's inability to control his urge to conquer. He had seen it during the constant campaigning to put down colonial rebellion after rebellion as a junior officer, culminating in the massacre on Ganymede.

But the Rift had stayed undetected for seven hundred years of astronomy, and aside from the Negra, no one appeared to have come across it before. So it was reasonable to assume it could stay hidden for another seven hundred.

Another jolt from his bearers brought Sullivan back to his grim reality. He could hear the sound of rushing water nearby, like a small waterfall. At first, it was quite distant, but when he felt the cold touch of the water along his back he realised they were crossing a stream. The sound of running water was all around him now, and he tried to use what little strength he had left in his numb limbs to pull himself out of the freezing water. A sharp bark from the Slav halted the party halfway across the ford.

“Wait! Did you hear that?”

There was no sound but the trickle of the river over rock and root. Then Sullivan heard a sharp whistle that terminated in a loud thud and a high-pitched wail. He risked pulling himself up closer to his hands, allowing his frozen fingers to tug at the blindfold covering his face.

All around him, the marauders had drawn their swords. The soldier Sullivan had identified as Screech was floating face down in the muddy water, a cloud of crimson filling the river downstream.

“Move!” shouted the Slav.

There was another whistling noise, and Sullivan felt the tail end of his pole drop, as he struggled to see what was going on. The rear bearer, one of the Slav’s friends, clawed at the stubby crossbow bolt sticking out of his forehead, before dropping like a stone into the cold black water.

Gruff released the front end of the pole and Sullivan fell into the water, fighting his bindings as the current sucked him along the riverbed. He could feel the ends of the pole knocking against the stones that littered the murky depths, spinning him around and around. Foul water filled his nose and mouth as he fought to get his head back above the surface.

Rocks crashed into his back, sending searing pain through his frozen frame. He rolled over and over, trying to grab onto the sharp stones with his elbows. He held his head inches out of the water, fighting for breath as he looked back along the river at the party of marauders.

The remaining four warriors still stood firm in the middle of the ford. Sullivan could see two of the limp bodies as they floated past him, knocking against the sharp stones as they bobbed away out of sight.

The marauders scanned both banks of the ford. They couldn’t see their assailants, but they knew that someone was out there. Gruff and the Slav were armed with huge two-handed swords, while Frenchy and the Slav’s friend wielded stubby misshaped short bows. All of them were looking around frantically.

A bellow erupted from a small hillock just by the bank of the ford, and as a huge black shape moved out from behind it, Sullivan heard another low whistling noise above the noise of the running water. A monstrous battle-axe hurtled end over end, its blade singing in the air as it flew. It hit the Slav’s remaining friend with a resounding thump, the huge blade cleaving into the marauder’s chest.

The other three marauders moved to intercept the huge shape as it neared their position. Sullivan was still fighting to keep his head above water, and it was difficult to follow the battle from where he was. The large black shadow was definitely man-shaped, but it seemed bigger in the dim light.

Frenchy pulled back his bowstring, loosing an arrow at the shape as it approached. The shadow flickered as it dodged the arrow, and before the archer could draw his string a second time the shape was upon him.

Sullivan could see it was definitely a man now, but he had to be almost seven feet tall. The huge furs that were wrapped around him, which occasionally parted to reveal fleeting glimpses of dull metal armour, further increased his bulk. He roared a great battle cry from behind a voluminous black beard as he swung a giant crossbow at Frenchy. One of the sharp arms of the bow impaled the French marauder.

Gruff moved quickly to aid his comrade, but by the time he had closed the distance, Frenchy was already falling into the muddy river, weighed down by the great crossbow. He swung his long sword in a great arc, narrowly missing as the huge man stepped nimbly out of its path. Before Gruff could bring the unwieldy weapon back to bear, he received a crushing blow to the head, knocking him off his feet and clear out of the water. The Slav began to retreat slowly, watching in horror as the monster hauled Gruff back out of the water long enough to ram the blade of his knife into the front of his throat. The tip emerged from the back of Gruff's neck, leaking crimson droplets, before Gruff's body was released and fell limply back into the water. The carcass floated over the rocks and crashed into Sullivan, threatening to dislodge him and send him downriver.

The Slav's gradual retreat became a desperate flight as the monster turned on him, grinning through his beard with a set of massive white teeth. He scrambled up the bank on the far side of the ford as the huge fur-wearing man reclaimed his battle-axe. Once freed from the great weight, the body it had pinned down bobbed to the surface of the shallow water.

The monster watched as the Slav made his way up the rocky bank as quickly as he could. He took careful aim, and then threw the metre-and-a-half long weapon end over end at the fleeing marauder. The blade buried itself in the Slav's back, and he took only a few steps before falling dead to the ground.

Gruff's body was still pressing against him, and Sullivan could feel the tail end of his pole slipping in the uncertain riverbed. He struggled against his bindings, but it only served to dislodge him, and his head fell below water, his mouth filling once again with the foul liquid. He bounced along the riverbed, the sharp rocks tearing into his back as he tumbled downriver. If he couldn't get free of his bindings, he was surely going to drown.

If the pole had been smooth, he might have had a chance to just slip free of it, but it was so gnarled that the crude bindings found great purchase on it. Black spots began to appear in Sullivan's vision, and he knew it to be the first signs of losing consciousness. He redoubled his efforts to free himself, but the strength had long since leaked from his frozen limbs.

Just before the last vestige of consciousness left him, Sullivan felt the pole stop dead. He felt himself suddenly being lifted clear of the water, and blinked as the mud ran away from his eyes. His blindfold was long gone, but he still found it difficult to see what was going on. All he could see was a huge black beard, and a row of grinning teeth.

“Who in the name of Toth are you?” said a deep voice.

Sullivan couldn’t answer; instead he coughed up a huge mouthful of water that he had swallowed. After that, he just passed out.

When he did eventually claw his way back to the waking world, it was a slow and laboured journey. His hands had been untied, and as he pushed himself up into a sitting position he realised that his feet were also free. His body was almost warm again, due in no small part to the roaring fire he sat next to. He rubbed his eyes, trying to clear his vision.

“So you’re alive, then?” came a deep shout.

Sullivan looked to the other side of the fire. The huge bearded man sat on a large rock, monitoring the progress of a large slab of meat suspended over the fire. He was still wrapped in thick furs, and small glittering black eyes stared out at Sullivan from either side of a broad, flat nose. It was most definitely the previous victim of Tayfen’s sphere – Kerreg, the Fallen Lord.

“Yeah, I’m alive,” croaked Sullivan. He moved closer to the fire, trying to get some extra warmth into his frozen bones. So the one who had been trying to kill him all along had just saved his life. It didn’t make any sense.

“Who are you, then?” asked Kerreg.

“You don’t recognise me?” replied Sullivan, a little surprised.

“Should I?”

“You have tried to kill me twice,” said Sullivan, his hand moving instinctively to his empty holster in case the Fallen Lord changed his mind again. He cursed silently, realising that the slain marauders still had his field-loader.

“So you’re the spaceman?” laughed Kerreg, a huge booming roar that shook the ground. “It seems the Fold is not without its share of irony, spaceman, in granting me at last what I had risked so much to attain. You.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you try and kill me?” asked Sullivan impatiently.

“I wasn’t really trying to kill you, spaceman. I was trying to capture you, and the reasons behind it are my own.”

There was a long silence, broken only by the hiss and crackle of the roasting meat.

“Why did Tayfen send you here?” asked Sullivan.

“A question I might equally ask of you,” replied Kerreg. “What in the name of Toth are you doing here?”

“Let’s just Tayfen is no more fond of me than he is of you.”

Kerreg laughed, this time a more subdued chuckle. “He’s a great deal fonder of me than he is of you, spaceman.”

“But we’re both here, aren’t we?”

“True. So you really are the spaceman? A human who travels amongst the stars?”

“That’s me,” replied Sullivan. “Although most people call me Sullivan.”

“Well, Sullivan,” asked Kerreg as he turned the slab over, the upturned side already charred and blackened. “It looks like we have fallen foul of the same treachery. My commiserations.”

“Can’t you get out of here?” asked Sullivan. Surely this Fallen Elysian had some kind of technology that could be useful.

Kerreg laughed again. “No, Sullivan, I cannot. Getting pushed into the Fold is easy enough. Getting out of it is another matter entirely. That is why I came looking for you.”

Sullivan shivered. “I don’t understand.”

“I sensed that another newcomer had come through, right after me, and close by. I reasoned that Tayfen’s treachery had been discovered, and that the King might have come through to find me. I would gladly bear witness against that backstabbing dog.”

Now it was Sullivan’s turn to laugh. “Fat chance. I doubt that the King even knows that Tayfen sent us here. I found Tayfen just as he used that thing on you, but his sentinels grabbed me before I could get away.” He stared into the fire.

“Even Calliya won’t know what has happened to me.” This last thought weighed heaviest on his mind. The gradual realisation that he might never leave this place was harder to bear when he thought of her.

“Then, spaceman,” answered Kerreg. “We have no hope. When I saw that it was you, and not one of the Elysians, I knew that I might be wrong about someone being sent to search for me. But I thought I’d rescue you anyway, just in case.”

“Well, thanks,” answered Sullivan gratefully. “That was a pretty close call.”

“Not as close as if the marauders had gotten you back to the citadel. No chance of surviving that.”

“The citadel?” Captain Gomez had mentioned the citadel in the mountain cave.



“It is where Sejanus rules the Fold from. He gathers the greatest strength of his marauders there.” Kerreg tore a rough chunk from the large slab roasting over the fire, and proffered it to Sullivan.

“No thanks,” said Sullivan. “I think I’ll pass.” Despite the rumblings in his stomach, he wasn’t sure where the meat came from. He hadn’t seen any large animals since he arrived in the Fold, and he could think of only one other source for such a sizeable piece of meat. Maybe it was better to stay hungry. He watched as Kerreg stuffed the meat in through his beard, tiny droplets of fat catching in the thick black curls. The Fallen Lord grinned as he ate.

“Not too much fresh meat in the Fold, Sullivan.”

Sullivan watched the Fallen Lord eat for a few minutes, his hand drifting back to his empty holster. He was alone and unarmed in an alien universe, and his only possible ally was the one person who had been trying to kill him all along.

“Why did you do it?” he asked. “What did you want with me?”

“I told you,” answered Kerreg, between mouthfuls of the rare meat. “It is a long story, and not one I care to explain.”

“Why not? Look around you. There’s just the two of us, and we’re both stuck here. So tell me – because I sure as hell don’t understand how I got myself into all this.”

Kerreg let out a short burst of laughter. “You didn’t get yourself into this, Sullivan. Tayfen got you into this. It was he who told me that the Kelison was returning from beyond the Rift with a prize greater than any I had ever coveted. A human who could fly amongst the stars.”

“Why?” asked Sullivan. “What’s the big deal?”

“The Fallen are not like the Elysians. We do not wish to languish for all eternity in the darkness of the Belt. We were always more concerned with the affairs of humanity, and we have done our best to monitor your progress in our absence. But without seerephon, we cannot cross the Rift. So I thought that you, spaceman, might hold the key to breaking their control of the Rift. Also, I was curious as to why Tayfen would want you dead.”

“But why would Tayfen betray the Kelison?”

“I do not know. But he was very keen that neither the seerephon nor its prize would reach Elysium. After the first attack failed, I decided to try again. Looking back, that was not one of my finer decisions. Greed can get the better of the best of us,” said the Fallen Lord philosophically, chewing on a charred piece of gristle.

“And now what?” asked Sullivan. His fingers and toes had finally warmed up, and he felt almost comfortable. The bindings had left deep welts on his wrists and ankles, and the warmth thawed the numbed flesh, bringing a stinging sensation.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what do we do now?”

“We do nothing, Sullivan. The only reason I didn’t leave you to drown is that I was curious as to how you got here – that and the fact that I have no love for marauders. And now that I see that Tayfen has no more mercy than he has loyalty, you are free to go your own way.”

“But I have to get out of here. I have to get back to Earth. There has to be a way.”

Kerreg sighed. “I have told you. There is no escape from the Fold.”

“I’m not giving up,” said Sullivan defiantly. “There has to be a way.” He pursed his lips in thought, his hand idly wandering to his empty holster. “Don’t your people have the run of this place?”

“There was a time long ago,” said the Fallen Lord, between mouthfuls, “when we ruled this place like Gods, and moved to and fro with the greatest of ease. We used nemotaphs, spheres like the one that Tayfen used to send us here. At specific points, they opened bridges that stretched between here and the two Realms. But that was a very long time ago, spaceman, and rumour has it that the last of us to venture here was caught and slain by Sejanus. Between that, and the destruction of the bridges that followed the war, we found no more reason to set foot in the Fold.”

“Bridges?”

“Gateways, if you like. Between here and the Finite and Infinite Realm. But they were all destroyed during the War of the Bridges.”

“How can you be sure?”

Kerreg threw his eyes towards the inky sky.

“I cannot be sure, Sullivan, but without a nemotaph, or any idea of where you were going, even finding a bridge would be useless.”

“Then we should go to the citadel,” said Sullivan flatly.

“Are you joking? If you are, I do not appreciate your sense of humour,” replied Kerreg. He had almost finished the large slab of meat, discarding only the most charred flakes of flesh.

“If there is any way out of here, Kerreg, it’s there. You said so yourself – the last of your kind was slain by Sejanus. He must have used one of those spheres to get here, right? So maybe it’s still here.”

“No, Sullivan. All that awaits you at the citadel is despair and a very painful death.”

“Is that any worse than what awaits me here? An eternity of war and death? Of hunger and suffering?” Sullivan got to his feet, brushing the black dust off his filthy uniform.

“You would choose suicide over survival, human?”

“It’s not suicide, Kerreg. But it might be our only ticket out of here.”

But the Fallen Lord shook his head. He stood, slowly drawing himself up to his full height. He towered above the human, glaring down at him.

“Are you just going to hide out here?” taunted Sullivan, trying to appeal to Kerreg’s pride. “Skulk around like a coward, hiding from the marauders?”

“At least I’ll be alive,” snapped Kerreg. He kicked at the embers of the fire, scattering them in an effort to douse the blaze, and the air filled with burning sparks.

“But I can’t reach the citadel without your help,” said Sullivan. “I don’t even know where it is!”

The Fallen Lord just grunted as he began to pick up his weapons. He slung the battle-axe and the crossbow over his back, and then hefted one of the two-handed swords that he had taken from the dead marauders. He reached inside his furs and tossed something towards Sullivan.

In the half darkness, Sullivan caught it before he recognised what it was. He felt the familiar cold metal of his pistol in his hand.

“You might be needing that, whatever it is,” said Kerreg.

“You don’t know what this is?”

Kerreg shook his head slowly. To explain it to him, Sullivan activated the pistol and took careful aim at a boulder sitting on top of a nearby ridge. The boulder exploded the moment the molten slug touched it, throwing broken shards of stone over a large area, including the Fallen Lord, who looked on in dumb surprise.

“Look,” said Sullivan, gently sliding the pistol back into its holster. “The way I figure it, you owe me. If you hadn’t attacked the homestead, I would never have ended up on your moon, and Tayfen would never have sent me here. So the least you can do is take me as far as the citadel. If there is a way out of here, I’ll find it.”

The Fallen Lord looked at him long and hard.

“Very well, human. I will guide you to the citadel, but that is as far as I go. You go to your death alone.”

“That’s fine by me,” replied Sullivan flatly.

## Chapter Twenty

The Kelison streaked skywards, skirting the edges of the Shroud, the violet clouds tumbling past the seerephon as it strove to escape the gravity of Elysium. Deep inside the heart of the vessel, Calliya was busy diverting power into the gravitic organs. Constructs aided her as she tied off some of the power arteries and fused them into larger systems; the delicate lattice at the heart of the Kelison trembled with the growing energy.

The problem was simple. The Shoal of Shades lay many weeks flight away, beyond the far side of the Darkling Belt. Getting there was going to take far too long, and if she fell foul of any of the darkling fleet, the Kelison would be quickly outmatched. So speed would be of the essence.

Sullivan was never very far from her mind as she made the adjustments to the Kelison's heart. She knew that time might not have the same meaning in the Fold as it did in the Finite Realm, but every moment she wasted would mean that Sullivan had longer to try and survive. So she willed her hands to move faster.

After she had made the last few modifications, she returned to the control chamber, opening her mind to communicate with the Kelison. The seerephon was keen to understand why Calliya had been diverting power to the gravitic organs.

*We need to fly faster than ever before.*

*Why?*

*Because Sullivan is in trouble. And only we can help him.*

*Help?*

The seerephon would not understand her motives, Calliya knew that. It would be simpler just to explain what they had to do, and hope the Kelison could sense her good intentions.

*We must make a very long journey, and we have very little time.*

*Where?*

Calliya took a deep breath, unsure of how the Kelison might react to the revelation of their destination.

*To the Shoal of Shades.*

No answer came, but Calliya could feel the fear rising in her seerephon.

*I know there is fear in you. But I will protect you, Kelison. We can do this.*

*Shoals forbidden. Much danger. Nightwings.*

*We will fly swifter than danger. We will fly swifter than Nightwings. We will fly swifter than ever before. We will prevail.*

Again there was no response, but Calliya sensed the fear subsiding slightly.

*From the moment you were hatched, I have tended to you, and watched over you. By the oath I took that day, I swear I will not lead you into harm.*

As if in reply, the Kelison surged forward and broke free of Elysium's gravitational pull, streaking through the layers of the Shroud as it soared into the deep darkness of the Finite Realm. Calliya took her position on the dais in the centre of the chamber, watching Elysium diminish in the rear display, the purple wisps of the Shroud fading as the Kelison increased the distance. But even at the rate the planet was shrinking, it would take several weeks to even reach the darkling belt. She began to coax the seerephon.

*Faster.*

The Kelison understood the command clearly, and the power surging through the gravitic organs jumped, increasing the Kelison's rate of acceleration. Once at the desired velocity, a seerephon usually relaxed its gravitic organs, allowing inertia to carry the vessel between the stars. They could then regenerate, giving them the energy they would need to slow down when they reached their destination. But the Kelison could not rest. Again the command came from its master.

*Faster.*

Calliya was beginning to notice the first signs of acceleration, and could feel the unseen hand pressing on her chest. In all her years of piloting the Kelison, she had seldom felt any impression of the vessel's motion.

*How long to the Shoals?*

Like every seerephon, the Kelison knew its way around the Finite Realm in a way no Elysian or human could. It could sense how far it was from any place, and know instinctively how long it would take to get there.

*Seventeen sunrises.*

*We must go faster.*

*Faster much danger. Danger Calliya.*

*Do not worry for me, Kelison. I am strong. We must reach the Shoal and return in seven days. Sullivan is in danger, too.*

The Kelison's gravitic organs began to strain as the seerephon pushed its acceleration way past anything it had ever exposed its master to before. And although it knew that it was in no direct danger itself, the Kelison was greatly concerned with what effect more than doubling their velocity might have on its relatively fragile master.

The increased acceleration weighed heavily on Calliya, and she groaned as she tried to breathe, the muscles in her chest pushing against her heavy ribs. She laid her head back against the chair, powerless to move against the crushing gravity, wondering how long she was going to have to endure this. In the rear display, Elysium was now the size of her fist, and she could still make out the long finger of the Shroud reaching out to the mother star.

*How long until we reach speed?*

*Some time.*

Calliya gripped the sides of the command chair with whitening knuckles, as a small trickle of blood ran from her delicate nose. She couldn't even bring her hand up to wipe her face clean, such was the tremendous weight of her limbs. The droplets flowed back into her blonde curls.

*How long to the Shoal?*

*Ten sunrises.*

Calliya felt almost relieved. There wouldn't be too much more to endure.

When Calliya did not return to the homestead by the end of the day, Titus began to wonder just what had happened to her. She had rushed off to the top of the world, to consult the shipwright, where she knew the Victorian could not follow. Titus had hoped that she would return to the homestead to alert him to her plan; now he feared that she had decided once again to proceed on her own.

To what end, he could not guess. If she had decided to confront Tayfen, she could find herself in a great deal of trouble. If the Midnight Prince truly possessed a nemotaph, then he had become a much more dangerous foe than he had ever been before.

Titus sighed. Calliya was so impulsive. She had set off to cross the Rift without as much as a word. Caution was something that could not be instilled in the young fleet master. And now Titus was sure that Calliya had done something impulsive once again, but without being able to see Lennat there was no way to discover her whereabouts.

He took a late meal by himself on the veranda, spending hours staring out at the violet evening sky, wondering how he should proceed. His mind made up, he retired

early to get plenty rest for a long ride the next day. He was sore already from all the flying he had done in the last few days.

The next morning he rose early and donned his finest robes. Pegasus's wounds would take several weeks to heal, so instead he mounted Merriat and set off for the Royal City. As the huge beast beat its wings, carrying them both skywards, Titus mused that the drakan would probably find the flight less taxing than he would.

He thought carefully about how he would proceed when he reached the city. He was unsure of what exactly Calliya might have done, but he knew how upset she had been by Sullivan's disappearance. As he himself was forbidden, as a human, from visiting the Whispering Woods, he could not simply travel to ask the shipwright.

On the balance of everything, Titus thought he might try Bellanis. As master of the Orisa, she might have an idea of the Kelison's whereabouts. She might even be persuaded to visit the shipwright herself, and ask in Titus's stead. He also considered the merits of telling Bellanis what Calliya had seen on Kerreg's moon. The Princess was no friend of the Midnight Prince, and would be very interested to learn that he was meddling with the forbidden lore.

He realised that Merriat had obviously felt the effects of the recent exertions more than he thought, for it was close to dusk when they finally neared the Royal City. Titus had been invited to Bellanis's dwelling on more than one social occasion, and knew to steer his mount towards the southern corner of the city.

From the air, Titus could make out the two principal areas of the Royal City. There was the inner circle, with the Palace standing at the very centre of a network of wide boulevards, skirting grand constructions that echoed the wonder of the Palace. A vague border separated these innermost constructions from those that occupied the other part of the city, the outer circle. There, narrow cobbled streets wound their way amongst the residences of minor nobles and what loosely passed for the Elysian lower class. Titus had often joked with Calliya that there really were only two classes on Elysium – the upper class, and royalty! But class humour was something that the Elysians didn't really understand.

It was in this outer circle that Bellanis had her lavish residence. Like Calliya, she too had a homestead not far from the city, but as a direct member of the royal family, she also had numerous estates dotted around the entire continent. Titus could only hope that the princess was in residence.

Merriat circled slowly down towards the large courtyard that adjoined the townhouse. Once on the ground, the drakan plodded slowly towards the stables at the side of the house, and Titus was encouraged when he spotted the drakan that Bellanis

had been riding when she had come to fetch Sullivan. He jumped down from his mount, wincing as his numb feet hit the ground. In his excitement he had forgotten how long he had been flying for.

He left the stables and made his way around to the front door of the house, which was bordered on all sides by the kind of gardens that the Elysians seemed to favour. It was a far cry from the 'little corner of England' that Titus had crafted at Calliya's homestead. Chaotic and overgrown, the emphasis seemed to be on a celebration of the virulence of the assorted flora, rather than any aesthetic value. The Victorian picked his way amongst the bushes and tree trunks until he reached the large, varnished front doors.

Titus lifted the ornate gold knocker and gently rapped on the door. He removed a handkerchief from the folds of his robe and patted his forehead nervously. With all the time he had had to think of what to say to Bellanis, he realised his mind was completely blank. A noise from the other side of the door alerted him, and he stuffed the handkerchief up his sleeve.

The door opened slowly. Bellanis stood, her long dark curls falling around her striking features. She wore what resembled to Titus's eyes a pair of man's silk pyjamas. It was curious attire in which to glimpse a princess.

"Dr. Scott! What an unexpected surprise!" Her voice was laden with her usual sarcasm, and the moment she spoke her features seemed to harden.

"Princess Bellanis, please forgive the lateness of the hour, and indeed my unexpected arrival, but I would speak with you if I could."

The raven-haired princess eyed him warily, her hands resting on the doorframe either side of her.

"Well I suppose you had better come in."

Once inside the door, Titus was tended to by a construct of glazed reddish clay; it sidled up to him, taking his flying cloak and folding it neatly. Bellanis had turned and glided towards the back of the house, moving with the effortless grace that seemed to come naturally to the Elysian royalty.

The construct disappeared with his cloak, and Titus followed the princess, who received him in a large drawing room, furnished with a delicate opulence. She poured them both a glass of wine from a crystal decanter and gestured to a comfortable-looking armchair. Then she stood by the large glass doors that led to the patio, staring out into the unkempt garden.

"So, Dr. Kendall-Scott. To what do I owe this unexpected visit?"

Titus shifted nervously on the plush fabric of the armchair. "It's the Lady Calliya, I'm afraid. I wondered if you had seen her?"



Bellanis laughed. "I thought that might be why you were here."

"Then you do know what has happened? For I have not seen her since yesterday, and must admit, I've been quite beside myself with worry."

"Yes, Dr. Scott. I have seen our impetuous young friend, but I do not know where she has gone."

When the princess did not immediately divulge the details, Titus pressed her further.

"Please, Bellanis, whether or not it allays my fears, I need to know. She has been so concerned over what happened to Mr. Sullivan, I fear the worst."

"With good cause, Titus," answered Bellanis with a sigh. "Calliya came to the Whispering Woods while I was there, having the Orisa tended to by the shipwright. She seemed most agitated, and craved Lennat's counsel."

"What did he tell her?"

"I was not privy to their conversation, Titus, but when it was over, Calliya took the Kelison through the Shroud and out into the void. I asked Lennat where she was heading, but as usual the shipwright was a little vague in answer."

"Oh," replied Titus. He had suspected that Calliya had taken the Kelison on a voyage to somewhere, but he still had no idea where.

"Perhaps, if I knew better why she had sought the counsel of the shipwright, I might be better able to guess where she had gone."

Titus stared at the raven-haired princess for a moment. As another fleet master, she might have a better perspective on the subject.

"The Lady Calliya wishes to find out what really occurred to the funeral barge of Gerren the Strong. She is convinced it will uncover treachery in the court, and force the King help find Sullivan."

Bellanis looked at him sceptically. "Find Sullivan? What's going on here, Titus? What treachery in the court?"

Titus thought carefully, weighing up the risks of telling Bellanis everything. With Sullivan and Calliya gone, Titus felt very alone. As dispassionate as she was, perhaps the princess could be trusted. After all, she openly showed disdain for Tayfen when the mood took her.

So Titus told her all that Calliya had told him, and included his own theories on what might have befallen Sullivan and the missing Fallen Lord. When he was finished, Bellanis stared at him for a long time, drinking deeply from her goblet. After what seemed an age, she spoke.

“So Tayfen possesses the forbidden lore. That is quite an accusation to make, Titus. No Elysian has openly used the ancient ways in millennia.”

“I realise that,” said the Victorian. “It is why Calliya is so desperate to find some way to prove that Tayfen meddled with the funeral barge. If she does, the King will have no choice but to challenge Tayfen.”

The princess stared at him again with her icy gaze.

“I believe I know where she has gone.”

“Where?” squealed Titus, desperate to discover what had become of his beloved friend.

“To the only place such proof can be found. The shipwright would have known this, and would have told Calliya. She will search for the Shoal of Shades, where the memories of all the sleeping ones are shared.”

Titus stared at the princess in disbelief. “Good lord. I realised she was upset, but I had no idea she would go to such lengths.”

Bellanis leaned closer. “She is risking everything, and I cannot understand why. Is this all to uncover Tayfen’s treachery? Or is she doing this for that human?”

Now it was Titus’s turn to sigh. He removed his glasses and made a great fuss over removing every last speck of dirt from the small round lenses.

“I believe the Lady and Mr. Sullivan appeared to have forged quite a bond. There really is no telling how far Calliya will go. She must have had no alternative.”

Bellanis stared at Titus, confused. “She had the alternative of not trying to get herself killed. She should have just forgotten about the stupid human.” Then, as an afterthought, she added, “No offence intended.”

“None taken, my lady. But if Calliya really wants to find out what happened to the barge after it crossed the Rift, then this Shoal is the only place to find such an answer, is it not?”

Bellanis simply nodded in reply.

“Then maybe she will be able to get to the bottom of this business. Perhaps we might even discover what really happened on Kerreg’s moon.”

“Obviously you know little of the Shoal of Shades, Titus,” said Bellanis, her tone icy once again. “There is little chance that we will see the Lady Calliya, the Kelison, or for that matter Sullivan ever again. The Shoal lies at the far side of the Darkling Belt, and even if she were to manage to get past the darkling fleets, there is still no reason to assume she can find what she’s looking for.”

Titus looked a little embarrassed. “Forgive me, but what I know of the Shoal I have heard only in children’s tales. A swarm of forgotten seerephon, orbiting a distant star, is that not the one?”

“That is indeed the tale told to our young. But it is not just a story. At the far side of the darkling belt, the Shoal orbits very close to the surface of the star Charox. Thousands upon thousands of sleeping seerephon drift, waiting until one of our number draws close to the end of their lives. Then one of them awakens and makes the journey to Elysium. It seldom arrives more than a day after the chosen has passed away, and bears the dead away to the Fires of Helios. But this much you know, as surely you witnessed at the passing of Gerren the Strong.

“But what you probably don’t know,” continued the princess, rising to refill her goblet, “is that all of the sleeping ones are connected somehow. All seerephon can communicate with each other through their songs, but these ancient vessels are different. They were created at the dawn of the Realm, to bear the Titans from world to world. The Shoal existed long before we walked the stars, and their song is said to be powerful enough to shatter the spirit of a seerephon. That is why the fleet is forbidden from seeking them out. To hear the song of the shades is to perish.”

“But will they have the answers Calliya is searching for?” Titus hadn’t touched his wine, so intent was he on learning what had become of Calliya.

“Perhaps,” replied Bellanis. “Lennat seemed to think so, the old fool.”

Titus was surprised to hear her speak so critically of the shipwright. In his experience, the ancient Elysian was afforded the greatest reverence.

“Was it not Lennat who also told Calliya she should cross the Rift in the first place? And was it not he who asked her to bring Sullivan to the Whispering Woods?”

Bellanis eyed him coolly. “What are you hinting at, Titus?”

“Nothing,” sighed Titus. “I simply do not understand what he means to accomplish. I would that I could ask Lennat in person why he continues to advise Calliya so.”

“Many have asked themselves the same question through the ages, Titus. But they never receive an answer. The shipwright is a law unto himself.”

The princess stood up suddenly, laying her goblet to one side.

“But the hour has grown very late, Dr. Scott. And if you will excuse me, I must retire. But you are more than welcome to stay. You will be tended to, if you so wish.” She gestured towards a terracotta construct as she glided out of the room.

Titus sat back in the armchair and drank deeply from his own golden cup, feeling utterly powerless. Sullivan was lost to another universe, and Calliya had undertaken a

journey from which she might never return. He sat and stared at the overgrown jungle that passed for a garden, trying to think of the best course of action. Perhaps, in the morning, he would see Cren, and seek his advice. The King's counsel was one of the older Elysians that Titus knew well, and times as difficult as these often required the wisdom of the most ancient.

Titus's body was so exhausted that sleep crept up on him unnoticed, and did not even stir when the construct relieved him of his goblet and covered him with a thick fleece.

Calliya returned to the control chamber, refreshed from a few hours in the regenerator. The tremendous acceleration had done her no great harm, but it was always nice to spend time bathing in the healing light. She had little to fear from darkling fleets, such was the speed the Kelison travelled at, skirting the edges of the belt, making careful pains to avoid the attention of any of the Darkling lords. She could only hope that her journey went unnoticed and that she might arrive at the Shoal unhindered.

Calliya spent most of the trip repairing some of the damage done to the Kelison. Although the wound it had received in the battle with the Nightwing had healed very well, thanks mostly to Lennat's salve, the tremendous energy flowing through the gravitic organs had ruptured many of the power arteries. Repairing them was simple work, but she had only just completed it when the Kelison signalled her that it was almost time to decelerate, and she had come running to the control chamber.

*Close now.*

*I know,* replied Calliya. *But many ages have passed since one of the fleet ventured so far from home. We must be careful.*

The Kelison began to slow. It was fast approaching Charox, the star that anchored the nebulous darkling belt. In the rear display, Calliya could still see the dark dots against the crimson belt, worlds overrun with darklings and pure evil. She shivered, and then shook herself, instructing the Kelison to make for a high orbit of Charox, to better use the star's gravity to gradually slow the seerephon, gently descending until they reached the Shoal. Calliya could only hope that the Nightwings did not wander this far in on patrol.

*Can you see them?* she asked her seerephon.

*Close. Very close.*

It took almost a whole agonising hour to slow to an orbital speed. The Kelison was still travelling fast enough to orbit the star in less than half a day, as Calliya didn't want

to waste time in trying to find the Shoal. She needn't have worried. The Kelison guided her unerringly towards the star's photosphere, until it dominated the forward display.

The Kelison filtered out most of Charox's blinding glare, but she still had to squint to make out the tiny black shapes orbiting below them. They stretched out in a narrow belt that ran over the distant horizon of the star, thousands of teardrop shapes, drifting endlessly through the Finite Realm. Calliya's pulse quickened. She had come so far so fast; she had scarcely had time to work out what to do once she found the sleeping shades.

*I need to speak with them,* she told the Kelison. *I must hear their song.*

In answer, her seerephon began to slowly descend to a lower orbit, and Calliya felt a growing sense of trepidation. These were ancient, enigmatic creatures, and she could only hope that she could make her plight clear. She gazed at the forward display, marvelling at the size of the silent stream of vessels that stretched out over the star's horizon. As a child, she had sat by the fireside and listened to her cousin Gerren's tales of the Shoal, never dreaming that she would see it with her own eyes.

She opened her mind as the Kelison began to emit a low keening wail, and the sound filled the seerephon. But it was not a cry of pain, or fear, as it had first sounded to Calliya. It was a song, a melody that she had never heard before.

The seerephon began to sing loudly to the Shoal. Calliya had never heard her vessel make such a song, and she could only guess that it might have something to do with the presence of so many of the ancient shades. Gradually, although still travelling at great velocity, the Kelison approached the Shoal, matching their orbit perfectly. It continued to sing, a gentle high-pitched melody that rose and fell with the vibrations of the power that coursed through the vessel.

Calliya threw her hands to her ears in reflex when the Shoal returned the Kelison's song. It was a deep, deafening cacophony; a thousand voices all striving to be heard over each other. It felt like her head would explode with the noise.

*Please!* she cried. *It hurts!*

She could no longer hear the song of the Kelison – it was completely drowned out by the overpowering song of the Shoal. She fell forwards out of the command chair, landing hard on her knees. Her head pounded as she tried to hear the song of the Kelison, but her own seerephon was obviously struggling as much with the intensity of the thoughts of the Shoal as she was, because no answer came. So Calliya tried instead to make herself heard amongst the sleeping ones.

*Hear me! I am the Lady Calliya of Elysium, of the house of Gerren the Strong! I would speak with the Shoal brothers of the shade that bore my kinsman to the flames of Helios!*

There was no change in the intensity of the Shoal's song, and she repeated her plea, slipping forward off the dais as she did so. She lay on the floor of the control chamber, her hands cupped over her ears, silently calling out again and again. The pressure in her skull increased ten-fold, and she began to lose hope, her mind darkening under the torturous din.

The gentle golden light in the control chamber flickered, a sign that the Kelison was suffering equally under the pressure. The seerephon began to list, sinking ever closer to the Shoal, and Calliya rolled onto her back, screaming aloud as she watched the display. A gigantic, dark seerephon loomed large on the sloped front bulkhead of the control chamber, edging ever closer as the Kelison fell into the grip of the star's gravity.

Calliya struggled to her feet, trying to break through to the Kelison and instruct it to climb again. But the overwhelming song of the Shoal gripped her limbs, blocking out all of her commands, and her body fell limply to the floor. Just as she began to slip into darkness, her last thoughts were of Sullivan. Of his slightly crooked smile. Of his gentle touch.

The Kelison descended, falling towards the Shoal, colliding with a large sleeping shade that had filled the forward display.

Calliya heard the shell of the Kelison crash against the shade, as the vibration rocked her seerephon. The moment the two vessels made contact, there was an upsurge in the intensity of the Shoal's song, but for the first time Calliya felt an emotion from the shades. There was a dawning of comprehension, a moment of realisation, and then the song abruptly ceased.

The Kelison recovered its attitude, righting itself. When it broke contact with the shade, the song did not resume.

*Calliya?*

*I'm fine,* replied Calliya, rising from where she had fallen. *What was that?*

She could sense the Kelison's ignorance. The seerephon seemed to have no more idea of what the overwhelming song had meant than she did. She turned to resume her place upon the dais.

*Kelison master Calliya of Elysium what do you seek?*

The voice boomed, causing her knees to buckle, and she grabbed the arm of her chair steady herself. She looked down at her control bracelets to find them burning brightly. She sat down in the chair hard, her eyes moving to the sleeping ones that filled

the forward display, stretching far out into the distance. But now many of them, indeed most of the ones she could see, had turned to face their sharp prows towards her. She tried to collect herself, closing her eyes and mentally shouting at the Shoal.

*I seek answers. Information about what befell one of the funeral barges of my people.*

*To what end?* came the deafening reply. Calliya winced at the query. *To undo a deed most foul,* she replied.

*That which is done cannot be undone. Such is the way of the universe.*

*No, you don't understand. I can still save him.*

*Sullivan.*

Yes, replied Calliya, her brow curling in confusion. The Shoal seemed to be able to see right into her mind.

*The Shoal understands. What is the information you seek?*

Calliya was finding it difficult to adjust to communicating mentally in such a sophisticated manner. The Kelison communicated with much simpler concepts.

*One of the Shoal brothers left to bear Gerren the Strong through the Rift. Before it left Elysium, I instructed it to fly straight through the Rift, and bear Gerren to his final rest. But another tampered with the barge. It sought out a human ship, and both of them were destroyed. Calliya took a deep breath. I would know who it was who instructed the barge after it left Elysium.*

For a time, the Shoal was silent, save for a faint whispering that Calliya thought she might be imagining. Then she felt the familiar voice of the Kelison.

*Scared.*

*I know. But do not fear. They mean us no harm.*

Calliya hoped that the Kelison did not pick up on her doubts. She knew that there was no real reason to fear the Shoal, but she also knew that if they desired it, the shades could crush the Kelison between their massive bodies.

With no warning, the Shoal disappeared from the forward display. Instead she saw sparse starfield of the Finite Realm. It looked familiar, but it was impossible to be sure. A shape moved into view in the display, and approached, growing slowly larger. When it occupied a quarter of the display, Calliya had no trouble in making it out. It was a seerephon, a massive one, and the dark colouring that became evident as it drew closer identified it easily. It was the Fentach.

This had to be the memory fragment from the barge. The other sleeping ones had watched this as it had happened. What one saw, all saw. Calliya watched as the Fentach

drew closer, moving down the port side of the barge. Before it slid out of view Calliya could clearly see the spur extending.

So Tayfen had boarded the barge. And instructed it to seek out the human vessel. She felt the anger rising in her gut. The memory fragment ended, the image replaced with the true view from the forward display. Once again, the chamber filled with the light of Charox, the star that blazed beyond the Shoal.

*You have found what you sought?*

She felt their question resound inside her mind.

*I have. Thank you. I -*

*Knowledge is not important. It is what you do with that knowledge, Calliya of Elysium. Be gone from here, and never return.*

There were so many questions that filled Calliya's head. She wondered why the Titans had left them behind, to forever orbit this cold star. And why did they journey to take each and every Elysian to the Fires of Helios? So few of her kind had ever dared to journey here that all that remained were children's tales and half-forgotten legends. But she had heard the true power of the Shoal's song, and lived to tell the tale.

The Shoal must have picked up on her gratitude, because again came the overpowering cry.

*You must go now. Others are coming, from the darkling worlds. They dare not approach the Shoal, but we cannot allow them to harm the Kelison.*

"Thanks for your concern," mumbled Calliya. She stopped, laughing at how she was beginning to sound like Sullivan. She relaxed in her chair, trying to make contact with the Kelison. Her seerephon was eager to get away from the sleeping shades, and Calliya could feel the unease in her vessel, as if the Kelison was intimidated by the floating hulks and their overpowering song.

*Home?* it asked.

*Yes, home. And as fast as we came here, we must return.*

The relief in both the seerephon and its master were palpable as the Kelison climbed to a higher orbit, and Calliya allowed herself to relax in the command chair for the first time in a long while. After she had rested for a few minutes, she hopped down to the starboard control well and asked the Kelison to display the memory fragment from the barge on one of the control panels. She tapped a few icons, stopping the image at the point that the Fentach filled the display.

"Tayfen, what have you done?" she whispered to herself.



The Kelison warned her that it was about to start accelerating to great velocity once more. Calliya sat back into the command chair, steeling herself for the heavy hand that she knew would lay its leaden grip upon her.

She could only hope now that Sullivan had the good fortune to stay alive long enough for her to get this evidence to the Court. If Tayfen's treachery was uncovered, then surely something could be done to bring Sullivan back from the Fold. But by the time she reached home, almost a week would have passed.

A week might as well be an eternity in the Fold.

Her limbs grew heavy as the Kelison began to gather speed, slowly at first, and then faster, pushing her further back into the command chair. But if they were to be sure of outrunning the Nightwings that the Shoal had mentioned, they might have to risk even more speed than before.

Calliya stared into the forward display, willing the Kelison to go faster.

"Hold on, Jack. Hold on for just a little longer," she said quietly.

## Chapter Twenty One

Sullivan struggled to keep up with the dark mass of fur that clambered over the rough rocks ahead of him. He had long since given up asking the Kerreg to slow down, and was resigned to nearly exhausting himself in trying to catch up. With no sunrise or sunset, he had no way of knowing how long they had been on the move, and the days and nights were as one long grimy twilight. They regularly passed through patches of thick rancid fog, and Sullivan was concerned that they couldn't see enough to tell where they were going. But the Fallen Lord seemed to know the way well enough.

They were heading towards an ominous collection of black peaks far ahead of them. Sullivan had first glimpsed them through the fog when Kerreg had finally conceded to stop for a rest, what seemed like an eternity ago. That had been the last time they had rested, and all the time since that Sullivan had puffed and panted behind the Fallen Lord the peaks had grown larger. Their tops looked razor sharp, and the closer they got, the more foreboding they appeared. Sullivan wasn't sure if he ever wanted to reach them.

After a great deal more badgering, he got Kerreg to stop for another break. They had neither food nor water, and although Sullivan felt like he was starving, he was astonished at how much energy his tired muscles had to give. He mentioned this to Kerreg.

"It's the Fold," he replied, in his gruff voice. "Mankind needs no sustenance here but war. No need for food or drink when blood will suffice."

Sullivan snorted. He was thinking of the sumptuous banquets that were every meal on Elysium. He particularly missed the simple warm broth that he first tasted on the Kelison, and if he closed his eyes, he could almost feel the tingling on his taste buds.

"We should not tarry much longer. It is too dangerous. The closer we draw to the citadel, the harder it will be for me to sense if there are marauders near."

"How can you sense them?" asked Sullivan, his eyes still closed.

“The same way as you hear, or smell – my senses are simply more attuned to the Fold than yours. But the sense is limited, and as we near the citadel, I will not be able to tell the difference between the marauders there and any who might be following us.”

Sullivan sat up and massaged his aching muscles. “Are there many marauders in the citadel?”

“The citadel is almost all marauders, spaceman. It is Sejanus’s stronghold, and from there he rules over them all.”

“I don’t understand,” said Sullivan, shaking his head. “Who is this Sejanus, and what does he want with me?”

“I cannot be sure what Sejanus wants from you. For all we know, it was me he sought, and not you. I suspect he pursues every new arrival on the off chance they have brought some technology with them. He knows that time has moved on since he left Earth.”

“Well, maybe he can be bargained with. Surely he wants to escape from here like everyone else.”

Kerreg laughed. “And what might you have to offer him, spaceman? He does not wish to escape, Sullivan. He is not a man like any you know.

“Sejanus was once a great commander in the Roman Empire. It was the custom to give returning commanders a huge parade through the streets of Rome – I believe they called it a triumph. Sejanus had marched on many of these triumphs, first behind Pompey, and then Gaius Julius Caesar. But he wanted more. He wanted a triumph all to himself. A lone tribute to his greatness.

“Unfortunately, one of the conditions of a triumph was that five thousand enemies had to be slain by the army in question. So Sejanus took it upon himself to take the five thousand souls by himself. His army helped, of course. They bound five thousand prisoners to the palisade around their camp, and Sejanus calmly walked the line, cutting throat after throat. It took him several days. They say that when he finished, he slept, and awoke to find himself in the Fold. He would not be the first or last man to find a way here through pure evil.”

Kerreg stood. “We have tarried long enough.” He motioned for Sullivan to rise, and the human grumpily complied.

“How far to the citadel?” he asked.

“Not far. Once we reach the top of this ridge, you’ll be able to make your own way.”

“You’re not going to join me?” asked Sullivan, as they scrambled up the steep slope. The sharp rocks cut into his hands as he climbed, and dust from Kerreg’s feet fell back into his eyes.

“No,” called Kerreg. “I have no desire to end my life prematurely. There will be ample opportunity to die in the near future without charging headlong into the marauders’ citadel.”

“Fine,” mumbled Sullivan. They scaled the remainder of the ridge in near silence, the only sound coming from Sullivan as he grunted his way up the mountain. He strained his eyes as he tried to pick out handholds that would not give way under his weight. The light in the Fold was permanently weak, and Sullivan was sure it was getting darker the closer they got to the citadel.

Kerreg was untroubled by the climb. His added height and strength enabled him to choose a more direct route, and he had to wait for several minutes after he reached the top for his human companion. Sullivan eventually dragged himself over the lip of the summit, panting and wiping his bloodied hands on his brow. He was too out of breath to speak, so he rolled over on his side to get a view of the dark landscape that lay on the other side of the high ridge.

There was nothing but the same rough stony ground almost as far as the eye could see in every direction. Great black shadows crisscrossed the terrain, but with neither Sun nor Moon to cast them, Sullivan assumed they were deep gouges in the rock. The ravines were scattered across the plain, surrounding the only other feature of the landscape – the citadel.

It was smaller than Sullivan had imagined, and only visible in the half-light because of the countless fires that surrounded it and filled the interior. He could definitely make out stone structures in the centre of the city, but it appeared to be surrounded with a tall palisade, which was littered with watchtowers and fires all along its high perimeter.

“Is that it?” asked Sullivan, but he was answered only with a snort from Kerreg. “So how do we get in?”

“We don’t. And how you get in, well that’s your problem. As far as I know, there is only one way in or out. The main gate, on the southern side.”

The Fallen Lord pointed to one side of the citadel, where the palisade sported a heavy concentration of fires, both atop the wall and on the barren land outside it.

Without another word, the Fallen Lord moved off down the slope of the hill, on the citadel side.

“I thought you weren’t coming!” yelled Sullivan as he dragged himself to his feet.

“I’m not,” answered Kerreg, “but I’ve got to get off this ridge. And one side is almost as good as the other.”

Sullivan shrugged as he followed Kerreg. There really was very little that Sullivan could offer him, and he had even toyed with the idea of taking him hostage with his pistol, but the risk was that Kerreg might take it the wrong way. And there were already quite enough people intent on killing him without Kerreg being given reason to resume his murderous intentions.

The human slipped and scrambled for purchase as he descended, cursing the fact that he couldn’t seem to find a single smooth rock to steady himself. Every time he laid his hand down, it was jabbed by another sharp outcropping, and the heavy fog that began to roll around the slope of the hill didn’t improve matters. Sullivan lost sight of his guide, and was forced to simply blunder down the hillside, not even realising he had reached the ground until the slope of the hill began to level out. He stopped for a moment, breathing heavily and surveying the damage to his hands and arms. The sleeves of his Elysian uniform were tattered and torn, revealing the dull metal of his control bracelet. He found himself staring at the useless trinket. It already seemed like a lifetime ago that he had knelt in the Whispering Woods and witnessed the birth of a seerephon.

Sullivan heard a sound nearby in the thick fog and hurriedly tried to cover up the bracelet with the tattered remains of his sleeve. Kerreg loomed large out of the fog.

“Thought I’d lost you,” said the Fallen Lord.

Sullivan just grinned in reply, peering into the grey mire that enveloped them.

“Which way to the citadel?”

The combination of the fog, the featureless terrain and the absence of any definite light source made orientation very difficult. Nevertheless, Kerreg pointed unerringly off to his right.

“That’s the way you’re going. I’m headed this way,” he added, pointing back over his shoulder.

“So I guess this is it,” said Sullivan.

“This is what?” replied the Fallen Lord gruffly.

“Never mind. Just promise me something, okay?”

“And what would that be?”

“That you won’t try and kill me anymore?”

Kerreg laughed, throwing his head back and letting out a thunderous roar. “I will promise you no such thing.” He walked closer, bending so that the wispy tip of his thick

beard touched Sullivan's nose. "Do not be fooled by my current benevolence, human. If it was in my interest, I would slay you as you stand here before me!"

With that, Kerreg disappeared into the stinking fog, leaving Sullivan totally alone. He pulled up the collar of his uniform; a futile gesture against the cold wet hand of the weather, and began to trudge in the direction that Kerreg had indicated.

As he blundered along, he felt the first few drops of icy rain beginning to fall. At least it might do away with the fog, he thought. He had maybe covered half a kilometre when the ground began to descend, and although the fog had cleared a little, he still couldn't see the citadel. He resolved to continue in the same direction anyway, and trust to his natural ability to stay on track. It was something he was more comfortable doing in the cold depths of space than in the freezing fog of this cursed place.

But the fog did finally begin to clear. On either side of him, Sullivan could just make out the tops of the high black walls of the ravine he had walked into. He swore under his breath. He hoped that the ravine led him towards the citadel, as he could surely not climb the steep rocky walls, and he was in no mood to retrace his steps. He was about to resume his exhausted trek when a he thought he heard a noise from the thinning fog behind him.

Sullivan took refuge behind a large boulder and strained his ears to pick up any sounds that were carried on the wind. They were very faint, but he thought he could make out human voices, which was not a promising development.

Another sound came now, different both in character and proximity. He slid further behind the cover of the boulder, still trying to identify the noise. Heavy footfalls smashed through the stony ground of the ravine, prompting Sullivan to chance a look over the top of his rocky cover.

Kerreg was running flat out down the floor of the ravine. He was holding one of his arms tight to his body, and Sullivan could see the black fletching of a crossbow bolt sticking out of the fur covering his broad shoulders. He was rapidly nearing Sullivan's position.

Sullivan heard the loud crack of crossbows from above, and looked up, glimpsing helmed heads appearing over the high edges of the ravine. He swore under his breath. The situation was deteriorating rapidly. Kerreg would be upon him at any moment, and the marauders at the edges of the ravine would surely spot him as the Fallen Lord moved past. He took a chance and stood up from behind his makeshift cover, calling to Kerreg.

"You want to tell me what's going on?" he yelled.

"Marauders!" boomed Kerreg breathlessly, from twenty metres away.

"I've seen them!" replied Sullivan, pointing at the high edges of the rocky ravine.

Kerreg glanced upwards and promptly shifted the angle of his run. Two crossbow bolts struck the ground near him with enough force to split the shafts.

“Not them!” shouted Kerreg, as he neared Sullivan. “Them!”

The Fallen Lord twisted as he ran, pointing back off into the light fog that rolled through the ravine. Sullivan stared into the dark blanket, listening to the tremendous rattling noise, a sound that was totally alien to his ears. The Fallen Lord had run straight past Sullivan, and now the human began to back up slowly.

“What the – ”

He started to speak, but what emerged out of the fog quickly silenced him. Six humans, wrapped in little more than loincloths, running at a steady pace; they were almost shoulder-to-shoulder in three pairs, one behind another. They wore harnesses of some sort, all attached to a pole that ran between each pair to a large chariot that rattled and bounced over the rough stony ravine floor. Two humans rode in the chariot; one a short man with a small curved bow, the other a giant of a man, at least seven feet tall and wielding an enormous spear.

Sullivan’s dignified retreat rapidly became a full-fledged flight. He could still see Kerreg running up ahead, and could hear both the chariot and the whistle of crossbow bolts as they passed. The adrenaline had lifted all of the weariness from his limbs, and he chanced a look over his shoulder as he ran.

More marauders had emerged from the fog on foot, wielding a horrific array of primitive weapons. Arrows flung from short bows and stones hurled from slings flew over Sullivan’s head, striking the ground either side of him, and he ran from side to side in an effort to evade the hail of missile fire. The chariot was gaining on him quickly, but ahead of him Kerreg had stopped, resting his weight on his knees with his massive arms.

“What are you doing?” screamed Sullivan. Kerreg didn’t reply, but just puffed and wheezed, half-heartedly waving an arm in the direction Sullivan was heading. As he neared the Fallen Lord, the reason for his sudden halt became evident. The ravine terminated abruptly in a sheer rock face. They were confronted by a dead end.

Sullivan ground to a halt, every breath bringing shooting pain through his chest. There was no escape. The mob of marauders slowed as they neared their quarry, and the gigantic spearman leaped from the chariot, shaking the very ground as he landed. He glared at his prey from behind a massive crude helm, the three metre spear his only weapon. As he strode towards them, Sullivan realised that he wore no other armour save the helm, and was clothed only in rough furs, the icy rain running in rivulets over the bulging muscles that peeked through.

“Now what?” asked Sullivan, in a low voice.

“Bad news,” growled Kerreg. “I know of this man. He is the Philistine warrior, Goliath of Gath. No human could ever best him in battle.”

“Wait a minute,” whispered Sullivan in disbelief. “You mean the Goliath? David and Goliath, the Bible and all that? I thought he was killed.”

“No, he didn’t die. And David was no human. You have to read between the lines of a legend, Sullivan.”

They fell silent as the giant stood before them. Even Kerreg had to look slightly upwards at the helmed head. Sullivan had never seen a human so big. Not even on the low gravity worlds where they really grew them big. But where those guys were all tall and thin, this Goliath had to weigh two hundred kilos, maybe even more.

Goliath reached out a massive hand and grabbed the shaft that protruded from Kerreg’s shoulder. The Fallen Lord gritted his teeth in agony and in turn grabbed the giant’s neck with his other hand. The sinews in Goliath’s neck protruded as he resisted Kerreg’s grasp, dropping his spear and bringing his other hand up. Sullivan half expected him to start throttling Kerreg, but instead the giant brought his hand slowly to the side of Kerreg’s head and pulled the curly black hair away from The Fallen Lord’s ear.

It bore the soft point of the Elysians. Sullivan had forgotten that Kerreg was also one of Calliya’s gentle race. It was also clearly something that interested Goliath, as he let out a cry of triumph and released his grip of the crossbow shaft. Then he reached up with a massive hand and prised Kerreg’s fingers from his throat.

“Elysium,” said Goliath, his tongue fumbling around the sounds of the word. He spat when he finished the word, as if to relieve some horrible curse that might accompany it, and jabbed a finger in Kerreg’s chest.

“You. Sejanus.” When he said the name of the marauders’ leader, he pointed towards the citadel.

Goliath turned and shouted in an unfamiliar tongue at the assembled force behind him. Those that wielded missile weapons fanned out across the floor of the ravine while the others rushed towards Sullivan and Kerreg. The Fallen Lord noticed Sullivan’s hand move towards his pistol, and stopped him with a bark.

“No! You’ll get us both killed!” He dropped his voice. “Now is not the time to fight.”

Against his better judgement, Sullivan stayed his hand, and the marauders surrounded them quickly. Strong hands bound their wrists and tied their arms to their torsos. Once they were tightly bound, thick leather collars were wrapped around their necks, and ropes were tied from the collars to hooks at the rear of the chariot. Goliath



shouted a few more commands and the marauders haphazardly began to form up and move slowly back towards the open end of the ravine.

Sullivan was beginning to tire of being a prisoner. In all his years in the Navy, he had never been captured by enemy forces. Now it seemed to happen every other day.

“Well, Sullivan,” said Kerreg with a grin. “Looks like we’re going to get to see the citadel after all!”

Sullivan didn’t feel like laughing.

The Kelison screamed through the darkling belt, just ahead of a flight of Nightwings that jostled for position as they strove to keep pace with the seerephon. Calliya couldn’t be sure where exactly they had come from, but she had picked up her first pursuer near the innermost moon. It could even have come from the Lord of the Darklings himself. She had managed to outpace that first Nightwing, but soon more vessels joined the chase, and the darklings were not so susceptible to gravitational forces as her seerephon. It meant they were far more manoeuvrable at the great velocities, but also that they drained their energy faster.

To overcome this, the darkling vessels had adopted a relay strategy. Every time one of the Nightwings began to slow, its power source drained, another would take its place. They occasionally managed a burst of speed sufficient to bring them level with the Kelison, whereupon they would try and ram the seerephon. Calliya had to muster all of her strength to help guide her vessel, the enormous forces involved in lateral acceleration wreaking havoc on her body. She was sure the last evasive manoeuvre had cracked one of her ribs against the command chair.

She peered into the rear display, where five Nightwings still flew in loose formation.

*We need more speed,* she urged the Kelison.

*So tired, Calliya.*

*Not much further now.*

Calliya was trying to reassure her seerephon, but she was also beginning to feel the strain of the past few days. She hadn’t slept properly since she the night the darklings had attacked her homestead, only managing to grab catnaps in her command chair, or a stolen hour in the regenerator. But they were nearing Kerreg’s Moon, and she knew the Nightwings would hesitate to follow her past the end of the belt. They would be too wary of the Elysian Fleet.

Two of the Nightwings broke their formation and surged forward. They could only sustain their velocity against the fierce gravitational pull of the darkling moons for a

short time, but it would be long enough to cause the Kelison some problems. Calliya lurched from the command chair, willing the seerephon to maintain its course and speed. Then she dropped nimbly down into the port control well and took the same station that she had once shown Sullivan how to use. Her fingers hovered over the gravitic lance controls as she waited for the Nightwings to draw closer.

*Steady now.*

She tried to keep the seerephon from panicking. The lance would only be effective if it was held on target for more than a few seconds. The Kelison jolted forward violently as one of the Nightwings rammed it. They tried to pierce the shell with their invasion spurs, but could not gather enough momentum to break through the thick outer skin of the seerephon. The Kelison rolled as it was struck, trying to ensure that the darkling vessel could not find purchase.

Calliya discharged the lateral lance. The beam streaked thirty metres out from the hull, raking across the shell of the Nightwing. The darkling vessel immediately dropped back, sections of its shell peeling off. In response, the other Nightwing that had broken formation surged forward even faster.

*Seal all the doors!*

Calliya had to prepare in case one of the Nightwings did manage to pierce the Kelison. If she kept all the chambers sealed, then even if they did breach the shell she could break the spur and stop the darklings from spreading. With their conduit broken, any invading darklings would be sucked back into the vacuum of the void.

The second Nightwing was making its move now. It whipped from side to side, ducking behind the Kelison and trying to avoid the rear lance. Then it accelerated further, driving into the Kelison with as much force as it could muster, and the seerephon shook as the black ship's invasion spur rammed against the thick shell.

*Are you breached?* asked Calliya.

*No.*

The spur had hit the Kelison hard, but not hard enough to pierce the shell. The Kelison rolled sharply, knocking the Nightwing off course by striking it with its starboard trailing edge.

Calliya climbed back into the command chair and urged the seerephon to pick up more speed. While it was still within the gravitational field of the darkling belt, the Kelison had to work to maintain its velocity. She could only hope that the Nightwings would be unable to pursue her for much longer.

She had the evidence she needed against Tayfen now. She knew that if the King saw the memory fragment, he would have to listen to her. And once the monarch

learned of the Midnight Prince's use of the forbidden lore, he might even be prevailed upon to bring Sullivan back somehow. Even if Jack had to be sent back to Earth instead of being allowed to stay, for Calliya anything would be better than him spending an eternity in the Fold.

She looked to the rear display. The Nightwings were indeed beginning to slip away. When she was positive they would not resume their pursuit, Calliya breathed a deep sigh of relief.

*They are not following, are they?* she asked the Kelison.

*We are alone now.*

*And how far to home?*

*Half a sunrise,* replied the seerephon.

Calliya breathed an even deeper sigh of relief. She closed her eyes, not to communicate with the Kelison, but to try and get some sleep. She would need all her strength when she got back to Elysium.

Sullivan slipped and fell to his knees for what felt like the tenth time. Goliath's chariot did not slow, but dragged him along until Kerreg grabbed him by the shoulder with bound hands and hauled him back to his feet.

"Try and keep up, spaceman. If they think you are weak, they will kill you and eat you without a moment's thought." Kerreg spoke in a low voice, and although Sullivan had heard very few of the marauders speak any English, he couldn't be sure they weren't eavesdropping.

"Isn't that exactly what they're going to do with us when we get to the citadel?"

"It is possible. But we cannot be sure – we do not even know which one of us he was after. Sejanus must have wanted us taken alive. Otherwise, he wouldn't have sent his most trusted lieutenant to find us."

Sullivan jerked his head towards the giant that rode the chariot. "Him?"

Kerreg nodded. "Goliath has served Sejanus for millennia. He is the perfect soldier. Devoid of conscience and possessed of a simple, brutal intelligence. He will carry out any order given without thinking. So he has obviously been ordered to capture us, or he would have killed us in a heartbeat."

"So what can Sejanus want from us?"

"From you? Maybe your technology."

Kerreg nodded his head towards the marauder that walked just behind them. He was tall and thin, with skin of darkest ebony, and had been entrusted with Sullivan's gun

belt. He wore it over one shoulder like a bandolier, the pistol dangling tantalisingly close to the prisoners.

“But from me?” continued Kerreg. “I have no idea. He may well be harbouring a grudge.”

“A grudge?” asked Sullivan suspiciously.

“I told you the tale of how Sejanus found himself here. What I did not tell you was that I was there.”

“What are you trying to say?” Sullivan hadn’t thought their situation could get much worse, and he was dreading whatever Kerreg might be about to reveal.

“I am a great deal older than I look, spaceman. Long after the War of Dominion, I was one of many Elysians who fought in the Secret War. It raged for millennia, from Realm to Realm and through the Fold. It was here where the decisive battle for Earth’s future would be fought. But both sides knew that there would be a great advantage in numbers here, and were driven to enlist the help of humans who had a talent for war. But the technology they used to draw the humans to the Fold ran amok, and was corrupted. The Fold filled with the flotsam and jetsam of mankind, and the sky darkened as the land filled with their thirst for blood. But rumour has it that Lucius Sejanus was one of those recruited by Toth himself, at the beginning of the war, and that he has harboured a grudge against all of our kind ever since.”

“Great,” replied Sullivan sarcastically. “So not only is this guy a complete psychopath, but now you’re telling me he might just be out for revenge?”

“It’s a distinct possibility,” answered the Fallen Lord flatly.

Sullivan looked past the chariot, to where he could see the fires atop the high wooden palisade of the citadel, only a kilometre away. The ground had flattened into a plain of hard-packed black clay, making it easier for him to trudge behind the chariot without falling over every hundred steps.

All around the captives, the marauders kept their loose formation as they approached the citadel. Tall, black-skinned spearmen walked alongside short and swarthy swordsmen; shaved heads and tribal tattoos bobbed alongside copious beards and misshapen helms. Some of them carried large roman shields and wore heavy plate armour, others wore little more than animal skins, but all bore somewhere the same eagle motif. On some it was a tattoo, on others it was etched into their tarnished shields. Sullivan assumed that this was the famed Praetorian Guard, but he had never seen such a ragtag regiment. The only thing that seemed to keep them in line was the physical presence of their lieutenant.

Goliath of Philistine had removed his crude helm; it rested upon one of the wicked spikes that protruded from the chariot. Sullivan could finally get a good look at his captor. Dark, matted dreadlocks hung around the weathered skin of his shoulders, framing a broad, flat-featured face. Expressionless eyes stared out beneath a thick brow. He spoke very little, only occasionally barking a command at one of his sergeants. His orders were followed with no question and at great haste.

Sullivan watched the ominous palisade grow as they approached the citadel. It was hard to imagine why anyone would build a city in this god-forsaken place. He asked Kerreg, but the Fallen Lord merely shook his head.

“The marauder citadel has always been here, and many have contributed to its construction. Whoever rules the citadel adds something of their own culture to it. I believe it was Sejanus who constructed the palisade, soon after he took power. But others constructed the central part, long before that Roman monster began to shed blood in this place.”

The Fold seemed to have darkened while they trudged towards the citadel, until it was as if they were in the dying moment of a perpetual twilight. Every few meters along the top of the palisade, bright fires burned, casting long shadows of the watchmen who tended them. As the formation approached the palisade, two massive gates began to open outwards, propelled by teams of men in heavy armour who were in turn flanked by similarly attired spearmen.

The marauders tightened formation as they moved through the gates. Some of the guards began to cheer and applaud, while Goliath waved in triumph as his chariot was towed into the citadel. In one hand he raised his gigantic spear, in the other he clutched his crude helm.

The giant roared as the gates closed behind him, an evil grin cracking across his broad face. Many of the jeers and shouts were directed at Sullivan and Kerreg, but the tall Elysian remained utterly defiant. Sullivan was reminded of how his own troops had cheered when Orlat had emerged from the Kobiyashi mines, parading his prisoners. It had led to the duel that would spell the end of Sullivan’s naval career. And now, at last, he knew how those prisoners had felt. He knew that he had been right to stand against Orlat that day.

The troops flanked the chariot as it wound its way through the grimy narrow streets of the citadel. There was no single architectural style, as the buildings were mostly little more than shacks and lean-to’s, lit from dirty oil lamps that gave off a sickly sweet smell. The permanent drizzling rain ran off the roofs of the few stone buildings that stood amongst the ramshackle terraces.

A huge ziggurat rose out of the centre of the citadel, nearly three times the height of any other building, dominating the skyline. Sullivan's eyes were drawn to the tall pyramidal structure, and the fires that burned at uneven intervals around the steps of the near the top.

Kerreg realised Sullivan was looking at the centrepiece of the citadel.

"That is the Temple of the Fold. It was made by the Titans themselves, brought into being at the very moment the Fold itself came into existence. From there, Sejanus rules over all he surveys."

Sullivan's pace must have slipped, because he felt the sharp prod of a spear in his back. He looked around in anger, wishing he had had a chance to show some of the marauders what he was made of. The one that had poked him scowled at him. It was the marauder that wore his gun belt like a bandolier.

"Move!" he grunted, waving the tip of his spear again. Sullivan just glared back.

The ragtag regiment turned a corner, moving onto a wider avenue that led directly to the ziggurat. The surface of the road was roughly cobbled, and Goliath's chariot rattled as it trundled along. Large fires burned in braziers atop thick metal poles that were evenly spaced along either side of the avenue, bright against the ever-darkening sky.

Sullivan moved as close to Kerreg as he dared, speaking lowly with his head bowed to avoid the attention of his captors.

"It's time we came up with a plan."

"What are you talking about?" growled Kerreg.

"I don't know about you, but I don't intend to go gently into the good night. If we can break free, we can hide out in the city. We might be able to lose them in the dark," Sullivan said, he scanning the sides of the street for possible escape routes.

"Don't be a fool, human," Kerreg replied. "You are surrounded on all sides by thousands of vicious marauders. And even if you did escape, there's nowhere to run to. This is the Fold, Sullivan. Accept it, and die with dignity."

"No offence, but I'm not dying in this hell-hole. And I refuse to believe there's no way out."

"Believe it, Sullivan. Our only hope is that Sejanus wishes only one of us dead. He may just show some cruel mercy to the other."

They were almost at the end of the avenue, where it opened up into an enormous courtyard that skirted the edges of the ziggurat, which Sullivan guessed to be about five hundred metres along its base. A phalanx of guards was strung out along the edges of the courtyard, and there were more on the bottom two tiers of the ziggurat. Each step

was at least five metres in height, and the only way to scale the pyramid was by way of the flight of narrower steps that were carved into the front side. Fire-laden braziers marked the ascent of the steps, all the way to the high summit.

Goliath of Philistine prodded his sweating steeds with his spear, and they veered sharply left, running along the lines of cheering marauders until they reached the base of the steps. Goliath turned and unhooked the ropes that were bound to his prisoner's wrists. He had left his helm in the chariot, but lofted his great spear as he gestured to the applauding horde. He tugged on the ropes, pulling Sullivan and Kerreg after him as he scaled the ziggurat. They made their way up the steep flight of stone stairs; assorted marauders began to follow them, but always at a distance.

Sullivan looked up into the dark sky. Up near the summit he could make out a few rough structures. A set of canopies had been erected around one of the steps, shielding it from the constant rain. Halfway up the ziggurat, Goliath stopped to once again salute to the marauders gathering around the base. He gave another tug on the ropes that bound his prisoners, as if to make clear his power over them to the cheering mass.

Other marauders, mostly those who had assisted in Sullivan's capture, had dared to follow Goliath more closely. Sullivan chanced a glance over his shoulder, and counted maybe a dozen, including his old friend Bandolier, who leered at him and waved the wicked point of his spear.

A figure had emerged appeared at the very top of the steps, striding out to greet his lieutenant. It was a man of medium height and build, with a hairless head and a prominent nose. Small, glassy, black eyes stared down the steps as they approached.

The summit of the ziggurat was crowned with a flat plateau ten metres square, ringed with braziers of burning coal. The figures, which wore dark hooded cloaks, huddled under the canopies, peering out in curiosity as Goliath led his prisoners up the final few tiers of the ziggurat.

As they crested the summit, Goliath turned and pushed them down onto their knees, before untying his rope from the bindings that held their wrists. Then the monstrous Philistine stepped aside.

The rain had grown stronger still as the prisoners had scaled the steps to meet their fate. Now it swept across the naked summit of the ziggurat, making it difficult for Sullivan to see clearly. In the exact centre was a metal ring, about two metres in diameter, which was set flush into the stone. Inside the ring the surface was of black glass, and save for the braziers that occupied each corner of the summit it was the only feature visible.

Sejanus walked slowly towards the prisoners kneeling at the edge of the plateau.

“What have we here?” he asked, in perfect English. “Our newcomers, no doubt?”

Neither Sullivan nor Kerreg answered, but Goliath spoke briefly in his own language. As Sejanus listened, he didn’t take his eyes off either of his captives, but nodded slowly and leaned closer to Kerreg. He pulled back the thick hair on the side of the Fallen Lord’s head and grinned when he saw the pointed ear. Then he laughed softly.

“After all this time,” he said, kneeling so as to stare straight into Kerreg’s eyes. “I had doubted I would ever set eyes on your kind again. I believed that you, and your kin, had forsaken this place. Indeed, after so many millennia, I had come to believe that the Gods themselves had forsaken the Fold. Yet now I find one of their princes, here before me – as my guest.” He looked at Sullivan. “But you, I don’t recognise. Tell me, where do you call home?”

Sullivan looked straight back into the black beady eyes. “Earth.”

Sejanus stood and looked Sullivan up and down, nudging him with the toe of his soft leather boot. “That much I can guess for myself. But perhaps you would tell me when, exactly, you might call home? For here in the Fold, that is a much more pertinent question.”

Sullivan said nothing. He stared back up at Sejanus, the rain running off his nose. The marauder leader was clad in roman armour, and wore a short, faded, red cloak that hung from the wide shoulders of the metal plate breastplate.

Sejanus called out to the members of his Praetorian guard that had been brave enough to scale the heights of the ziggurat, gathering around the upper tiers. Sullivan couldn’t understand what Sejanus was saying, but some of the marauders who had helped catch him moved closer and answered his questions. Goliath stood silently behind Sejanus, near the ring in the centre of the summit.

The marauder leader looked on in dawning comprehension as his soldiers shouted their reports at him. After a few minutes, he silenced them with an outstretched hand, and turned to his captives.

“I do not understand why you would choose silence over life, human. Surely you cannot owe anything to this trickster who kneels at your side. His kind have meddled for long enough in the affairs of man. Although for an age, they have been too fearful to set foot in this place.”

“Fear has nothing to do with it,” growled the Fallen Lord. “This is a cursed world. There is nothing here but the very evil in the soul of man. We have no reason to set foot in this hell.” Kerreg spat when he finished, and glared up at the roman.



Sejanus struck Kerreg hard with the back of one hand. “Treacherous dog! You will get the reward you deserve, trust in that.” Then he turned to Sullivan, his expression softening. “But where are my manners?”

He took a few steps backwards and bowed. “I am Lucius Sejanus, Emperor of the Fold. I welcome you to my empire, and apologise if any of my men have treated you roughly. Some of them are not – well – civilised men. Unlike myself.”

“Captain Jack Sullivan,” Sullivan replied. He was about to add his rank as master of the Bogart, but bit his tongue instead.

“You have met many of my marauders. They have come to me across the scope of human history, but few and far between are those that speak this language. It would seem that as the years passed in the world I knew, fewer and fewer souls have found their way here. We have seen only a handful from the age when man has learned to build great machines that fly through the sky.”

The roman looked wistfully into the dark night. “I have often wished I could see what has become of my beloved Rome; of how the world has moved on. And now look what I have before me. For I do not recognise your attire, and your speech is modern. So I believe you may be one of these precious men that come to us from the end of time. Someone who might be able to unlock the secrets of the Fold – are you such a man?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know anything about secrets, or the end of time. I was brought here against my will, and all I’m trying to do is to get home.”

Sejanus smiled. “There is only one way out of here, Sullivan. You are about to witness someone’s exit from the Fold. Afterwards, you may choose whether you will stay and serve me, or leave this place. Goliath!”

The giant stepped closer to his master. Sejanus pointed at Kerreg.

“Goliath, take this abomination and cut off his head. Mount it on a spike, so that I can enjoy his company later, and cast his body to the men to use as a plaything.”

Sullivan tensed as Goliath strode towards them. He struggled against the bindings around his wrists, and was rewarded with another prod in the back from Bandalier. Sullivan was really starting to harbour a grudge against that particular marauder. Kerreg noticed his efforts to escape and barked a hurried whisper.

“No, Sullivan. Save yourself. For I gladly would have killed you when it served my interests.”

“I can’t just let them – ”

“Now is not the time, Sullivan.”

Sullivan was about to ask when the time would be, when Goliath laid a massive hand on Kerreg's shoulder and dragged him towards the centre of the summit. He barked at one of his lieutenants, and a marauder rushed onto the summit, carrying Kerreg's own battle-axe.

"With his own weapon, Goliath?" smiled Sejanus. "How fitting."

Sullivan's legs were tired. His whole body ached. His hands were numb from a combination of the cold rain and the tight bindings. He watched as Goliath used a small sharp knife to cut away some of the furs that shielded the Fallen Lord's neck. There was no way he could just sit here and let Sejanus kill Kerreg. He knew that the darkling lord had tried to kill him more than once, but he had also saved his life back at the ford.

Sullivan sat back on his heels. If he was going to take action, it would have to be now.

## Chapter Twenty Two

Calliya felt the Kelison enter her dreams. She was walking upon the grassy plains, not very far from her homestead, hand-in-hand with Sullivan. The sky overhead was not that of Elysium, for it was of purest blue, and bore no trace of the Shroud. A warm breeze caressed her face, and the grass tickled her bare feet as they walked. She couldn't hear Jack's voice, but his lips were moving. She was trying to hear him; desperately trying to make out what he was saying, when she heard another voice.

*Calliya.*

The sky began to shift from blue towards gold, and when the voice came again Calliya felt her limbs grow heavy. The paradise of her slumber was replaced with the gentle glow of the Kelison's control chamber.

She sat up in the command chair with a start, staring around wildly. She brought her hand to her face, wiping the sleep from her eyes, and then turned her attention to the forward display.

Her home world loomed large before her, and she sighed in relief at the sight of Elysium, nestled in the folds of the Shroud. Six days had passed since she had left the Whispering Woods, and she could only hope that there was still time to save Sullivan. She would head directly to the Royal City, and plead with the King to grant her an audience. If anyone could bring Sullivan back, it would be the Elysian monarch.

Calliya instructed the Kelison to make a gentle descent towards the palace, and then made her way to her quarters. If she hadn't slept for so long, she would have had time to spend in the regenerator. Instead she would have to make do with a bath and a change of clothes.

The mirror in her quarters revealed the toll the journey had taken on her. Dried blood was caked on her face from the extreme velocity changes, and despite having slept there were deep dark circles under her eyes. She bathed and changed clothes as quickly as she could, selecting a dark blue uniform. She straightened the short jacket as she left her quarters, planning her next move. She couldn't very well just storm into the palace

and demand to see the King. Her best chance was to see Cren first. If anyone could arrange an audience with the King, it would be his most trusted advisor.

Calliya returned to the control chamber just as the Kelison passed through the last remnants of the Shroud. They descended towards the city, circling inexorably down to the gleaming jewel in the centre of the grassy plain. Fleet masters were forbidden from landing seerephon within the walls of the city, save in times of direst necessity, but Calliya didn't think she could be in much more trouble than she was already.

The Kelison touched down in the large open plaza that bordered the front of the palace. A small crowd had glimpsed the vessel during its descent, and gathered around it, whispering and pointing as the hatch at the rear of the seerephon began to open. Calliya strode past the assembled city residents, resplendent in their multicoloured finery. Let them chatter, she thought. She had to find Cren.

The King's Counsel kept a townhouse very near the palace. Calliya had visited it once, long ago, and knew it wasn't far. She headed down first one boulevard, and then up another, before she found herself a little lost. She was in such a hurry to find Cren that she just couldn't remember where she was supposed to be going. Finally, she stopped one of the Elysians heading to the market for directions. Everyone in the city knew where Cren lived, and with a little help, she had no trouble in finding his grand townhouse.

She scaled the narrow stone steps and made her way through a tunnel that led through the thick foliage of the garden, straightening the short jacket of her uniform. She knocked on the polished wooden door, and almost instantly a terracotta construct open it, motioning for Calliya to come in. As soon as she crossed the threshold, Cren appeared in the foyer, wearing a large woollen robe that seemed to wrap around him more than once, despite his enormous bulk.

"My Lady Calliya! It is good to see you. Some of us had feared the worst."

He strode straight to the young seerephon master and embraced her warmly.

"Is it true? Have you really visited the Shoal of Shades?"

Calliya nodded gently. "And I have much to tell. How did you know?"

"News travels fast, my lady. Your friend Dr. Scott told me."

"Titus? He was here?"

"Why, yes. He arrived yesterday, and we spoke long into the night. Then he left suddenly this morning, but he didn't mention where he was going."

"What did he want?" asked Calliya.

"He came here to seek my advice, but was most guarded in his questions. He said that he believed your Captain Sullivan had been sent to the Fold, and that there might be

some conspiracy afoot in the court. I wasn't sure what to make of it, really, but he did seem somewhat agitated. Then, this morning, he disappeared. I wish I knew what was going on."

Calliya frowned. She couldn't understand what Titus was up to. And where had he rushed off to, and why?

"Don't worry, Cren," came a sharp voice from the townhouse's interior. It was Princess Bellanis. "I'm sure Calliya has something in mind."

Calliya looked at the raven-haired Elysian. "I made it to the Shoals, Bellanis. I found the answers I was looking for."

The others looked in surprise at Calliya. It was Bellanis who spoke up.

"I was sure you would turn back before you reached the Shoal. And I was even more certain that the darkling lords would stop you from returning. How did you make it through?"

"The Kelison and I flew as fast as the heavens would allow. They tried to stop me, that is, the darkling lords –"

"But they should have known better than to try to dissuade you," interrupted Cren. "A lesson that most of your friends have long since learned."

Calliya just smiled. "Then you must know that I will see the King. With or without your help."

Cren looked at her sternly for a moment and then turned to Bellanis, who just raised an eyebrow and cocked her head. "It would seem that our young friend is very determined, Cren."

The rotund Elysian frowned, tucking his hands into the folds of his voluminous woolly robe. "Then it would follow that I have very little choice but to agree to help you. Although I fear that we are on a fool's errand."

"I have that feeling a lot," answered Calliya.

Cren turned and walked back out to the foyer, clapping his hands loudly over his head.

"Come," he cried, "we must dress for court!"

Responding to his call, a gaggle of constructs appeared from various entryways around the foyer, and two large wooden ones swaggered down the circular staircase on their bandy hind legs. Once on the flat they dropped onto all fours again, and joined the rest of their brethren as they milled about their corpulent master.

"Quickly," rattled Cren, "we need suitable attire for court, for myself and my two enchanting guests. And be quick about it!"

He ushered two of the small, delicate terracotta constructs towards Bellanis and Calliya, and they scuttled across the tiled floor, each taking the hand of one of the Elysian ladies. Then they led them back out into the foyer and up the staircase.

Cren was already reaching the top of the staircase, flanked by the remainder of his constructs. There were so many of them that they were forced to scramble over each other to keep up, creating a comical tumbling mass that rolled after Cren. He barked orders at them as they made their way through the upper floor of the house, and occasionally one of the constructs would split from the entourage and scurry off to perform some chore or other.

Calliya was led, with Bellanis, up the stairs to a large dressing room. Huge gilded mirrors lined one of the walls, facing a row of highly decorated doors, which the constructs pulled back to reveal a vast array of finery hanging in a series of deep alcoves.

Calliya groaned. "I don't have time for this, Bellanis. Every minute we waste here, Sullivan could be dying."

Bellanis was leafing through the dresses hanging in one of the alcoves, frowning at some and shaking her head at others. "If your human had the mind to survive the Fold for more than a few hours, then he can probably survive a little while more."

Calliya glared at Bellanis, but the princess had turned her back, and Calliya found herself glaring instead at her thick dark curls. She felt a tug from her left and looked down to see the delicate little construct pulling gently on the corner of her uniform jacket. She threw her eyes skyward as she pulled off the jacket and handed it to the construct, which it folded carefully before scurrying off towards the racks of clothes.

Bellanis had pulled something out of the hidden depths and threw it towards the other construct. Then she resumed her search through the various outfits.

"I know you must find this tedious, Calliya, but you have asked a lot of Cren. The least you can do is indulge him. Now try and find something, please?"

Calliya muttered something about wasting time and moved to look through the racks of clothes. If Bellanis or Cren knew the full extent of what she was going to reveal to the King, they would share her haste. The terracotta construct followed her, scuttling around her feet, proffering various garments. There was a huge array of different costumes, made from every kind of fabric imaginable, and in every cut possible. She shook her head, unable to believe that while Sullivan might be dying in a distant dimension, here she was playing dress-up.

The drakan beat its wings as strongly against the sky, striving for more speed, climbing ever higher in a search for thinner air and prevailing winds. Astride it, Titus

pulled his thick flying cloak tighter around his body, his face set in a look of grim determination, his eyes squinting against the cold wind. He slid his hand in through the folds of his cloak, his fingers searching for the PCU nestled carefully in his jacket pocket. He almost sighed with relief when he realised he hadn't lost it, but the small plastic device also brought with it a sense of dread.

They had been flying all day, and just when Titus thought he could take no more he felt Merriat relax and begin to descend. Titus strained his eyes to make out the high plateau where the Estrella Negra had crash-landed. As soon as they broke through the thin layer of cloud, he spotted the familiar ring of peaks surrounding the thick rainforest, and Merriat glided unerringly back to the clearing they had landed in before. As Titus dismounted the drakan, his hands were still numb from the long trip and he muttered to himself as he removed his flying cloak and fastened it to the saddle.

“What can this mean?” he asked, to no one in particular.

He removed the PCU from his pocket and examined it, but the piece of technology remained inert. He thrust it back into his pocket and began to battle his way down the rough path that led to the ship's access hatch.

“How can this be possible?” he muttered. The closer he drew to the bulbous black vessel, the more flustered he became. After a battle that left him dripping with sweat, he gingerly touched his hand to the door controls, and it opened with a loud hiss.

“I do wish Captain Sullivan were here,” said Titus to the jungle, before stepping inside the dark interior of the ship.

A short time later, the Elysian fleet masters rejoined Cren in the main foyer of the house. Bellanis had, at great length, chosen a strapless gown of shimmering silver. Its heavy fabric bunched tightly around her muscular frame, swaying gently as she moved. Behind her came Calliya, who had chosen a suit of gossamer silk, the culottes and blouse flowing around her as she descended the broad spiral staircase. She carried her scabbard in one hand, unwilling to leave her sword behind. Life was full of surprises these days.

Cren had dressed in his finest court robes. They were a rich purple colour, and fashioned from heavy brushed fabrics with intricate gold trim along the hem. The last of the constructs milled about him, making the final adjustments.

“My ladies!” cried Cren as he saw them descending the staircase. “What a transformation!”

He moved to meet them at the bottom of the stairs, making a fuss over examining their attire.

“Calliya, I would hardly recognise you!”

Calliya smiled as demurely as she could. "Please can we make haste, Cren? I must see the King as soon as possible."

Cren seemed faintly annoyed to have his ritual disrupted, but said nothing. Instead he turned towards the front door and opened it with a flourish. "Let us make our way to the palace then. It is not far, and will not take us long to walk."

They stepped out into the chaotic vegetation of Cren's grounds, where two constructs tended to the walls of the tunnel that led through the dense garden, clipping delicately at the tangled fronds with sharp-clawed fingers. They paid the Elysians no attention as they made their way out into the bright sunshine.

It was only a short walk down the Royal City's principal avenues to reach the palace. Calliya had walked these streets many times, but somehow they never lost the sense of wonder they had held for her when she had first visited them as a small child. She gazed up at the narrow golden spires that stretched into the purple-threaded skies. Pennants flew from some of the highest spires; others were just as beautiful without. Slender birds spiralled from one delicate minaret to another, occasionally straying down towards the lower reaches of the skyline.

Calliya lagged slightly behind the others as they made their way up the through the city's marketplace. All around her, constructs and Elysians mingled, jostling about to get a better view of the produce on offer. To here would traders from every corner of the Realm come to barter their wares; as the day went on the contents of the various ornate stalls did not so diminish, but merely change in character. Trinkets, jewellery and elegant pottery were exchanged for exotic fruits and game, hunted from the distant plains. The Elysians had no need for currency, and seemed to take to trading as a sort of pastime rather than a crucial business. Perhaps that was the reason that this market had remained unchanged for nearly a thousand years.

Her hastily chosen sandals chafed at her feet as she walked across the smooth cobbles, and she longed to be back in her comfortable boots. They might have looked a little weathered after everything they had been through, but the same could be said of her.

Few of the market's residents took any notice of them as the party made their way through the thickest crowd. It had always amazed Calliya that there would be so much activity at this market. The Elysians led largely pastoral lives of leisure, as the constructs provided virtually everything they needed to survive. Even her own life, save for the time she spent on patrol, had been one of lazy days and little excitement. But after the last few months, she could hardly remember what that tranquil life had been



like. She felt like laughing at the Elysians who busied about the market. Were they so desperate to amuse themselves?

The market stretched almost to the edge of the plaza that bordered the front of the Royal Palace. In this distance, the Kelison was clearly visible and Cren and Bellanis exchanged surprised looks when they saw where Calliya had landed her vessel. Where the plaza joined the boulevard, they moved through one of the more unusual groups of traders, one that was only to be found in the capital at certain times of the year.

Cren, Bellanis and Calliya were forced tightly together as they made their way through the sprawling drakan-breeders market. All manner of drakan were on display; from whelps with their wings still down covered, to fully-grown males ready for flight. Breeders discussed at great lengths the different techniques involved in rearing the winged creatures, the merits of various bloodlines, and the best places to tour.

They entered the Palace by way of the front door, and with no fanfare. Cren merely signalled to the sentinels as they passed, and as soon as they were through the door strayed from the course Calliya would usually take. Rather than heading for the crystal dome of the Great Hall, they moved instead into the maze of corridors that ran around the perimeter of the Royal Palace. They encountered no one else in the tunnels, save for a few constructs that bustled about their business without taking any notice of the Elysians.

Calliya wasn't used to seeing so few people in the Palace. But then she had generally only visited after a patrol, when court was in session. On court days, the whole Palace would ring with excitement, as visitors from distant corners of the world arrived bearing every kind of gossip.

The quiet of the corridors contrasted greatly with the bustle of the marketplace. Calliya found her thoughts wandering to how she was going to explain what the actions she had taken. The King was not going to be happy when he found out that she had visited the Shoal. He would be even less pleased when she accused Tayfen of using the forbidden lore to consign Sullivan to the Fold.

The maze of corridors led all the way around the edges of the Palace, reaching each and every one of the gigantic towers that surrounded the Great Hall. They passed exit after exit, tower after tower, until they reached a rather grand looking corridor that led to two large ornate wooden doors. Cren walked up to them, knocked loudly three times and then gently pushed the doors open. Once inside, he turned to the ladies, bowed, and gestured for them to enter the chamber.

Calliya followed right behind Bellanis as they entered, fighting to hide her amazement at the sight before her. Like most Elysians, Calliya had never ventured as far as the King's private chambers before.

The chamber took up the entire bottom half of a massive tower. Lengthy narrow windows cut into the walls allowed shafts of bright sunlight to cast pools around the multicoloured stone floor. The lower half of the walls were covered in all manner of treasures, from heavy golden idols to plain wooden spears and clubs, which Calliya could only guess to have some historical significance. In the centre of the room was a strange device, which reminded Calliya of the hatch-arms on a seerephon, but it was much larger. A stone platform about a metre wide, gripped on three sides by thick obsidian fingers, which stretched back into a thick-coiled mass and obscured what function the device might have.

An assortment of furniture was littered haphazardly around the spacious chamber. In one of the pools of light, sitting on a wooden stool, was the King. He sat at a plain wooden table that bore an ornate chess set, and across from him sat a very ancient looking Elysian. The King was staring intently at the pieces arrayed on the board.

Before any of them could speak, the King raised his hand to silence them.

"Excuse me for a moment, if you will," he said.

The three visitors acceded to his wish and stood in silence for a short time, although it seemed very much longer to Calliya. Eventually, the King reached out and moved one of his pieces with a confident smile. He then looked across at his opponent, who was looking around the tower absent-mindedly. The King coughed gently, and his wizened opponent turned his attention back to the board. He looked at it for a moment or two, before swiftly moved one of the pieces. The King's smile drained away from his face.

"Check-mate?" asked the elderly Elysian, almost apologetically.

The King sighed. "Three thousand years of wisdom! The gift of foresight! And still I lose." He got up from the stool and bowed to his opponent. "Perhaps I should know better than to play against the game's inventor." He smiled broadly as the chess-master rose from his stool and bowed to the King.

"Same time next week, your majesty?" he asked.

The King nodded. "Of course."

The chess-master scurried out the doors behind the visitors, closing them with a loud bang. Cren took that as his cue to make his presentations.

"Your Royal Highness, may I present the Princess Bellanis and the Lady Calliya." He bowed grandly, and Calliya and Bellanis in their turn did the same.

“And to what do I owe this pleasure?”

The King looked for a moment at the demeanour on their faces and immediately knew that this would be grave business. When they did not answer his question, he tried again to elicit something from them.

“You may as well just get on with it,” he said with a sigh, selecting a deep comfortable chair in a pool of bright sunlight, and arranging his simple robe as he made himself comfortable.

Calliya looked nervously at her companions. Cren gestured to her to step forward and explain herself to the King, as Bellanis seated herself on a chaise-lounge near her father and looked on expectantly.

The young fleet master gulped and stepped forward, bowing deeply towards the King.

“If your majesty would permit, I think I can shed light on some mysterious recent events. Such as what caused the funeral barge to seek out a human ship, and why both the Fallen Lord Kerreg and Sullivan disappeared on Kerreg’s moon.”

“Really?” said the King. “How so?”

“I have new information – information that explains what happened to the barge. After that, everything else falls into place.”

The King eyed her warily. “Does it? And how, my child, did you come by this information?”

Calliya looked again at Cren and Bellanis, wishing more than ever that Titus were with her. She bowed her head, ready for the wrath of the King.

“Your majesty – I have travelled to the Shoal of Shades, and sought answers from the sleeping ones.”

There was utter silence in the chamber, as the King sat up straight in his chair, his ancient frame suddenly poised as if to spring towards the young lady.

“You have done what?”

“I travelled to the Shoal of Shades. I wished to know what had become of the funeral barge after it began its journey to the Rift – what caused it to collide with the human ship. And it became clear that it was the only place in all the Realm where I might find the answers I sought.”

The King again stared at her through wise old eyes. “How could you? You know that it is forbidden, above all else, to travel there! And that the danger involved is considerable indeed. Will you never learn, child?” The exasperation was clear in his voice.

“I had nowhere else to turn,” replied Calliya. “None of this was Jack’s fault – I could not simply abandon him.”

The King stared at her for what seemed an age before speaking again. “No, I don’t suppose you could.” His expression seemed to soften slightly, and he relaxed back into his chair again. “But I am unsure of how what occurred in the Infinite Realm relates to Captain Sullivan’s disappearance. Perhaps you should tell me.”

Calliya began her story from just after she left the surface of Elysium. She did not think it wise to mention what she had witnessed on Kerreg’s moon yet. It would be best for the King to see evidence of Tayfen’s treachery for himself, before she accused the Midnight Prince of making use of the forbidden lore.

It took her only a few minutes to relate her tale, as the King listened intently, not interrupting her once, and only raising his eyebrows ever so slightly at her account of the Nightwings pursuing her. Bellanis continued to look on impassionedly, never stirring, while audible gasps could be heard from Cren at virtually every revelation.

When she had finished her story, Calliya bowed deeply again, waiting for her King to speak. But he said nothing, and instead rose wearily from his chair. He walked to a short marble plinth that stood in the open floor, and ran his hand along the metre high gold statue that stood upon it. It was the image of a rather rotund calf, with four thin legs supporting its large bulbous body. A head with large eyes on either side stared blankly back at them.

“You could so easily have lost your life, my child,” said the King, in a soft voice. He looked around at her, the concern evident on his face. “Or worse still, you might have fallen into the hands of the Darkling Lord himself. A seerephon and its master would be a worthy prize for him. And I am still unsure of how this relates to Captain Sullivan.”

“All will become clear, your majesty,” answered Calliya. “And I knew the risks. But any fate would have been better than just sitting here and doing nothing.”

The King nodded in understanding, a stern expression spreading across his features. “Then I must now see the fragment that you retrieved from the Shoal. I presume you have seen it yourself.”

Calliya bowed her head in answer, staring at the polished stonework of the floor.

The King looked to Bellanis. “Daughter, do you know what Calliya saw?”

The Princess shook her head in answer. Behind Calliya, Cren piped up.

“Your majesty, I know nothing of what was retrieved. Only that the lady Calliya felt it was necessary to come to you directly. She did not offer any indication of what she has discovered.”

The King thought for a moment, and then spoke. "I believe we should all see this memory. Lady Calliya, where is your seerephon?"

Calliya nodded. "I landed in the plaza in front of the palace."

The King looked at her, his eyebrow rising in surprise. "Really? You must have been in a hurry indeed."

Calliya found herself blushing. She had forgotten how presumptuous she had been in landing her seerephon in the centre of the Royal City. She followed the King as he passed her and headed for the doors. Cren and Bellanis fell in quickly behind them as they moved back into the maze of corridors that led towards the front of the palace.

The King's sentinels appeared from nowhere, loping into step with the group as they strode the around the circumference of the Great Hall. It took them only a few minutes to arrive back at the main entrance of the Royal Palace.

The Kelison stood in the bright sunlight, the sharp talons of its landing struts gouging into the soft stone of the courtyard. Calliya instructed the seerephon to lower the entry ramp as they approached, and the King led the way inside. He signalled to his sentinels to remain behind and they formed a protective guard around the Kelison, keeping the inquisitive crowd at bay.

She couldn't help but wonder what the King might do when he learned the extent of Tayfen's treachery. He would have no choice but to confront the Midnight Prince, and force him to retrieve Sullivan. Even if Tayfen could not, perhaps then the King could be prevailed upon to undo his foul deeds.

They entered the control chamber, the Kelison bringing up the lighting level the moment they stepped inside. Calliya hadn't noticed how quiet the Kelison had been until it began to speak to her. The seerephon was confused at the presence of so many masters. It could sense Bellanis, and it knew her to be the master of the Orisa, but it was unsure about the King. The Elysian monarch had never set foot on the Kelison before. As the master of the Caradan, he wore control bracelets like every other fleet master, but the seerephon knew instinctively that there was more to this ancient Elysian than it seemed.

*Calliya?* The Kelison asked for its master.

*Do not be concerned. We have come to see the memory that we retrieved from the Shoal.*

She could feel the trepidation oozing through the deck beneath her feet, as another voice broke in between Calliya and her seerephon. It was deep and strong, and quite unlike the King's spoken voice.

*Be at peace, Kelison. I am the King of Elysium. I wish to see the memories of another vessel. Those that you have fetched to me from the Shoal of Shades.*

The lights in the control chamber dimmed, and the front display on the sloping forward chamber wall darkened. Cren and Bellanis stood in silence near the back of the chamber, as the King made his way to the dais and sat wearily in the command chair. Calliya joined him on the dais, standing just behind him as the darkness slowly melted into the sparse starfield she had seen before. Everyone watched as the dimly lit shape moved into view, holding their breath. When the shape had grown large enough to be recognised as the seerephon Fentach, Calliya heard Cren gasp from behind her. Then Bellanis stepped forward, her eyes lighting up in surprise and anger.

“Tayfen!” she snarled. “How could he dare do such a thing?”

“It has to be a mistake,” spluttered Cren. “A fragment from another ship, from another time – there has to be a rational explanation!”

Calliya turned in annoyance towards Cren. “There is no mistake,” she barked. “This is what the funeral barge of Gerren the Strong witnessed before it crossed the Rift.”

“It cannot be!” wailed Cren. “He is a prince of the Realm!”

The King raised an arm to silence the others in the command chamber. It was a few moments before he spoke.

“Such things are possible, Cren, and you know it all too well. I fear that the impulsive prince has gone too far this time.”

“He may have gone further than you think, your majesty,” said Calliya. She stepped down in front of the dais and looked up at her King.

“When you sent me to find Tayfen on Kerreg’s moon, I came upon him in what he called a Temple of Bridges. There was a strong smell of brimstone in the air, and he held in his hand a small purple sphere. I believe it was a nemotaph.”

There was another gasp from Cren at the back of the control chamber. The King fixed his eyes on Calliya.

“Tayfen must have known that with Sullivan’s help, we would eventually uncover his treachery,” she continued. “Jack must have followed us into the fortress. Perhaps he witnessed more of Tayfen’s misdeeds, or was simply unlucky, but I believe that he and the Fallen Lord Kerreg shared the same fate. They were consigned to the Fold, using a nemotaph of the forbidden lore.”

The King stared at Calliya for what seemed an eternity. Finally he rose from his chair, a cold fire burning in his eyes.

“I thank you my child. You have risked everything to bring this news to me, and your efforts shall not be in vain.”

Calliya’s heart lifted as she heard those words. The King descended from the dais and moved quickly towards the port hatch.

“Bellanis, you must go and bring Prince Tayfen to the palace. Do not tell him why I wish to see him, but make him understand that I demand his presence. Cren, take Calliya back to the Great Hall. Bellanis and Tayfen will join you when they return.”

He was leaving the chamber when Bellanis spoke up. “And you, father. What do you mean to do?” Calliya was surprised at how meek Bellanis sounded when she addressed her father. She normally had such contempt in her voice for almost everyone.

The King stopped. “There is something I must attend to. I will join you all shortly in the Great Hall.”

Titus pored over the display on the bridge of the *Estrella Negra*. He could understand some of the data that Iago was showing to him, but the rest of it was verging on gibberish. For the umpteenth time he mopped his brow with his handkerchief. He had asked Iago if the temperature on the ship had risen, but the artificial intelligence had informed him that it was a constant nineteen degrees centigrade on board. So the human’s own fevered mood was generating any heat he felt.

Titus wished with all his heart that Sullivan were with him. The Captain would know what to make of all this. The truth was, the Victorian had no idea what to do – he could stress and strain for as long as he liked, but any action he took would be a shot in the dark. And there would be no telling what the consequences would be.

## Chapter Twenty Three

The rain whipped across the bare summit of the ziggurat harder and colder than ever. Sullivan's legs ached from kneeling on the freezing wet stone, so he sat back on his heels, wary of receiving another sharp prod in the back from Bandolier. None came, and he chanced a look around to see that the marauder who wore Sullivan's gun belt had fixed his attention on Goliath.

The giant Philistine stood impassively by Kerreg, listening blankly as Sejanus spoke at some length in a language that Sullivan did not understand. The Roman was gesturing around the citadel enthusiastically, giving Sullivan the distinct impression of a victory speech.

Something hard dug into his buttock as he sat back onto his heels. His wrists were bound tightly behind him, but not so tightly that he couldn't reach into the pocket with the fingers of his right hand.

He touched the cold steel of one of the crossbow bolt heads he had scrounged from Gomez. There were two of them, and their serrated edges cut against his fingertips as he ran them along the triangular pieces of metal.

Sullivan chanced another look behind him. Bandolier's attention was still diverted. Sullivan carefully slid one of the bolt heads from his pocket and angled it against the rough ropes that bound his wrists. He worked as fast as he could, conscious of how little time Kerreg might have left, as Sejanus seemed to be reaching a crescendo in his speech. Many of the Praetorians were cheering and whooping loudly, and shouting answers in a multitude of tongues from the upper tiers of the ziggurat.

Sullivan held his breath once, when the bolt head nearly fell from his fingers, but he managed to keep hold of it and redoubled his efforts to cut through the bindings. Sejanus had finished speaking. He turned and walked over to Kerreg, who still knelt by the giant Philistine. He grabbed a handful of Kerreg's voluminous curly hair and pulled his head back, leaning over to whisper something in the Fallen Lord's ear. Sullivan had no idea what it was that Sejanus had said, but Kerreg twisted and spat straight in the Roman's face. Sejanus slowly wiped the spittle from his face with the back of his hand



and then wiped his hand on the hem of his short robe. He looked to Goliath and nodded, stepping slowly backwards.

Goliath too took a step back, judging the distance he would need for the perfect axe blow, just as Sullivan felt the bolt head cut through all but the last few strands of the rope. He strained against the bindings and felt them give slightly.

Only a few minutes earlier, Kerreg had cautioned him. “Now is not the time,” he had said. Sullivan wasn’t sure what the Elysian would say if he could ask him now, but he figured that the time to act had come. Goliath moved the axe into a position behind him, holding it there while he gathered his strength. The monstrous Philistine clearly wished this to be a blow of biblical proportions.

Sullivan used his clenched hands for leverage and strained with all his might against the remnants of the bindings. They snapped almost immediately, and for a moment Sullivan struggled to retain his balance, such was the momentum of his effort. He sprang off his knees, turning and reaching as he did so.

Time seemed to slow for a moment. He could see Bandolier, eyes trained on the execution, just beginning to realise that the prisoner he had been ordered to watch had freed himself. The marauder started to react, his hand going instinctively for his blade, but Sullivan had already closed more than half of the distance between them.

Bandolier’s blade was still only partway out of its scabbard when Sullivan’s hand closed around the grip of his pistol. The marauder hadn’t even had the technological knowledge to switch the weapon to ‘safe’. It was primed and ready to fire, just as it had been the last time Sullivan had held it in his hand. Sullivan tugged on the pistol, pressing the point of the holster into the marauder’s belly and pulled the trigger.

There was a loud crack as Bandolier was propelled a metre backwards, toppling off the summit of the ziggurat. All around Sullivan, heads turned at the explosion. Even Sejanus spun in surprise, watching his marauder fall dead. But at least one amongst them had paid no attention to the blast from Sullivan’s muzzle. Out of the corner of his eye, Sullivan saw Goliath bring the great axe around in a huge circle, the razor sharp blade speeding towards Kerreg’s naked neck. At the last moment possible, Kerreg bent his body to the side, evading the lethal blow by inches. The axe head struck the stone of the summit with a resounding ring and dug several centimetres into the hard surface.

Sullivan yanked his pistol free of its holster and barrelled into another marauder, who was trying to pull his blade from its scabbard. Sullivan’s body pinned the marauder’s sword arm, and before he could react the muzzle emitted another crack. A cloud of red mist in the cold rain signalled the fall of another of the Praetorian Guard.

Chaos broke out on the summit of the ziggurat. Many of the marauders had started scrambling down the temple steps at the sound of the second shot, connecting the noise with the death that Sullivan's pistol was dealing out. But some amongst them had known firearms before, and realised quickly what was afoot. They took cover, skipping over the edge of the summit before Sullivan could draw a bead on them. The spacer called out to his comrade, trying to locate Sejanus amongst the scattering marauders.

"Kerreg!" he yelled, over the drumming of the icy rain. "Now's the time!"

Kerreg stared in amazement as Goliath strained to pull the axe free from the stone. He pounced forward as quickly as his numb limbs would allow, driving his shoulder into Goliath's midriff. It was like striking solid stone. But Kerreg was strong too, stronger than any mortal man. He caught the giant off guard and knocked him backwards across the summit.

Kerreg twisted sharply to his left as he fell forward, throwing out a leg to steady gain his balance. He then carefully lowered the bindings on his wrist onto the razor sharp blade, cutting through the rough ropes in an instant. He looked around for Sullivan, watching as the spacer backed up slowly the centre of the summit, firing in a controlled manner at the marauders who bravely dared to scale the edge. Kerreg got to his feet, and felt a presence suddenly behind him. He turned to find Goliath's empty grin staring down at him from above.

The Philistine swung a two-fisted blow directly at the Fallen Lord. Even his Elysian reflexes could not move him from the path of the giant's swift hands. The blow, akin to being struck in the chest with a great hammer, knocked him back off his feet. Winded, he could only watch in horror as Goliath pulled the axe free from the stone with a gargantuan effort.

"Sullivan!" shouted Kerreg.

Sullivan looked around. He could see the massive dreadlocked head on the other side of the summit, bearing down on the Fallen Lord. Sullivan moved around the pool of glass in the centre as quickly as he could, so unsure of what it was that he dared not cross it. He trained the pistol on Goliath's head as he moved, closing the distance with his target. The Philistine was only two metres from Kerreg now, and Sullivan could wait no longer. He fired.

An instant before Sullivan discharged the pistol, Goliath glimpsed the spacer moving towards him. When he saw the muzzle pointed at him, he instinctively knew to protect himself – a great warrior does not have to know more than what he can feel in his guts. Goliath brought the head of the great axe up before his face.

The slug struck the axe head held right in front of Goliath's head, and there was an explosion as the molten metal struck the cold steel, shattering the axe head in a blast of hot shards. Goliath stumbled backwards, crying out, clawing at his torn face with his giant hands. He teetered for an instant on the brink of the summit, and then toppled over into the dark night.

Sullivan grabbed the fur that swathed Kerreg's shoulders and hauled him to his feet. The Praetorians had lost confidence after seeing their lieutenant felled by Sullivan, and for a short time there was silence, save for the patter of the icy rain falling on the flat stone summit.

Then they both heard Sejanus's voice ring out into the night.

"He's ordering them to attack," muttered Kerreg grimly.

"Then we have to figure out a way out of here," answered Sullivan, making a futile effort to wipe the rain off his face.

Kerreg bent over one of the dead marauders, pulling a sword from a scabbard and testing its weight.

"Arm yourself," he growled. "Unless you have enough magic in that thing for all of them."

Sullivan examined the power cell of the field-loader. There was only enough for another twenty shots or so. Even with all the metal freely available on the summit, he could not hope to account for a third of the men gathered on the lower tiers. And that was ignoring the crowd of maybe a thousand that had gathered around the base of the ziggurat.

He looked at Kerreg. "Nowhere near."

Kerreg tossed Sullivan the sword he had found, and then scavenged two more from bodies around the summit. Together they backed towards the pool of glass in the centre of the summit.

"Do you know what it does?" asked Sullivan.

"What what does?" answered Kerreg gruffly.

"The pool of black glass in the centre."

Kerreg looked quickly over his shoulder, his face furrowing in confusion.

"I'm not sure. It looks like one end of a bridge, but they were all destroyed, eons ago. Even if it was still intact, we would have no means to control it."

"So what you're saying is that it's useless," said Sullivan. He saw a head pop up over the summit's edge, so he took careful aim and fired. The head disappeared, but Sullivan couldn't be sure if he had hit him or not. Then another head appeared, and Sullivan swung the pistol towards it, sighting more marauders scaling the summit. A

crossbow snapped behind him, and the bolt whizzed past his ear, singing as it disappeared into the rain. Sullivan whirled, firing at the crossbow's owner. The slug tore half of the crossbow apart before it ripped into the flesh of the Praetorian.

More bowmen appeared, firing crude crossbows, short bows, and other primitive missile weapons – Sullivan even glimpsed a set of bolas swinging in the light of the braziers. The Fallen Lord stepped forward, swinging his blades in intricate arcs about him, cutting bolts and arrows from the air as they flew.

Sullivan chose his shots, moving as he did, trying not to make a static target for any of the bowmen. Other marauders, armed with swords, clubs and spears surged onto the summit. Amongst them, Sullivan glimpsed the distinctive roman armour of Sejanus. He brought his pistol to bear on the Emperor of the Fold, but quickly lost sight of him.

On one side of the summit, the marauders parted, leaving a stretch of the edge empty. Kerreg was about to pull Sullivan towards the apparent escape route when he saw a giant bloody hand appear over the edge. A massive arm, one that was all too familiar, followed it, clutching a long smooth pole bearing the remnants of a shattered blade. Kerreg swore under his breath, watching as Goliath dragged himself back onto the summit. His face had been torn by the exploding axe, giving him an even more terrible appearance, and he roared as he got to his feet.

Sullivan moved as quickly as he could around the pool of black glass, trying to keep his movements random and unpredictable. Despite the rain and the relatively poor aim of the marauders, there was no cover of any kind on the summit, and Sullivan knew it was only a matter of time before one of the bowmen found his mark. He continued to shoot, conscious that he was going to have to refuel the pistol soon. It was not something that he was looking forward to.

Goliath leaped at Kerreg, swinging the axe shaft in a great arc. Kerreg blocked the blow, his blade ringing with the impact, and he stumbled backwards under the Philistine's immense strength. The Fallen Lord raised his sword to ward off another huge swing, but this time Goliath struck him squarely on the hand, below the protective guard on the hilt. The blow shattered his fingers and knocked the blade from his hand, as his legs buckled in agony.

"Kerreg!" yelled Sullivan.

The human had a sudden sense of déjà vu as he watched Goliath bring the weapon up for the killing blow. He brought his pistol around to bear, but before he could pull the trigger he felt a sharp searing pain in his thigh. He looked down, dropping the sword he had held, his hand moving instinctively to his leg. A crossbow bolt's crude shaft poked out between his clenched fingers.

Kerreg looked up as Goliath raised the axe shaft high above his head. As the Philistine extended himself fully, a gap appeared in the furs that covered his midriff. With no hesitation, Kerreg brought up the shorter sword he held in his undamaged hand and rammed it upwards into Goliath's soft belly. The blade pierced the giant's heart, which beat one final time before the life drained out of his eyes, and the massive bulk of his body fell backwards in a crumpled heap. The Temple of the Fold shook with the fall of Goliath.

Some of the attacking marauders lost their taste for the fight when they saw their champion fall for a second time. When Kerreg turned, gathering his injured hand into his chest, he scattered the marauders around him, flying at them in a blur of steel.

The summit shook again, but this time, there was no falling Philistine to explain it. Some of the marauders began to look at each other uneasily. Sullivan fended them off as best he could, firing occasionally into the thickest gatherings of his enemies. He couldn't move as fast as he might have liked, such was the injury to his thigh, so he tried to close the space between himself and Kerreg, knowing that only together did they have a chance of surviving this battle.

But for every Praetorian that fell, another three took his place. They continued to clamber onto the summit, and Sullivan could only guess that some of the crowd around the base of the ziggurat had begun to climb upwards.

Another marauder flew at him. He parried the blow, swinging his own blade back across the marauder's chest and cutting deep into the flesh. His eyes blurred momentarily as something struck him hard on the side of the head. He put his gun hand up and felt the point of impact, his fingers coming away wet and warm, slick with the blood pouring from the gash on his temple the passing arrow had left. He swung wildly, trying to defend himself as his eyes cleared. Once they did, he scanned the enemy ranks for the bowmen who had wounded him.

But they were too many. He fired wildly into the crowd, conscious that the weapon's power cell might be drained at any moment. The ground shook again. The interval between the tremors was growing shorter and shorter, as if the pulse of the battle itself was quickening.

Kerreg had recovered his second sword, and held it awkwardly in his wounded hand. It did not seem to affect his prowess with the weapon at all, and the two swords whirled around him in a cyclone of flashing steel. Limbs and extremities flew from his opponents, the red mist washed from the air by the icy rain. But the Fallen Lord could not protect himself from every sling and arrow cast at him, and bled from several deep wounds.

The beating of the ziggurat continued to quicken, the intensity growing hand in hand with the frequency. The attacking marauders were growing less sure of the situation by every passing moment, and some were shouting and pointing at the flat black glass inside the metal ring set into the summit surface.

“We can’t hold out much longer!” shouted Sullivan, edging closer to Kerreg. His leg was wet with the warm blood leaking from his thigh, in sharp contrast to the cold raindrops that soaked through the rest of his clothing.

“Then let us take as many of them to hell with us as we can!” cried Kerreg in answer. He swung his swords about him furiously, whirling and ducking the rain of blows aimed his way. But even Sullivan could see that his pace was beginning to flag, despite his great strength and speed.

The vibrations had quickened even further, coming every few seconds, as Sullivan chanced a look around at the pool of glass. He thought for an instant that he could see it vibrating with the tremors, but his attention was soon diverted by an impact to his upper chest. He looked down in shock, spying the rough-hewn shaft of an arrow protruding from his body just underneath his collarbone. It had not penetrated very deeply, and Sullivan took the fact that he could still stand as evidence that it had missed all of his vital organs.

The marauders had begun to fall back, discouraged by the seeming indestructibility of Kerreg and the ominous vibrations that emanated from the black glass. Sullivan could see the surface actually bulging upwards several centimetres with every successive tremor, which were now coming almost every second.

Sullivan heard a great battle cry uttered from the other side of the summit. It was Kerreg. The Fallen Lord had spotted Sejanus cresting the edge of the summit and was moving to engage him.

The last of the marauders began to leap over the edge, crashing into their comrades on the tiers below. Sejanus and Kerreg flew at each other in a blur of flying steel, the rapid-fire ringing of steel on steel mingling with the almost painful vibrations.

Sullivan raised his field-loader. It still had a few shots left, and he closed one eye as he tried to aim through the darkness and pouring rain at the Roman’s naked head. But the Emperor was too fast, ducking and parrying Kerreg’s blows as he tried to move onto the side of the Fallen Lord’s wounded hand. There was no way to get a clear shot.

Sullivan’s attention was drawn to the pool of black glass in the centre of the summit, as it bulged almost a metre upwards with each resounding tremor. The obsidian surface was only dimly visible in the light of the braziers that surrounded it, and was

vibrating so fast that it was impossible to make out where it was at any particular moment.

Some of the more curious Praetorians poked their heads over the edge of the summit, trying to get a glimpse of the epic battle that was taking place. Round and round Kerreg and Sejanus spun, their blades flying too fast for the eye to see. Kerreg was still trying to favour his good side, and constantly sidestepped the Roman. Their swords locked for an instant, and human and Elysian were pressed face to face, staring into one another's eyes with cold fury.

Something made Sejanus look away first, and he stared in dumb astonishment at the vibrating glass inside the metal ring.

"It cannot be!" he hissed.

Kerreg pushed him away in a giant effort, but rather than follow up, he glanced over his shoulder at the source of the tremors.

For a time, everyone on the summit was frozen in wonder at the sight they beheld. The vibrations had melted into a continuous, earth-shattering drone, as the glass flickered to a height of at least two metres. The rain did not appear to fall onto the glass, but instead ran down the outside of the vibrating black dome.

Kerreg sidled around to Sullivan and pulled the wounded human to his feet.

"What the hell is going on?" whispered Sullivan through clenched teeth.

"I'm not sure," replied Kerreg. "But it doesn't look like they know either."

Either spurred on by the fact that Sullivan had stopped shooting, or simply because they could not resist their curiosity, some of the marauders had scaled the summit once again, and were slowly forming a circle around the edge. Sejanus still stared numbly into the flickering void, watching as the rain formed a bell-jar shape around it.

With a final earth-shattering boom, the vibrations ceased and the glass was still. Standing on the black surface, large as life, was the Elysian King. He wore no crown, was dressed in simple robes, and carried a staff Sullivan hadn't seen before.

It was short, only a metre in length, and made of gold. The head of the staff was a crystal skull, fixed with narrow gold bands that ran over its surface, which was otherwise smooth, and through which the dim light of the braziers was reflected.

The King raised the staff above his head and some of the marauders cried out in alarm. Sullivan heard cries of 'Jove!' and 'Jupiter,' as well as more general cries of panic, ring out beneath the huge rolling mass of dark cloud that began to form over the peak of the ziggurat.

Lightning streaked down from the boiling clouds, striking the head of the Elysian King's staff. The crystal skull shone with blinding intensity, tongues of blue fire flicking

out in every direction. Sullivan and Kerreg hit the ground, and for the first time Sullivan noticed that Sejanus had also dropped to his knees.

The azure energy slammed into the marauders assembled around the edge of the summit. Wherever it laid its incandescent finger, the marauder was thrown back, missing the tier immediately below and toppling down the ziggurat. The remaining marauders attempted to protect themselves, but the fire from the crystal skull snaked around their cuirasses, engulfing the shields they cowered behind. As soon as it touched them, their bodies contorted in agony before they were hurled from the summit.

It took only a few moments for the last of the Praetorians to disperse. They threw themselves from the summit, ducking the King's wrath as they tumbled down the tiers. The King lowered the staff, and the energy from the rolling clouds ceased. He turned to Sullivan, who was leaning on Kerreg to spare his wounded leg.

"Captain Sullivan," said the King with a gentle smile. "Words cannot express how glad I am to see you still draw breath." He looked to the Fallen Lord that stood with Sullivan, their blood mingling as the icy rain washed it from their shattered bodies. "And the Lord Kerreg." The King bowed his head almost imperceptibly. "I thought that I might find you in the Fold also. But I confess, I am surprised to find you both actually here at the bridge."

"That would be his doing," croaked Sullivan, pointing his pistol at the prone Sejanus. The King shook his head and walked over to the Roman, jabbing him roughly with the butt of the staff.

"Lucius Sejanus. Still lord of all you survey, I see?"

The Roman dared to glance upwards, his head still held close to the ground.

"My Lord Jupiter! I had long since, I mean, I, I –"

The King interrupted him. "It is a very long time since anyone called me that. Now get up, and stop snivelling."

The Roman rose humbly to his feet, leaving his sword on the ground where it lay. His head remained bowed.

"My Lord Jupiter, I did not expect ever to cast eyes on you again. When we captured the trickster I was overcome with rage. I had come to doubt that the gods even existed, as if what I remembered of the day I came here was nothing but a dream. Forgive me if I have displeased you."

"Displeased me? A monster such as you, Sejanus? From the moment of your birth, you have desired nought but death and destruction. I would expect nothing less of you. That is why you are here, Sejanus, and doomed never to walk in the world of men again." The King turned back to face the wounded Sullivan. "But you, Captain



Sullivan, have surprised me once more. I did not really believe that you could have survived for more than a few short hours here.”

“I might not have,” Sullivan, “if it hadn’t been for Kerreg.”

The King looked to the Fallen Elysian. “Then it would seem that I am in your debt, Lord Kerreg.”

“The only debt here is the one I owe to Sullivan,” Kerreg growled. “If it hadn’t been for him, Goliath would have taken my head as a trophy. But I don’t understand what you’re doing here. Why did you come for us? And why does a bridge between Realms still stand?”

“A few bridges remain, known only to a few between Elysium and the darkling belt. We make use of them when needs must, and I do believe this was one of those times.”

“So why the rescue?” croaked Sullivan. “I mean, you did come to get us, didn’t you?”

“I did indeed, my intrepid captain,” replied the King. “Although I must confess, after your disappearance on Kerreg’s moon, I couldn’t help think that you might have been in league with the Fallen Lord. After all, you do seem to have a habit of attracting darklings.

“But I could not understand how both of you disappeared on Kerreg’s moon. I sensed no bridge being opened, and there are precious few other ways of shifting between the Realms. And I had no idea that any of my subjects would employ such methods.”

“So how did you solve the mystery?” asked Kerreg. “What would drive you to take such drastic action as a journey to the Fold?”

“That is all down to the young lady Calliya,” answered the King. “She risked everything in a foolish voyage to the Shoal of Shades to find proof that the funeral barge had been tampered with; that all these events had some instigator, within the Court of the Royal City. If she had told me what she had witnessed in the ruins of Kerreg’s fortress, I might have been here earlier. She saw Tayfen with the nemotaph, but did not realise its significance.”

“Tayfen couldn’t allow you to question me, your majesty,” said Kerreg. “For it was he who told me that the Kelison was returning from the Rift with a great prize on board.”

“So he sent you to the Fold,” offered Sullivan. “And I saw him do it. When he realised what I’d seen, he sent me too. He must have thought he’d tied up all the loose ends.”

“Except for your friend,” said the King. “Without Calliya’s courage, and her considerable stubborn streak, I might never have learned of Tayfen’s treachery.”

“But you did,” said Kerreg. “And lucky for us there was a bridge that led you right here.”

“There was no luck about it, Lord Kerreg,” replied the King. “This is not the only bridge to survive the end of the Secret War. It is merely the closest one.”

The Fallen Lord eyed the Elysian King warily.

“What the hell are you two talking about?” asked Sullivan. “What Secret War?”

“The Fold came into being at the very moment the Rift was created,” explained the King. “They are intrinsically linked; the Fold acts like an anchor to hold the Rift between Realms. It was covered in bridges that led from one Realm to the other, meaning one could simply walk across worlds. After the Exodus, and the War of Dominion, the Fold became the only place the battle over Earth could be joined. And so, for millennia, human and Elysian fought the War of the Bridges.

“In the beginning, the Fold was a pure place, an eternal moment of sunshine frozen in time. But the longer the war raged, the darker the heart of this place became. Men like Sejanus were recruited to make full use of man’s thirst for blood. In time, it became the eternal hell that it is now, fuelled by the violence that feeds the black land.”

“But not all the bridges were destroyed,” continued Kerreg. “And the Secret War began.”

The Elysian King nodded gravely.

“For more millennia, both we and the Fallen continued to pass through the Fold, fighting our war on the shores of Earth. Where the Fallen would seek to give power to despots and rule through fear, we would fight them with wisdom and enlightenment.

“But soon, man’s capacity for violence and his thirst for blood gave us little hope for victory. We feared that the Fallen would win the hearts of men, and instead destroyed the bridges between the Fold and the Infinite Realm, restricting them from travelling to Earth. With the Rift closed to all but seerephon of the Elysian fleet, they could never seek to blacken the hearts of men again.”

“We did not blacken their hearts,” spat Kerreg. “And it wasn’t for some lofty purpose that you destroyed the bridges – it was out of fear. You feared mankind’s machines – you feared what use they might be put to if we learned their secrets.”

“Believe what you will, Fallen Lord,” said the King gravely. “But we took our decision to protect humanity, not to save ourselves from them. Your kind has never been able to see the truth.”

“I see the truth – that you made a mistake. A mistake the rest of us have been paying for ever since,” hissed Kerreg. “You have held our people back while the infant race stretched across the Infinite Realm.”

“What you see as progress I see as slow death. I have never doubted that decision since the day it was taken. The fate of mankind is their own to decide.”

Kerreg snorted in reply.

“Sejanus called you Jupiter,” said Sullivan. “What did he mean? Was it you that sent him here?”

The King half-laughed. “In the distant past, I was called many names. As were all of our kind. There was no one Jupiter, or Ra, or Yahweh. It was simply a question of influence. We possessed technology that the ancient peoples of Earth could not comprehend. We were able to manipulate the minds of men. We could raze their cities to the ground, or even command the very weather.”

He raised the short staff into the air, and the rain stopped immediately, the rolling clouds overhead receding to reveal the blank dusk of the Fold. Sullivan could hear cries of alarm and astonishment ringing out from the lower tiers of the ziggurat. He looked around and noticed that Sejanus had taken the opportunity to slink from the summit.

“But this is no time for parlour tricks,” added the King. “The marauders’ curiosity may still get the better of them, especially if they are spurred on by that foul excuse for a man. And Prince Tayfen will soon arrive at the Great Hall, and I should very much like to be there to greet him.”

The King stepped onto the black glass, beckoning Sullivan and Kerreg to join him. When they hesitated, he tried to cajole them. “I realise neither of you gentlemen have cause to trust me completely, but unless you’d rather remain guests of Lucius Sejanus, I suggest you join me.”

Kerreg and Sullivan looked at each other warily, then shrugged and joined the King inside the steel ring set into the stone of the summit. The King held the staff aloft and closed his eyes. Sullivan could feel a heavy vibration travelling through the soles of his boots, but when he looked down at the platform it appeared to be completely still. He took one last look at the Fold, watching as the Emperor Sejanus meekly poked his head over the edge of the ziggurat’s summit. Sullivan waved goodbye, smiling sarcastically at him and eliciting a furious reaction from the Roman.

Sullivan felt a great weight pushing down on him, until he could hardly breath. He closed his eyes, grimacing from the agony that the extra weight poured through the wounds scattered about his body. When he opened his eyes again, the Fold was gone, along with the ziggurat, the marauders and the icy rain. Instead, he found himself

standing inside an identical steel ring, on a similar stone surface. There was a brief flickering in his surroundings, and then the great weight was gone. He reached out to steady himself, grabbing hold of Kerreg, who almost collapsed under the extra weight.

This pool of glass was in a room Sullivan had not seen before, which was filled with all manner of artefacts and trinkets. It looked like some kind of pirate treasure trove to Sullivan, so little order was there to the collection. There didn't appear to be any exit from the room, and Sullivan found himself yet again wondering what fate might hold for him.

The King stepped out of the ring, and walked halfway across the room, stopping to examine a giant hourglass that stood on a cluttered desk. "Hurry," he said. "Almost an hour has passed since I left for the Fold." He laid the crystal skull staff on the desk and walked to the centre of the room, gesturing for the others to join him.

"How is that possible?" rasped Sullivan as he limped over to join the monarch.

"Time has no meaning in the Fold. It is difficult to judge exactly how long one has spent there."

"Then how long have I been gone?" asked Sullivan. For him it had been only a matter of days.

"Several weeks have passed since the attack on Lord Kerreg's fortress," replied the King. He closed his eyes for a moment, and Sullivan saw the bracelets almost hidden by his robe flash for an instant.

The circular flagstone they had been standing upon suddenly fell through the floor, gently moving downwards into an even more expansive chamber that resembled the one above. It was supported from below by a delicate, coiling armature that stretched from the distant floor.

"We should hurry to the Great Hall," said the King. "I doubt that being made to wait will have improved Tayfen's temper."

"Screw him," muttered Sullivan. But the truth was he was looking forward to confronting the twisted individual who had caused the deaths of the Bogart's crew.

In the Great Hall, Tayfen's temper could scarcely have grown much worse. He had not the insolence to refuse to accompany Bellanis, but had complained bitterly when he was told to leave his sentinels behind. "This is court business," the Princess had told him. The Midnight Prince had grumbled, but grudgingly agreed to come along. But his mood had darkened further when he saw that Cren and Calliya alone were waiting in the Great Hall.

“What is the meaning of this?” he cried. “Why have I been brought here? Is this your doing?” He glared at Calliya, who was only restrained by a chubby hand on her shoulder.

“Calm yourself, Tayfen,” said Cren. “His Majesty will be here soon, and I am sure that he will make all things clear.”

“I do not appreciate being dragged out here by these two,” he snarled, jerking his head at Bellanis and Calliya. “I am the Prince of the Royal City, and as such, I demand an explanation!”

“Why don’t you explain it to us, Tayfen,” said Calliya, looking coldly at the Midnight Prince. “About how you have meddled in the forbidden lore. About how you sent Sullivan to the Fold.”

“Impudent bitch,” hissed Tayfen, drawing his sword and flying at Calliya. She met his blade with hers, the clash ringing through the Great Hall.

They circled, carving deadly crescents in the air around them.

“You should learn your place, woman,” snarled Tayfen.

“I know my place,” said Calliya. “It is standing against traitors like you.”

She ducked under the Prince’s blade and sprang upwards, driving the pommel of her sword into his midriff. He stumbled backwards, winded, giving Calliya the opening she needed. She struck Tayfen on the hand with the flat of her sword, disarming him.

She raised her blade to strike again.

“Enough!” roared a voice, as the giant wooden double doors of the Great Hall as they were cast open. The King strode through the doorway, Sullivan and Kerreg limping behind him, both just managing to stay upright unassisted. Calliya rushed forward, supporting Sullivan as he nearly collapsed into her arms. The sight of him washed the rage from her, but she was aghast when she saw the crude arrow jutting out of his shoulder. She kissed him tenderly on his bloodied cheek.

“Jack, I thought I’d never see you again.”

Sullivan grinned weakly. “I don’t die that easily.” He coughed, grimacing from the shooting pain it brought.

Tayfen instinctively took a step back when he saw who flanked the monarch. He had not expected to see either of them ever again.

“Your veil of deception will protect you no more, Prince Tayfen,” continued the King. “Your treachery is revealed.”

Tayfen stumbled further back in horror. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I have learned much of your plans, although I confess I do not understand why you have done what you have done,” said the King gravely. “Of how you intercepted

the barge of Gerren the Strong on its final voyage; and of how you caused it to seek out and destroy Captain Sullivan's vessel. I can only assume that when you learned that the Kelison had taken on a prisoner, you knew your plan would come to light if they were allowed to return to Elysium safely."

"Which is when he came to my moon," growled Kerreg. "Tayfen told me that the Kelison was returning from the Rift, carrying a prize beyond all imagination. A human that could travel between the stars. But my Nightwing never returned. And still I wished to meet this human, to see if it was true that these barbarians had reached beyond their world."

He laughed, and a trickle of blood escaped the corner of his mouth and was lost in the thick curls of his beard. "And so I sent more darklings, to bring him to me." He stopped and turned to Sullivan and Calliya. "An action for which I now humbly apologise. It was rash and ill-thought, and has brought nothing but trouble to me."

Calliya stared back at him icily. Sullivan felt her start towards the Fallen Lord, so he raised a hand. "It's alright, Calliya," he croaked. "I forgive him. As long as he promises never to do it again."

Kerreg smiled behind his thick beard. "I owe you my life, human. You need only ask me a favour, and I will do your bidding."

Sullivan smiled knowingly in reply.

The King turned to Tayfen. "To hide your treachery, you made use of the forbidden lore and sent Kerreg and the Captain to the Fold. You were seen wielding the nemotaph, and it is this that pains me the worst. To covet the forbidden lore is to fall into darkness," he sighed. "And now you stand accused of high treason against Elysium, Prince Tayfen. How do you answer the charge?"

"You cannot take their word over mine!" wailed Tayfen. He was beginning to lose icy manner. "This Fallen traitor and this – human!" The Midnight Prince spat the last word.

"I have seen the evidence with my own eyes, Tayfen. The memory fragments from the barge were retrieved from the Shoal of Shades. I have seen it! And I myself retrieved these two from the Temple of the Fold!"

The King leaned in closely, the cold rage building behind his calm expression. "How do you answer the charge?" he hissed.

Tayfen suddenly appeared to calm, the fear leaving his face to be replaced by his usual air of contempt. He addressed the King with sudden insolence.

"Our race has grown weak in isolation. Century after century, age after age, we languish in this paradise, rotting into history while mankind stretches across the Infinite

Realm. That legacy is ours, not theirs!” He flung an arm upwards at the vast crystal dome that covered the Great Hall.

“There was a time when we were as Gods, your Majesty. When we walked between the Realms, and ruled as we saw fit. We were strong then. We could be strong again. That’s why I sent the barge to seek out a human vessel. I had heard the stories for centuries, but unlike everyone else, I believed them. I dared not go myself; such a thing would be foolish. I knew I could send the barge to do my work. It would be destroyed, or better still captured, and sooner or later, mankind would come looking for us. And we would have no choice but to take our rightful place once more.”

“Are you mad?” hissed the King, grabbing Tayfen’s arm and then flinging it away in disgust.

Tayfen ignored him. “When I heard that Calliya had rescued a human from the barge, I knew that my plan might be discovered. The Court would learn that the barge had sought out the human ship. So I decided to let the Lord Kerreg in on a little information. I knew that his black heart would do the rest of my work.”

Kerreg snarled at Tayfen, stepping towards him. The King spun and laid a hand gently on the Fallen Lord’s chest, shaking his head.

“I had no idea, Tayfen,” said the King with a sigh. “That you had reached this point of madness. The barge could have caused the death of hundreds of humans. We are lucky that the death toll was so few.”

Sullivan stifled a laugh. All of the others turned to face him, quizzical looks on their faces. Sullivan stared at the assembled Elysians. Their faces had that slim, elfin quality, heightened even more so by their beautiful features and their gently pointed ears. If it wasn’t for the searing agony from his wounds, he could have been dreaming he was in a fairy tale.

“They happened to be my crew,” he rasped.

“We mourn their loss, Jack, truly,” said Calliya softly, running her fingers through his matted hair.

“I know,” nodded Sullivan. “But what we are lucky in, is that it was a hunk of junk like the Bogart that ran into your barge, and not a ship-of-the-line.”

At this, the Elysians all looked equally confused.

“A naval vessel,” Sullivan continued. “If they had found your little barge, they’d be tearing it apart in some lab somewhere, right now. And when they came looking for you, you’d sure as hell hope they didn’t find you.”

Everyone looked at each other, wondering what Sullivan meant. Cren leant close to Bellanis, whispering, “I think the poor fellow might be delirious.”

Bellanis nodded in agreement. "Calliya, why don't you take Captain Sullivan to a regenerator. He looks in dire need."

"No," replied Sullivan. "I'm staying. I want to see someone get the justice they deserve."

"Silence!" snapped Tayfen.

"No!" boomed the King. "It is you who will be silent, Prince Tayfen. No more will your voice be heard in this court. No more will your face be seen on these shores. You are banished from Elysium, and commanded never to return, upon pain of death."

"No," stuttered Tayfen. "You can't do this!"

All of the Midnight Prince's bluster and confidence evaporated, as he looked around, searching for some sympathy. He looked to Sullivan, who was grinning as broadly as he could, and mouthing an obvious curse.

"You are the one who caused all this," hissed Tayfen. "You should have died on that barge!"

The Midnight Prince sprang forward, drawing his sword and bringing it to bear on Sullivan's head in one smooth movement. Calliya had no time to react, as both her arms were supporting Sullivan, who was just too tired to move. He could only close his eyes in anticipation of the blow. But Tayfen's blade stopped a centimetre from the bridge of his nose with the resounding ring of steel on steel.

Sullivan opened his eyes to see Kerreg holding the shorter of the two swords he had scavenged from the ziggurat. And despite all the wounds he carried, he still retained the strength to hold Tayfen's blade at bay.

"Now we're even," the Fallen Lord grinned at Sullivan, through clenched teeth.

The Prince drew back his sword for another blow. Calliya pulled Sullivan backwards as Bellanis stepped forward, her sword already partway out of its scabbard. Lord Kerreg readied himself, favouring his least wounded side.

"Stop!" cried the King, stepping between Kerreg and Tayfen. He turned to the Prince. "Your scheme is undone. Go now from this place, and never return."

Tayfen took one last look at the nobles assembled around him. For a moment, he looked as if he was going to break down, but then he turned and fled the Great Hall at speed.

The King sighed.

"It is done."

The aged monarch wearily trudged across the floor of the Great Hall and sat heavily in his throne. Cren rushed to his side, and after the King whispered in his Counsel's ear he beckoned for the others to follow. Bellanis nudged Kerreg to get him



moving, and they exchanged icy stares as Calliya helped Sullivan limp across the Hall to face the King. After a time, the monarch spoke, turning first to the Fallen Lord.

“Lord Kerreg, do not think that I have forgotten your part in this chain of events. But neither can I forget how you have aided us in resolving them. Or that you have already paid a heavy price for your audacity.” He leaned out of his chair, managing a thin grin. “And I do not think the Lord of the Darklings will be overly pleased with your scheming. You might have brought a heavier price for them, and you have gained nothing.”

He sat back in the ornate throne. “Princess Bellanis will bear you to your moon. I do not wish to ever set eyes on you again.”

Kerreg tried to bow, but merely swayed slightly. He turned without speaking and walked alongside Bellanis towards the double doors that still lay open. Just before he left, he stopped and turned back to face Sullivan once more. He nodded at the human, and Sullivan returned the gesture. Then he vanished from the doorway.

“Captain Sullivan,” said the King.

Sullivan grimaced as he tried to put both feet under him. He managed it, and eased Calliya away so that he was standing unaided.

“It would seem I owe you a humble apology. For the actions of Prince Tayfen, who was one of my subjects, and for my own part in abandoning you to your fate. I can only hope that you have the grace to forgive me.” The King bowed his head deeply. “You are free to remain our honoured guest for ever more. And you will enjoy the protection that my word gives.”

“Thanks,” croaked Sullivan. “But what if I wish to go home?”

“Then I would have no choice but to trust you with our secrets. This court is in your debt, and you have earned its trust. But I would ask you – why would you want to return to Earth? What is it that draws you there? Have you considered what you might be leaving here?” The King’s glance flicked to Calliya.

Sullivan nodded, returning the ancient Elysian’s gaze. “I’ll give it some thought.” His legs suddenly started to give way, and he would have hit the floor had Calliya not moved to catch him.

“I think a rest is what Captain Sullivan needs now,” said Cren, joining Calliya in supporting the wounded spacer.

The King nodded. “I hope to have the honour of speaking with you again,” he added, as they bore Sullivan from the Great Hall.

Ten minutes later Calliya was laying Sullivan in the healing light of the regenerator on board the Kelison. Cren had left them at the entrance hatch, and Sullivan was mumbling in delirium as Calliya gently removed his tattered uniform. Sullivan's eyes flicked wide open in a brief moment of lucidity.

"Where's Titus?" he asked, in a hoarse whisper.

"I don't know," answered Calliya, running her hand gently down the side of his face. "He left Cren's yesterday morning. I expect he is back at the homestead."

"Give me my jacket."

Calliya picked up the filthy uniform jacket and handed it to Sullivan, who removed the flat plastic PCU from one of the pockets. He touched the controls and croaked into it.

"Titus, can you hear me?"

There was no answer, so Sullivan tried again. The second time, the communication device flickered into life.

"Mr. Sullivan? Is that really you?"

"It's me Titus, it's really me. Where are you?"

"Thank the Lord you've returned," gushed Titus. "I was beside myself with worry. No one survives the Fold, they say. And then when this happened, I just didn't know what to do."

Sullivan was suddenly very curious, and struggled into an upright position, touching the PCU for a visual display. Titus appeared on the screen of the plastic device, on the bridge of the Estrella Negra.

"Titus, what are you doing on board the Negra?"

"Oh Mr. Sullivan, I didn't know what to do," squealed Titus. "When it came, Iago called me on this device and said I had better come right away. But since I arrived, I've been at a loss as to how to proceed."

"Titus, hold on. Since what came?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I am simply not myself at all today." Titus looked squarely at Sullivan out of the display.

"Since the message came. From Earth."

## Book Four

### And Home Again



## Chapter Twenty Four

Sullivan slept as the Kelison hurtled over the plains of Elysium, his body floating in the healing light of the regenerator. Calliya watched him, communicating silently with her seerephon as it journeyed to the mountaintop plateau where the Estrella Negra lay. The trip would last several hours, but Calliya figured that both the Kelison and Sullivan could use the rest a leisurely flight would afford them.

Sullivan turned in his sleep, moaning ever so gently as the warmth of the regenerator flowed over his healing body. When Calliya had first activated the device, it had shown the deep wound the arrow had left in his shoulder as a channel of dark red. All over his body, there had been many more nicks and scratches, more than she could count, but that one arrow had only just missed his heart. She carefully placed her hand in the gentle light, stroking the side of Sullivan's face very, very softly.

I almost lost him, she thought. I will not lose him again, not without a fight.

Calliya wondered what the message from Earth could mean. When Jack talked about Earth, it was not always to praise it. She'd lost count of the horror stories he had told about his days in the Navy. It sounded like such a cold, harsh world on the other side of the Rift. Not like the warm summer days that stretched almost the whole year long on Elysium.

But she couldn't just ask him to abandon his world, and everything he had ever known. To leave behind his entire race and stay with her. That was something you couldn't ask of anybody. If she had been trapped in his Realm, and the King or Bellanis had shown up with a rescue party, would she be able to send them home empty handed? She couldn't bear to think about it. After all she had gone through to try and get him back from the Fold, was she going to have to just let him go?

Calliya shook her head, scolding herself. She liked to think that she had travelled to the Shoal of Shades not out of any selfish reason, but rather because Sullivan had not deserved to be abandoned to an eternity of hell. But now she wasn't so sure. She checked the display on the regenerator one last time to see how her patient was faring.

Sullivan's body was nearly whole again, but it would be best to let him sleep until the voyage was complete. So Calliya passed the time by walking the narrow twisting corridors of the Kelison, checking on the well-being of the seerephon. A few of the power arteries had ruptured in the mad dash from the Shoal, but aside from that the vessel was in good health. She finished her tour in the command chamber, sitting heavily in the command chair and watching the display as the seerephon tore across the surface of Elysium.

Calliya sighed. If this message was going to take Sullivan back to his own universe, then she wasn't in any hurry to reach the Estrella Negra.

Sullivan opened his eyes, unsure of where he was for a moment. The curtain of blue light still enshrouded him, supporting his body as he shifted his weight. The events of the last few caught up with him as he shook the sleep from his mind.

The regenerator sensed his wakefulness and the blue light subsided, lowering him to the smooth surface of the table. Sullivan sat up, suddenly conscious he was wearing only his shorts. He looked around the chamber but saw no trace of the tattered uniform he had worn when he boarded the Kelison. The spacer jumped down off the table, finding the deck warm under his bare feet.

It took him several minutes to find the quarters that Calliya had shown him to the first time he had woken from the regenerator. Inside, he found a fresh set of Elysian clothes laid out for him, alongside his gun belt and PCU. He dressed quickly and made his way to the control chamber, confident that there he would find the Kelison's master.

Calliya was watching the display intently as the seerephon approached the ring of mountain peaks that surrounded the densely forested plateau. She turned as Sullivan entered the chamber.

"Jack!" She smiled broadly when she saw the spacer, glad that he was looking much like his old self.

"I'm back," he grinned, sitting down on the edge of the dais, his eyes fixed on the plateau as it came into view. He rubbed his face, still feeling sleepy from his regeneration. The Elysian device had a way of making the skin all over your body tingle like it was newborn. Calliya slid from the command chair and sat next to Sullivan on the edge of the dais.

"Are you nervous, Jack?"

"Nervous?" asked Sullivan, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

"About the message from Earth. Are you not excited?"

"I'm curious, that's for sure. But something doesn't make sense here."

“What do you mean?” Now it was Calliya’s turn to be confused.

“From what Titus and I learned about the intersection – the Rift – then it shouldn’t be possible to transmit through it. Signals from my universe – the Infinite Realm – should bounce right back.”

“I don’t understand. You think then that this is some kind of ruse? A trick?”

“I can’t be sure,” said Sullivan. “We should find the answers we need down there.” He nodded his head towards the plateau on the display.

Calliya moved closer and slid her arm through the crook of Sullivan’s. “Whatever we find, Jack, I’m with you.”

Sullivan looked at her, smiling. Then he leaned closer and kissed her softly on the lips.

“I didn’t get a chance to thank you for everything you did. To bring me back.”

“You don’t have to thank me. This was all my fault. I should have taken you straight back to your world when I rescued you from Gerren’s barge. Then none of this would have happened.” Calliya’s eyes dropped, the sorrow clear on her face.

“Don’t blame yourself, Calliya. You had no way of knowing what would happen. And besides, then I would never have seen this incredible world. And I would never have met you.”

Calliya looked back into Sullivan’s eyes, her pale grey eyes swallowing him in the gentle golden light of the command chamber. They kissed again, more passionately, interrupted only when Calliya’s control bracelets began to luminesce. Sullivan’s bracelet glowed faintly also, as the Kelison informed them that they were coming in to land.

The Kelison slowed up, stretching its landing struts towards the thick rainforest that covered the plateau. The seerephon landed as close as it dared to the unfamiliar alien vessel, setting down not far from the clearing Sullivan and Titus had used on their last visit. Merriat was grazing there now, its saddle thrown over a thick root.

Sullivan couldn’t believe how well he felt, after the constant hunger and exhaustion that had been the Fold. He stepped off the ramp, wishing he had taken the time to get something to eat before they landed. As they fought their way through the thick foliage, he found himself daydreaming of the warming broth that he had first eaten as Calliya’s captive.

It took them only a few minutes to beat their way to the access hatch of the Negra. When they reached the small clearing near the ship, Calliya caught her first sight of the human ship. It wasn’t anything like the Bogart, instead appearing as a vast metal serpent, lying in the grass.

“Are you ready?” she asked Sullivan.

The spacer nodded, his hand settling automatically on the butt of his pistol. “Let’s do this.”

As if in answer, the access hatch of the Negra opened. Sullivan took a deep breath, and then they both climbed inside.

On the bridge, Titus was more flustered than ever. He was sitting at one of the aft stations, attempting to decipher the dense data, as it flew across the screen at a terrific rate. The Victorian found it all frightfully confusing, but his mood changed as soon as the access hatch in the deck of the bridge popped open to reveal Sullivan’s head.

“Mr. Sullivan!” squealed Titus, leaping from his chair to help Sullivan and Calliya climb onto the bridge.

“Hello Titus. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

“Nor I, Mr. Sullivan. I feared you were lost to us for ever,” answered Titus, shaking Sullivan’s hand with both of his.

“I would have been, if it hadn’t been for a certain someone.” As Sullivan spoke, he turned to look at Calliya, who was looking distinctly ill at ease on the bridge of the human ship. She almost jumped out of her skin when Iago’s voice emerged from the bridge’s sound emitters. The stream of data flowing across the screens around them disappeared, and was replaced by Iago’s bland features.

“Welcome, Captain Sullivan. Would you care for a systems report?” said the machine. There was no inflection in the voice to indicate the machine’s temperament.

That was the problem with A.I.s, mused Sullivan as he sat in the captain’s chair. There was never any way to tell if they were glad to see you, or about to try to kill you. Sullivan could only hope for the former.

“What have you got for me, Iago?”

Several of the screens around the bridge displayed the data stream that Titus had been examining. Sullivan stared at them for several minutes, concentrating intently.

“Seventy-eight standard hours ago,” droned the machine. “I detected a transmission of human origin. The transmission was triangulated to an area of space known to contain the intersection. All efforts at decoding the transmission, or precisely determining the source have failed. Doctor Scott has been unable to aid me in my analysis, but has suggested that you might be able to.”

Sullivan said nothing, as Calliya crouched at his side. “What is it, Jack?” she asked softly, as if to not disturb the machine.

“It’s a human transmission alright.”



The spacer jumped from the chair and went to one of the fore stations. He tapped a few commands into the control panel, and then sat down to examine the data stream in greater detail. “But it’s not from Earth.”

“How can you be so sure?” asked Calliya.

“Iago,” said Sullivan, tapping the control panel again. “From what we know about the intersection, should radio waves be able to pass through?”

“The intersection is an area of non-universal space. There is no medium through which the waves could pass,” answered the machine.

“So what would happen if you tried to transmit a signal through the Rift?”

“There is insufficient data from which to formulate a hypothesis. The composition of the region where the intersection meets normal space is unknown.”

“Is it possible that a transmission could be reflected? If not totally, then at least partially?”

Calliya and Titus exchanged confused looks. For all his recent study, Titus was still somewhat behind in the fields of electromagnetism and astrophysics. And Calliya was not used to creatures as cold as Iago. Her concept of machines fell far short of talking artificial minds.

“Partial reflection of a transmission is theoretically possible,” stated the machine.

Sullivan sat back in his chair with a groan, placing his hands over his face.

“Jack?” Calliya asked. “What is it?”

“This is a telemetry stream. The reason Iago didn’t recognise it is because it’s encrypted. It’s a Navy code, designed specifically not to be broken by the enemy, even if they used illegal artificial intelligences.”

“What’s a telemetry stream?” asked Titus.

“It’s data that one ship transmits to another to relay details of its physical operations, like course, heading and status. For instance, if a ship was making a preliminary reconnaissance in a war zone, it would relay all the data it collected back to the fleet.”

“So what does it all mean? Where is the transmission coming from?”

Sullivan tapped the control panel, halting the stream of data as it crossed the display. He pointed to a group of characters in the corner of the screen, explaining as he went. Calliya and Titus gathered just behind him, struggling to make out anything that made sense.

“The stream is only partially complete, and I don’t recognise the exact code, so I’m not sure I can decipher it completely. It must be a recent code, but if I run some of the cipher keys, I can make out a call sign. It’s the Charlemagne.”

"I beg your pardon?" said Titus. The name was familiar to him, but he was slow to understand what Sullivan was getting at.

Calliya was much more confused. "What is a Charlemagne?"

"A great warrior of ancient Earth," answered Titus, "but I'm not sure what he has to do with a transmission from the Rift."

"Not the person," said Sullivan. "The United Naval Vessel Charlemagne. It must be here, on this side of the Rift. It's trying to transmit telemetry back through to my universe, but most of the radio signal is bouncing back. That's why we can pick it up." Sullivan suddenly looked very uneasy. "Titus, you haven't tried to answer, have you?"

"No, Mr. Sullivan. Iago told me that the – " Titus paused for a moment, searching for the right words. "That the long range transmission array is damaged."

Sullivan breathed a sigh of relief.

"Why? Have they not come to rescue you?"

Calliya couldn't help the flash of concern that flew across her face, and she glanced at the two humans, relieved to see that neither of them had noticed.

"The Charlemagne is no rescue ship," said Sullivan. "It's a heavy frigate, tough as nails and armed to the teeth. If the Navy has sent her first, then they're obviously expecting trouble."

"Trouble?" asked Calliya.

Sullivan sighed again heavily. "When the Bogart was destroyed, I assumed Theo had been killed. But when I saw the memory fragment from the Kelison, of the moments before the explosion, I realised that there was a chance he had escaped. One of the escape pods had been jettisoned. It's a long shot, but if he managed to make it back to Earth, he might have told them what happened. There's no way to know whether or not he saw the Kelison arrive, but if he did, then – " Sullivan suddenly trailed off.

Calliya and Titus both stared at the spacer. "Then what?" asked Calliya.

"In two hundred years of space travel, nobody has ever come across alien technology. Most of us had given up on any possibility of finding anything out here. If Theo made it back to Earth with hard evidence of alien ships, then the Navy might have been tempted to come looking for them."

There was silence on the bridge for a time. Sullivan scrolled the data past slowly, searching for any other clues as to the UNV Charlemagne's intentions.

"What now?" asked Calliya. "Do you mean to contact them?"

Sullivan shook his head. "The transmission array is shot anyway, but that's probably not a bad thing."

“Why? Do you not wish to return home?” Calliya silently scolded herself the moment she spoke. How could she make it more obvious that she didn’t want Sullivan to leave?

“Of course I still want to get home, but I’m not so sure that the Navy finding this planet is a very good idea. Now they’re here, though, there’s every chance that they’ll spot Elysium. If they haven’t already.”

Sullivan looked at his two companions, his face very grave. “We have to warn the King. Maybe he has some piece of Titan technology, or some other way to hide this planet from prying eyes. The least he can do is make sure no patrols go anywhere near the Charlemagne. If they spot a seerephon, then they’ll know they’re on the right track.”

They rose to leave, and Titus and Calliya had already disappeared through the access hatch in the deck when Iago spoke. Sullivan had almost forgot that the machine had been listening all along.

“Are there any orders outstanding, Captain Sullivan?”

“Keep monitoring the transmission, Iago. If it changes in any way, then let me know. If the Charlemagne starts actively scanning anywhere in this sector, then let me know. But make sure that any transmissions to me are narrow band. We can’t risk the Charlemagne picking up any radio emissions from this planet.”

“You have cause to doubt the actions of the Navy?” asked Iago.

Sullivan checked through the floor, making sure that Calliya and Titus were out of earshot. “No, I’ve no cause to doubt the Navy at all. They’ll behave exactly as they always have. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

They had a little trouble convincing Merriat to board the Kelison. It was much more used to soaring through the air itself rather than being borne inside the confines of the seerephon. But after a little coaxing, and more than a little gentle shoving, the winged beast squeezed through the entry hatch and was made as comfortable as possible in the wide space of one of the rear chambers.

Once they had made themselves comfortable in the command chamber, Sullivan urged Calliya to fly for the Royal City as swiftly as the Kelison could carry them. Upon the dais, Calliya relaxed, closing her eyes and merging her mind with that of the seerephon. Her bracelets shone brightly in the gentle golden glow of the chamber’s light globes.

The Kelison lifted gently from the plateau, rising through the tangle of branches that stretched like twisted fingers towards the violet tinged sun. The seerephon turned its nose towards the heavens and streaked upwards as quickly as its gravitic organs could

propel it. For Titus and Sullivan, it was the first time they had felt acceleration, or indeed any sensation of movement on board an Elysian vessel.

“Oh my,” whispered Titus.

The further the Kelison was from Elysium’s gravity well, the harder it could work its gravitic organs, allowing them to reach the Royal City in a matter of minutes, instead of hours.

Sullivan was relieved the trip was brief. He could feel the other two sets of eyes staring at him as they reached the peak of their climb. The wispy strands of the Shroud curled their fingers over the seerephon’s outer shell, as the Kelison rolled and dived back towards the planet. Sullivan knew that his friends were worried about what he had already told them. If they knew what he was about to tell the King, they would probably decide against taking him to the Palace at all.

Sullivan ran over the possibilities again in his mind. If the Charlemagne were assigned to point duty, then it would be trying to establish contact with the rest of the flotilla. No ship could remain out of contact with command for long, so the Charlemagne would wait a predetermined period of time, and then retreat through the intersection, carrying the data from its preliminary scans. Those scans would be passive, and might not be sensitive enough to discern anything through Elysium’s protective nebula. Sullivan could only hope that the alien technology didn’t generate too strong a power signal, or that the existence of a finite universe would prove too great a distraction.

Once the Charlemagne was back through the intersection, the King could seal the Rift and prevent the Navy from returning. Assuming he was capable of such a feat, thought Sullivan. There were an awful lot of unknowns. Like whether or not the Charlemagne would detect the Elysian civilisation, or any of the fleet’s patrols, or decide that the curious nebula around the planet merited a closer look. But Sullivan felt that the incredible discovery of the intersection alone might be keeping the crew of the frigate occupied. And the Navy were nothing if not cautious. They wouldn’t dare venture too far from the Rift, not in the first sortie. No, as long as they didn’t encounter any more alien vessels, the Charlemagne would surely return to its own universe in the next day or two.

And that would give them enough time to figure out a way to deal with the problem.

The Kelison spiralled downwards towards the Royal City, marking a course directly for the palace at the heart of the glittering streets. There was no one left in the

control chamber when the vessel levelled out and floated towards the courtyard it had made its berth before.

Beneath them, a gaggle of constructs milled about the cobbled courtyard, repairing the deep gouges the Kelison's landing struts had already carved out of the surface. They almost didn't see the vessel returning, and at the last second scattered in every direction, as the Kelison's struts dug neatly back into its own footprints.

Calliya was the first off out of the hatch, ignoring the small crowd of Elysians that had emerged from their residences. They gasped at the audacity of one of the fleet masters landing their seerephon in the courtyard not once, but twice. She knew they recognised her vessel, and Calliya supposed it was no surprise that her name was always associated with mischief.

Sullivan followed close behind, intent only on getting inside the palace as quickly as possible. He shouted to Titus, who was leading his borrowed steed through the narrow confines of the seerephon's corridors with some difficulty. The drakan, for his part, was just as keen to leave the Kelison as he had been reluctant to board it.

"We'll see you in the Great Hall!" said Sullivan.

"The Great Hall?" asked Calliya, as they climbed the polished stone steps of the palace.

"We have to see the King. We need to make sure that none of the patrols have run into the Charlemagne. If a Naval frigate were to confirm the existence of alien spacecraft, then we'd have every ship in the fleet here faster than you could believe."

"Jack, we can't just barge in and see the King."

"C'mon," said Sullivan. "He said I would always be welcome."

Sullivan tried to smile as they approached the top of the steps, but his heart was too heavy to make it convincing. Two sentinels stepped from the shadows, into the bright sunlight, to bar their way.

"The Lady Calliya, fleet master of the Kelison, wishes an audience with the King," said Calliya, trying to make herself sound as important as she could. The sentinels were unmoved, staring implacably out of blank eyes, so Sullivan decided to try his luck.

"I'm Jack Sullivan, and I must speak with the King." He rested his hand on the butt of his pistol. "Now get the hell out of my way."

To his surprise, the sentinels stepped back from the doorway and allowed Calliya and him to hurry through.

The main entry chamber was busy, as there were Elysian nobles everywhere, talking excitedly. They littered the stairs to the upper gallery, filling the wide corridor

that led to the Great Hall, and everywhere that Sullivan and Calliya looked they saw more of Elysium's wisest and most powerful.

"What on Earth is going on here?" muttered Sullivan.

Calliya slipped over and spoke quickly to a familiar face, before returning a minute later.

"There has been a special session of court called. The banishing of Tayfen has caused quite a stir."

Sullivan shook his head. "Wait until they hear what I've got to say."

"Jack, are you sure this is a good idea?" said Calliya, looking around the assembled nobility. She wasn't sure how they might react to Sullivan's news. She wasn't even sure how she felt about the presence of the Charlemagne. For thousands of years, the Elysians had stood guard over the Rift. Everyone knew that only seerephon were capable of passing through, and a transmission from a human ship might be too much to believe.

"No. But we have to warn them." He took her hand and they headed through to the Great Hall.

The innumerable facets of the huge glass dome were filled with the light of the afternoon sun, casting overlapping shadows amongst the large crowd of nobles that gathered beneath it. Calliya scanned the hall, searching for a familiar face.

"There!" she said, pointing down towards the sunken central area of the hall. It was Bellanis.

Sullivan and Calliya pushed their way through the thick crowd, struggling to reach the raven-haired princess. She was surrounded by what appeared to be an entire family of Elysian nobles, from a flaxen haired youngster to an elderly matriarch. They were all quite portly, had strikingly similar features, and stared disapprovingly at Calliya as she interrupted their audience with Bellanis.

Calliya bowed to the princess. "Jack and I need to speak with you." She glanced around at the family of onlookers. "Alone. We have news that must reach the ears of the King."

Bellanis saw something in Calliya's face that made her look at Sullivan, who wore a graver expression still. She made her apologies to the nobles and accompanied Sullivan and Calliya to one of the last empty spaces on the floor.

"What is it?" asked the princess.

Calliya had been considering how best to broach the news, but before she could open her mouth to speak Sullivan shot a question at Bellanis.

"Have all the patrols reported in?"

Bellanis looked Sullivan, her brow furrowing in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“You continuously patrol the Rift, don’t you? To make sure that the darklings, or the Fallen, or whoever, can’t get through, right?”

The princess nodded.

“So how many ships are out on patrol?”

Bellanis continued to eye Sullivan warily, glancing at Calliya to see if she could shed some light on Sullivan’s questions. Calliya just shrugged, flicking her wide grey eyes skyward briefly, so Bellanis couldn’t see any reason not to tell the spacer.

“There are two seerephon out on patrol – the Senlat and the Goranna. The Goranna is due back today, but the Senlat won’t return for another week. Why?”

Sullivan looked at Calliya. She wore a slightly unsure expression, but indicated that he might just as well tell the princess straight out.

“There’s a human ship on this side of the Rift – a naval vessel. If it finds one of the patrols, we could have a very big problem.” Sullivan waited for a reaction, and was shocked to see a half-smile creep onto Bellanis’s face.

“A human ship? On this side of the Rift? How could you know that? Has the Fold done away with the last vestige of your sanity, Sullivan?”

Sullivan stared at Bellanis in disbelief. “We don’t have time for this. I must speak with the King, immediately.”

“And he will gladly speak with you,” boomed the familiar voice of the Elysian monarch. He was standing just in front of his throne, and a narrow corridor appeared in the crowd that milled about the central area of the hall.

“I have promised that you are always welcome here, Captain Sullivan, but I confess I had not expected to see you again so soon.”

The King walked slowly across the central area, stopping when he reached where the spacer was standing.

“What brings you to my court today?”

Sullivan looked uneasily at the crowd of Elysians gathered around them. They had begun to withdraw to the high sides of the chamber, forming an audience for their King.

“Maybe we should discuss this privately,” said Sullivan, in a low voice.

The King eyed him suspiciously. “What might you have to say that you cannot utter before these people? I would trust each and every one of them with my life.”

Sullivan said nothing, glancing at Calliya for advice. She had none to give, and shrugged her shoulders with a look of desperation.

The King looked at Bellanis. “What has Captain Sullivan come to speak to us about?” he said softly, although his voice seemed to carry effortlessly across the hall. The crowd fell very silent as they waited for Bellanis’s answer.

“He says a human ship has crossed the Rift, your majesty. And that at this very moment, it flies abroad in the Finite Realm.”

The King’s gaze whipped back to Sullivan. “Is this true?” His voice betrayed no emotion, but Sullivan got the impression he took what had been said far more seriously than his daughter had done.

The spacer nodded slowly. “The United Naval Vessel Charlemagne. A warship.”

A murmur echoed around the crowd, and a few hurried whisperers tried to elaborate on Sullivan’s brief words for those that did not understand his tongue.

“How is this possible? Did you bring them here, human?” The King’s tone was icy now, and his eyes burned with a cold rage.

“No,” said Sullivan. “Yes. I mean maybe. I’m not sure. They might have found it by accident, or – ”

“Or what?”

“Or maybe somebody survived the destruction of my ship. One of the escape pods had been launched by the time the Lady Calliya and I escaped in the Kelison. It’s possible that Theo Cardinale, my systems engineer, made it back to civilisation.”

“Which would mean they’re here looking for you?” said Bellanis icily. Calliya looked at Sullivan in distress, and then searched for Titus, relieved to see the Victorian pushing his way through the crowd to stand at her side.

“No,” answered Sullivan, shaking his head as he turned to face the princess. “The Charlemagne is no rescue ship. The Bogart recorded everything that happened, and when the escape pod was launched, it would have a record of all the Bogart’s logs. It also might have tracked the Kelison on its short-range nets.

“If the Navy saw the Bogart’s logs, then they would come looking for the Kelison. No one in history has ever had evidence of intelligent alien life. It would be a prize beyond imagination.”

Sullivan was addressing all of the nobles now, turning from one side to the other as he spoke, hoping that they could all understand him.

“If they plotted the Kelison’s course, then they will have found the Rift. And once they found it, they would have no choice but to come through and investigate.”

Sullivan turned back to the King, waiting for a response from the Elysian monarch. The King walked slowly across the Great Hall and resumed his throne, a grave expression etched into his aged visage.



“It would seem, then, that Prince Tayfen’s plan has come to fruition after all.”

Sullivan stared at the King in horror. “What are you talking about?”

“If the humans have indeed crossed the Rift, then we will be forced into action,” answered the King. “But first we must discover if what you say is true, Captain Sullivan.” He turned then to his daughter.

“Bellanis, hurry to the Orisa. See if there has been any contact with the Senlat or the Goranna.” Bellanis moved quickly towards the doors, the crowd melting away before her. Sullivan could sense for the first time uncertainty in the monarch. The King addressed the spacer once again. “Tell me, Captain, how did you come by this information?”

Once again Sullivan was acutely aware of every set of eyes in the Great Hall bearing down on him. He paused for a moment before speaking, knowing he would have to tread very carefully. “I found a derelict human vessel, lying on a high plateau far from here. Most of the ship is damaged beyond repair, but enough of the communication array was intact to enable it to receive the Charlemagne’s message.”

Another excited murmur flew through the crowd, and Sullivan looked to Calliya and Titus, wondering if he should implicate them. They returned his frantic glances, unsure of whether or not to speak up in his defence.

But it was Cren who spoke first. “And what, Captain Sullivan, would you have us do? You, who bear us such grim tidings, must have some counsel to give.”

Sullivan stared back at the King’s trusted adviser. He knew what the instincts of almost everyone one in the hall were. To fight. He had seen it dozens of times before – brave, valiant people willing to defend their way of life to the bitter end. But Sullivan had helped end those lives bitterly once too often.

“The Charlemagne will have to follow standard naval procedure. Without communications to fleet command, it will make only a preliminary survey and return through the Rift. The smart thing to do would be to hide as best you can.”

He looked around the edges of the Hall at the rapt nobles hanging on his every word.

“Once the frigate is safely back in Earth’s universe, you must seal the Rift.”

The murmur in the crowd erupted into gasps and cries of astonishment. Sullivan couldn’t understand everything that was being shouted at him, but he caught the general drift – they didn’t like the idea of hiding. He tried to reason with them.

“You can’t fight them!” he shouted, his cries falling on deaf ears.

After several minutes, the King managed to quiet the outraged nobles, before addressing Sullivan again. “You would have us hide?” There was an icy undercurrent

running through his voice that chilled Sullivan, even in the bright sunshine that blazed through the great glass dome.

Sullivan sighed. "I've seen your ships. They are truly amazing. I've never seen technology like it. But you have no idea of what you're facing. How many seerephon are there in the fleet? A hundred?" To Sullivan's amazement, a nervous laugh rang amongst certain members of the court. He looked at Calliya, but she just wore a pained expression.

"Captain Sullivan," said Cren, wearing a look of near embarrassment. "There are but a score of seerephon. No mightier vessels have ever soared between the stars, and they have been sufficient defence for the Rift for millennia."

Sullivan almost laughed in disbelief himself. He hadn't been one hundred percent about his plan before, but after hearing how small the fleet was he was surer than ever. The Charlemagne probably had the firepower to take the whole system, if not the Finite Realm itself. But the Navy would not be so bold, or so foolhardy. It had lost a lot of ships that way over the years. No, Sullivan was sure they would stick to procedure and report back through the intersection for further orders in a matter of days. Then they would come back with a battle group.

"You cannot stand against the Charlemagne," shouted Sullivan, hoping that at least some of the Elysians would heed his words. "It is a UNV Frigate. It carries medium and long-range tactical nuclear fusion weapons, x-ray lasers, and a fully automated ballistic defence system. It will have an escort of fighters, and god knows what else!"

The spacer was pleading with them, but he could see that their pride would not allow them to listen. He turned back to the King, trying a more measured approach.

"Your majesty, even if you could defeat the Charlemagne, more ships would come. First ten, then a hundred, then a thousand – you can't resist them. We have both known men like Lucius Sejanus. You know what drives them. When they discover this paradise, they will want to possess it. And nothing you can do will stop them. You have no choice but to seal the Rift!"

The King sat in his gilded throne, staring out at Sullivan with aged, weary eyes.

"We have been guardians of the Rift since before history began, human. We will not destroy it on the word of one who has kept secrets from us."

Sullivan opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it. Instead, he looked to Calliya and Titus for support. The Victorian squeezed Calliya softly on the shoulder and stepped forward, coughing loudly. He removed his handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his beading brow.

“With apologies to your majesty, I regret to inform the court that it was I who discovered the derelict human vessel, many years ago. It was I who kept it secret, and revealed it to Sullivan shortly after he arrived. For many years, the wreck has remained a mystery to me, and only with the good captain’s help was I able to unravel it.”

The King stared at Titus, his eyes burning. Then Calliya too stepped forward from the crowd.

“I also knew of the human vessel’s existence – I have seen it with my own eyes. It has lain there for many millennia, and poses no threat to us.”

“How can you be so sure?” snapped the King. “In these humans, such secrecy does not surprise me so. But for a fleet master to keep such a thing from her King? I would have expected better from you, Calliya.”

The young Elysian’s head drooped when she felt the disappointment in the King’s voice. She glanced sideways at Sullivan, the pain clear on her face.

The spacer stepped closer to the King.

“Don’t blame them, your majesty. They’re only in this mess because of me.”

The King’s steely gaze bored into Sullivan, as an uneasy silence spread over the assembled nobility. The silence was broken when the double doors crashed open and Bellanis pushed her way through the crowd.

“What news of the patrols?” called the King.

The raven-haired princess shook her head. “The Goranna has just returned, but there is no sign of the Senlat. But it is not due to return for several days.”

“And the Orisa was unable to make contact with the Senlat?”

Seerephons’ ability to communicate over the vastness of the void was an inexact science. All of the assembled nobility knew that a missing seerephon, while unusual, was not necessarily proof of anything. When Calliya had ventured through the Rift, the Kelison had also been reported missing.

Bellanis nodded in answer to the King’s question. “There was no sign.”

The whispering amongst the crowd continued. Sullivan tried once more to reason with the King, and stepped close to the throne, lowering his voice. “You can’t send the fleet against the Charlemagne, your majesty. They’ll be massacred.”

The King merely stared coldly back into his eyes. Sullivan looked to his right as Calliya and Titus joined him.

“Calliya, help me out here. Tell him this is madness.”

But the young seerephon master just looked back with sorrow in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Jack. You cannot expect us to simply hide, and let your people pass through the Rift at will.”

Sullivan looked to Titus, hoping to see some flash of inspiration, but recognising only an expression of frustration.

And then he felt it. The bracelet around his wrist flashed brightly, and Sullivan heard a scream of pain rip through his mind. He grimaced, throwing his hands up to the sides of his head, trying to block out the searing agony. As he reeled, he saw Calliya reacting in the same way.

Sullivan stumbled, reaching out for Calliya as his legs gave way beneath him. His vision blurred, nausea rising in his stomach, as the crescendo of sound and pain deep inside his mind rose until he felt as if his skull would split. And then, abruptly as it had begun, it evaporated.

Sullivan blinked, his mind slowly clearing. He looked around him. Titus, who seemed unaffected, was supporting Calliya, but around him in the assembled crowd many of the Elysians were being tended to by their friends and families.

The King rose from his throne and walked slowly past Sullivan and Calliya as they struggled to regain their feet. He reached down to the floor to help his daughter, tears flowing freely down his cheeks.

“What the hell was that?” growled Sullivan.

“It was the end of the Senlat,” replied the King. “Such a violent sudden death as to be felt by all of the other seerephon. And their masters.”

The monarch led his daughter back to the throne dais, supporting her weight less and less as she recovered her strength. By the time she reached the dais, the sorrow in her eyes had been replaced by a burning fire.

“Our course has been set,” announced the King, his voice rising to ring out to the very pinnacle of the dome. “One of our fleet has been lost. We can only assume that it was an act of war carried out by the human ship. We will not hide, or shy away. We will strike out with an iron fist and cast these invaders back to the Infinite Realm.”

And then he made a shout, one that would carry far enough to be heard in every corner of the palace. “Gather the fleet! We fly for the Rift!”

He strode down from the dais, pausing only as he passed Sullivan and Titus.

“I do not know what other secrets you humans keep from me, but I cannot allow your loyalty to be tested when it matters most. So both of you must remain here, until I return.”

“And if you don’t return?” asked Sullivan flatly. The King just glared, turning from him quickly and striding through the crowd.

As he passed, other fleet masters fell in behind him. Bellanis greeted them warmly as they joined the steady stream of Elysians heading out of the hall. Inside, others were bidding their families goodbye, with tears and proud smiles.

Sullivan turned to face Calliya, who also had tears in her eyes.

“You can’t possibly be thinking of going, can you? I’m telling you, it’s suicide!”

“No, Jack,” answered Calliya defiantly, blinking back the tears. “Flying to the Shoal of Shades was suicide. This, Jack,” she said looking around at the other proud masters, following their King out of the Great Hall. “This is hope.”

With that, Calliya turned and half-ran towards the doors. Sullivan moved to follow her until he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“What would you do, old boy? If you were in her place?”

Sullivan looked back into Titus’s sad face.

“Can you really ask her not to fight for her people?” added the Victorian.

“No, I guess not,” resigned Sullivan. He watched as Calliya exited the hall, joining the rest of the masters and their crews.

“But I don’t want her to die for them.”

## Chapter Twenty Five

Sullivan sat despondently on the edge of the throne dais in the Great Hall, the forlorn figure of Titus beside him. The rest of the hall was deserted, save for a few constructs that ambled about collecting ornate goblets and platters abandoned by the Elysian nobles.

“What now?” asked Titus.

“I don’t know,” replied Sullivan, staring at the floor. “I just don’t know.”

“Come,” said Titus. “Let us go and see them off.”

The plump Victorian stood, brushing at the folds of his robe. Sullivan followed him glumly out of the hall towards the front of the palace.

They entered the maze of corridors that led around the periphery of the Great Hall, taking the first left into a narrow passage and following it to the base of a tower that spiralled high above them. A slim flight of steps skirted the wall, curling upwards to the summit.

It took them a good ten minutes to scale the steps, two at a time, using the handrail on the wall to steady themselves. Not for the first time, Sullivan noticed how physically well he felt. There was no trace of his recent wounds, and even the old aches and pains he had accumulated over his life had faded. He was sure it had something to do with his exposure to the regenerator, but without access to sophisticated medical equipment – or for that matter, a doctor, there would be no way to know what it had really done to him. But the science wasn’t really important. Sullivan scaled the stairs at a dash, and was barely out of breath when he reached the top. What was even more surprising was that Titus was only a few metres behind him, and only puffing slightly when he reached the top. Obviously the Victorian had also benefited from Elysium’s unusual environment.

At the summit, the flight of steps passed through a narrow hole in the flat roof, and the glare of the afternoon sun blinded Sullivan momentarily as he emerged onto the wide viewing platform that sat atop the high tower.

He blinked, his eyes adjusting slowly as Titus emerged just behind him. They were standing at the edge of the platform, and they could see many of the other Elysians had

also made their way up from the Great Hall to see off the fleet. Some of them were excitedly pointing out towards the city, nudging each other with gleeful pride, while others wiped tears from their cheeks, trying their best to maintain their composure as their loved ones made ready for war.

It all struck Sullivan as rather archaic. He watched the fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, all eagerly bidding their beloved goodbye, as if they were off to fight in some glorious battle. In Sullivan's experience, war was never glorious. It was always a messy, bloody affair, and the relatives never looked as eager when a fresh-faced young officer appeared at their door to deliver grim tidings.

He fought the temptation to laugh as the crowd pressed towards the edge of the viewing platform. Titus was standing on his toes, straining to get a better view, but fell back on his heels as the first seerephon hove into view. It was Bellanis's vessel, the Orisa.

The princess brought her vessel around slowly, displaying its mottled black and orange shell in all its glory. The seerephon withdrew its landing struts, hanging in the air right in front of the assembled crowd. The only sound that the vessel emitted was a low hum, as its gravitic organs lifted its bulk from the surface.

The seerephon was quickly flanked by two more vessels, both of which Sullivan recognised. The first was the Kelison, which still bore the fresh scars of its tangles with the Nightwings during its previous voyages. Behind the Kelison, and rising higher than the other two vessels, was the King's own seerephon, the Caradan.

The Caradan looked every inch the flagship, resplendent in hues of purple and gold, its teardrop shape glinting brightly in the afternoon sun. Sullivan could hear gasps of admiration from the crowd gathered around him, and despite his grave doubts over the wisdom of their mission he had to admit that the three seerephon made quite a sight.

He leaned towards Titus, whispering. "Where's the rest of the fleet?"

The Victorian answered quietly, cupping his palm over his mouth.

"Many of the fleet masters will have left their vessels at the edge of the city, while others are no doubt still in their homesteads halfway around the world. It will take them a day at least to gather the fleet."

Sullivan watched the three seerephon rotate one hundred and eighty degrees, the harmonic vibration of their gravitic organs rising as they formed up. The Kelison and the Orisa moved into flanking positions, just behind the tail of the Caradan.

The crowd began to cheer loudly, sensing that the fleet was preparing to move off. Sullivan watched as the Kelison followed the Caradan, thinking about the seerephon's master. He had asked her to stay at home – not to answer the call of her people.

Thinking about it now, he knew that in her place he could never have stayed at home, no matter how slim the chances of survival were.

Another loud hum rose from behind the crowd, and heads turned, necks craning to get a glimpse of what was making the noise. Another seerephon, one Sullivan didn't recognise, shot over the palace from the other side of the city, inspiring a muted round of applause amongst the Elysians on the viewing platform.

Sullivan and Titus stared into the bright violet sky as the fleet accommodated the new addition, circling two hundred metres above the highest of the delicate towers that stretched upwards from the Royal City. The four vessels drew into close formation, the unfamiliar seerephon taking up position at the rear of the flotilla as they turned and dived over the city, gathering speed as they did so. Sullivan felt his stomach churn as the vessels dipped low over the palace, but he wasn't sure whether it was the effect of the gravitic propulsion in close proximity, or just a sense of dread at what fate might await the beautiful vessels.

The fleet climbed back out of the city, banking sharply and circumnavigating the perimeter of the palace one last time. Then the Caradan turned its sharp nose towards the horizon, and the fleet moved off, climbing towards the folds of the Shroud. There was much waving and shouting from the crowd on the viewing platform, but Sullivan couldn't understand what they were saying. He and Titus just stood and watched in silence as Calliya's seerephon disappeared into the distance.

And after a time, it was Titus who spoke first.

"What now, Captain Sullivan? Do you wish to return to the homestead?"

But the spacer didn't answer. His eyes were fixed on the horizon, his features locked in an expression of deep thought.

"Captain Sullivan?" repeated Titus.

"Sorry?" answered Sullivan.

"I said, what now?"

Sullivan stared out towards the horizon for a time, biting his lip.

"Titus, I need to borrow your drakan."

"I beg your pardon?" said the Victorian in surprise.

"I can't let them do this. I can't let all this be destroyed, not because of me."

"Captain Sullivan, you are not to blame for this turn of events. You have been nothing more than an unwilling pawn in this whole mess," said Titus, trying to reassure the younger man.



“Maybe, maybe not,” said Sullivan hurriedly, grabbing Titus by the arm as if to reinforce his point. “But I really need to borrow your drakan. And I don’t have time to explain.”

Titus stared at the spacer in amazement. “Very well, I mean, if you absolutely must, but I really don’t know what you hope to accomplish.”

“Please, Titus. There just might be a way for me to put an end to this before too many people get killed.”

The Victorian continued to eye Sullivan warily, before shrugging his shoulders.

“Merriat has been billeted in the royal stables, just to the west of the main entrance. You are free to take him, if that is what you wish.”

“Thank you, Titus,” beamed Sullivan. He leaned in and kissed Titus on the brow. “Take care of yourself, okay?”

Sullivan bounced down the staircase that led down through the narrow tower, leaving a slightly bemused Titus standing amongst the crowd of Elysians who had gathered to see the fleet off. They were also beginning to leave, having bid fond farewells to all of their loved ones. Titus made his way to the very edge of the platform and craned his neck over the edge.

After about five minutes, he saw Merriat emerge from beneath the palace where the stables were located. The brown drakan leaped into the air, beating its wings powerfully as it climbed upwards. Titus could clearly see the figure astride it, holding on for dear life as he spurred the flying steed upwards.

Titus watched as the drakan climbed skywards out of the city. At first, Titus had been oblivious as to what Sullivan might be planning, but as soon as he thought about it, Titus knew exactly where the spacer was heading. And that he would have to follow him.

Titus pushed his way past the last few remaining Elysians, eager to descend the stairs as quickly as possible. If he could get to Cren’s, then surely the Royal Counsel would have a spare steed that Titus could borrow. Maybe there was still time to stop Captain Sullivan before he did something rash.

Sullivan yanked hard on the reins as Merriat crashed through the heavy foliage onto the mountaintop plateau. The drakan hit the ground with a terrific impact, howling out in exhaustion and pain. His rider had pushed him to the brink since leaving the Royal City. Merriat clearly did not intend to let anyone ride him again for quite some time, and purred in relief when Sullivan hopped down from the saddle, before slinking off into the forest to rest.

The spacer too, ached as he stepped away from the drakan. He rubbed his thighs as he pushed his way through the undergrowth, waiting for the blood to return to the parts of his body that had been cut off by the constrictive saddle. He shouted at the Estrella Negra as soon as he was a few yards from the access hatch.

“Open up, Iago!” he yelled.

The hatch clicked and hissed, sliding out of the hatchway. Sullivan climbed through into the Negra and headed directly to the bridge at the front of the ship. The machine greeted him the instant his head popped through the bridge access hatch.

“Captain Sullivan. How nice to see you.”

As usual, Sullivan couldn’t tell if the machine was being sarcastic or not. He was still sweating from beating his way through the jungle outside, so he whipped off the uniform jacket he had been given on the Kelison.

“Status report, Iago,” he barked.

“The UNV Charlemagne continues to hold station close to this side of the area of intersecting space. There has been only one change in its status since you were last on board. At approximately oh-seven-fifty-eight hours this morning, power levels on the ship rose by two hundred percent.”

Iago displayed a log of its observations of the Charlemagne on the bridge screens and Sullivan peered closer, trying to distinguish what was going on.

“The ship didn’t move?”

“No,” replied Iago. “All emissions continue from the same relative coordinates. At the stated time, power levels on the ship rose by the indicated degree.”

The machine had no penchant for clarity, mused Sullivan. The rise in power levels on board the Charlemagne coincided roughly with his painful experience in the Great Hall. Which would mean it happened on or about the time the Senlat was destroyed. Which in turn could mean only one thing.

“She’s fully armed and battle ready,” he said quietly. “The fleet is flying into a massacre.”

Sullivan tried to recall the armament on the Charlemagne. X-ray lasers, thermonuclear missiles and computer controlled steel storm defence nets – even ten years ago the frigate’s arsenal had been formidable. Sullivan dreaded to think what might be awaiting the fleet.

But maybe there was still something he could do. He instructed Iago to call him if there were any further developments in the Charlemagne status, and then headed aft. The machine didn’t ask him what he had planned.

When he had first explored the ship, he had come across what Captain Gomez had referred to as the Bligh Contingency. It had been designed as a last defence against a rogue artificial intelligence that was intent on doing the crew harm. Sullivan knew that although the Estrella Negra had lain dormant for centuries, there was a chance that some of the equipment in the cavernous launch bay might be put to very good use.

It took him only a few minutes to retrace his steps and find the mechanically sealed bulkhead. He undid the bolts and entered the bay, firing up the auxiliary power systems as soon as he stepped inside. Halogen lamps on the high ceiling of the bay ignited, throwing harsh light across the stubby cone shaped object at the back of the bay.

Sullivan picked up the emergency toolkit stored by the hatch and crouched over the object, examining the bolts on the casing, searching through the toolkit for the dedicated tool. He selected the correct one and then proceeded to remove the locking bolts.

The sections of the casing opened out like steel petals, revealing the treasure within. Sullivan craned his neck to read the legend on the side – it was a Dell 9000 1 Megaton Tritium Fusion Warhead. Below the name was a warning stating that improper use of the warhead could result in the loss of human life, which almost caused Sullivan to laugh out loud. The company would bear no responsibility in the event of such usage, employing the age-old defence of the arms manufacturer – guns don't kill people, people kill people.

But would it kill the Rift?

Sullivan used the bay's integral hoist to lift the warhead free of its casing and lowered it to the floor. Then he activated the internal communication system. It wouldn't allow Iago to see into the launch bay, but he would be able to hear Sullivan well enough.

"Iago?"

"Yes, Captain Sullivan," replied the artificial intelligence. The machine's voice never failed to chill Sullivan to his spine. He couldn't get used to the perfect diction, the lack of inflection, or the very coldness of its tones.

"How much do we know about the Rift? The intersection?"

"I do not understand the question."

"Think of it as a hypothetical problem. Let's just say, for example, that there was an explosion inside the intersection."

"What magnitude of explosion?" asked Iago.

Sullivan bit his thumb for a moment before replying.

"A one megaton fusion blast," he said.

“The exact nature of the intersection is unknown. Prior to the observation of this particular example, their existence was purely theoretical. Pure theory that suggests that a blast of sufficient magnitude might disrupt the delicate balance required to sustain the intersection.”

“So will a megaton be enough?”

“A thermonuclear fusion blast of one megaton should be sufficient to destroy the region of intersecting space. The energy released by the explosion will act like a superconducting short circuit, causing the borders of normal space to collapse in on the region.”

Iago displayed a selection of graphics relating to the information, and Sullivan watched as the machine demonstrated the theoretical destruction of the intersection. It all looked simple enough.

Sullivan turned back to the stubby metal flower in the corner of the launch bay. He activated one of the autoloaders, a large semi-robotic trolley with hydraulic lifting arms. With a loud grunt, he started hauling it across the launch bay towards the dark shape of the warhead.

Titus battled against the unruly steed that he had managed to borrow from Cren. The beast had not been ridden in some time, and it had resisted Titus with every beat of its wings as they made their way towards the Estrella Negra. Eventually, Titus managed to get the better of the creature, spurring it on towards the mountaintop plateau.

The large, unkempt drakan dropped through the foliage heavily, landing with its large padded feet outstretched to cushion the impact. Titus skipped off the creature's back, relieved to have his feet on the ground once again, and looked around the clearing that they had used for so many landings. The foliage was finally beginning to accede to the arrival of so many visitors.

Titus made his way inside the Estrella Negra, calling out for Sullivan. There was no response from the spacer, but as soon as he popped his head through the bridge access hatch Iago greeted him in its usual cold fashion.

“Dr. Kendall-Scott. There was a significant probability that you would arrive.”

“A significant probability?” asked Titus, confused as he pulled himself onto the bridge, dusting himself off instinctively. “Oh, I see.”

He laughed half-heartedly as he examined the bridge displays. “I don't suppose there's much surprising you, is there?”

He stared at the data being downloaded from the Charlemagne. “Have you succeeded in decoding anything significant?”

“There has been no progress made in the effort to decrypt the transmission. If Captain Sullivan is correct, the UNV Charlemagne will be using a military code, one specifically designed to be impossible to decrypt. Without the correct cipher, it is highly unlikely that I will succeed.”

Titus removed his glasses and wiped them on the hem of his robe. “Where is Captain Sullivan now, Iago?”

“Captain Sullivan has initiated the Bligh Contingency.”

“The what?” asked Titus.

“There is an area of the vessel beyond the reach of my systems. Captain Sullivan moved into the area approximately ninety-three minutes ago.”

Titus was intrigued. Why would anyone make part of the ship beyond the reach of the machine?

“What is the Bligh Contingency?”

“After the Artificial Intelligence wars, Professor Yuki Taneshiro of the Tokyo Institute of Robotics proposed that artificial intelligences could be included safely on space flights in the future, as long as the ship employed a Bligh Contingency. Named for the deposed captain of the HMS Bounty, the contingency plan itself is simple. A part of the vessel would remain isolated from the control intelligence. If the intelligence attempted to harm a ship’s crew or passengers, then the crew could use the Bligh Contingency to ensure their safety.

“The mere presence of a restricted area would thus render any intelligence’s probability studies useless. If there was no way to guarantee success, no artificial intelligence would ever try to harm its crew ever again.”

“And did it work?” asked Titus. Was Sullivan planning to destroy Iago? Why?

“The theory was never officially tested. Although the presence of a restricted area on the Estrella Negra would suggest that at least one test is underway.”

Titus was heading for the access hatch in the floor when he stopped, turning back to face Iago’s blank features.

“Do you know what Captain Sullivan is doing in the restricted area?”

“Captain Sullivan entered the bridge and asked on the status of the Charlemagne. He believed the ship had armed its weapon systems. Then he asked what effect a one-megaton nuclear explosion would have on the region of intersecting space.”

It took the machine several minutes to explain to Titus what a nuclear explosion was. Once enlightened, the Victorian hurried aft, frantically trying to follow Iago’s directions. He traversed the central access corridor, ascending a level to find the restricted area access above the main systems bay.

He was just outside the launch bay's manual hatch when a powerful rumbling shook the deck plates beneath his feet. The hatch before him slid open as he approached, and Titus was forced to shield his eyes from the bright sunlight that flooded through from the other side.

He stepped through into the glare, his eyes gradually adjusting to grant him a view of the interior of the launch bay.

Titus was standing at the edge of a vast rectangular compartment, maybe thirty yards long and another twenty deep. The top of the compartment boasted gigantic curved doors that were slowly opening outwards and upwards, creating the rumbling Titus had felt in the corridor outside. The further apart they moved, the closer the bright sun crept to the dark corners of the bay.

In the centre of the bay, clamped to the floor with an array of complicated steel braces, was a small, wedge-shaped ship. It was at thirty feet long and half as wide across the stern, which bore a set of huge dark shallow cones. The thick stern narrowed evenly until it reached a sharp point at the prow.

Sullivan was standing next to the ship, a bulky portable control panel in his hand, watching the progress of the launch bay doors as they opened high above his head. He had changed clothes, and was wearing a pair of overalls left over by the long vanished crew of the *Estrella Negra*. Something made him look over towards Titus, and he smiled broadly, shaking his head.

"I should have known you'd follow me, Titus!"

"Indeed you should!" called the Victorian in reply.

The doors opened to their full extension and the rumbling ceased. Sullivan walked across the launch bay, skirting around the *Espada* fighter nestled in its cradle.

"What are you doing here, Titus?"

"I came to see what you were doing, Captain Sullivan. I had feared you might be considering doing something rash. Now I am here, I can see you're doing far more than considering such a thing. You are actually doing it."

"You have no idea what I'm about to do, Doc," shot Sullivan, turning back to the *Espada* and opening the hatch. It was located just aft of the narrow starboard cockpit window, and Sullivan had to duck as he stuck his head inside the small ship, checking for something.

"I don't?" answered the Victorian in mock surprise. "You do not intend to destroy the Rift? And are you not intending to return home in this ship?"

Sullivan stopped, drawing his head back out of the *Espada* and looking his bespectacled friend right in the eye.

“Very good, Titus. You see right through me. But if you’re not going to help, then you had better just stay out of my way.”

“Help?” cried the Victorian. “Help you do what? Get yourself killed? If the Elysian fleet doesn’t stand a chance against the Earth vessels, than how do you propose to fight them in this tiny thing?” He flung an arm at the Espada, sitting quietly on its launch clamp.

“I don’t intend to fight them, Titus,” said Sullivan wearily. “I’m hoping to sneak right past them.”

Titus looked at him, trying to understand what Sullivan was getting at. “Sneak right past them? But how? Why?”

“I’m going home.”

“I see,” said Titus, very quietly.

Sullivan groaned. “Look, I’ve had it with this place. Monsters keep trying to kill me, I’ve found myself in some sort of hell universe, and now I’m being blamed for bringing war to these people. Well, no more.

“I am flying out of here and heading straight for the Rift. Once I’m safely on the other side, I fly a small nuclear device back into it. After that baby blows, no more ships go through, and no more ships go back. The fleet can probably deal with the Charlemagne, but if we have any luck it will be back in Earth’s universe when the Rift closes.”

Titus stared at Sullivan for a few moments, saying nothing. He watched as the spacer began to remove items from the interior of the fighter, piling them untidily on one side of the bay. On his third trip, Sullivan stopped close to Titus and looked at him with an expression of grim determination.

“Titus, you don’t know this Navy like I do. I know what they are capable of. They will destroy everything beautiful this world has to offer. Same as we’ve done everywhere else we’ve been. This is the only way to be sure that that never happens.”

Sullivan glanced at the Espada. “There’s room for two, you know. This might be your last chance to go home.”

Titus smiled faintly. “The world I knew is long gone, Jack. Everyone I have ever known has long ago died and been laid to rest. The face of mankind has changed so much that I doubt that I should even recognise it, were I to return to Earth. Elysium is my world now, Jack.”

“Okay, Titus,” said Sullivan heavily. “But if I don’t close the Rift, then Elysium will be a Navy world.”

The only two humans in the finite universe stared into each other's eyes for a long time. Then Sullivan threw aside the emergency rations he was carrying and embraced the Victorian.

"I'm going to miss you, Titus. You've been a very good friend to me."

The Victorian beamed back at him, a tiny tear welling in one eye. "The only thing that paradise lacks is human company. I wish you were staying, Captain Sullivan."

"You know I don't belong here. I have to get back to my home. And take the Navy with me."

Titus used his handkerchief to dab at his eyes, and made a show of cleaning his already spotless glasses.

"If you won't be dissuaded, then I suppose I had better lend a hand," he said, with a theatrical sigh. Sullivan laughed and directed him to help him get rid of as much excess weight from the fighter as possible.

It took them almost twenty minutes to finish stripping as much of the disposable weight as they could from the ship. The final task was to detach the two large external x-ray lasers from the stubby wings that extended from the widest part of the ship.

Once that was done, Sullivan signalled to Titus to help him carry something onto the Espada. They moved to the back of the bay, where Sullivan had already attached two magnetic carrying clamps to a small ominous cone shaped object sitting on the platform of an autoloader.

Titus stared at the small black cone, which was barely two feet high.

"Is that the nuclear device?" he asked timidly.

"That it certainly is," replied Sullivan, grabbing one of the carrying handles. "So try not to drop it."

Titus took the other handle and between them they lifted it towards the Espada. "I was expecting something a little bigger, I suppose."

"That's mankind's innovation for you, Doc. Biblical destruction in a convenient carrying size."

They placed the warhead in a cradle Sullivan had rigged in the jump seat. Then Sullivan fetched the micro-thruster array from the bay and stashed it at the rear of the cramped cockpit. He stepped outside the Espada and checked the deck surrounding the ship. There was nothing left to do, so he checked his pistol, making sure that it was fully recharged and loaded with liquid uranium. Then he turned to his Victorian friend.

"You might want to make yourself scarce before I launch. It's going to get pretty warm in here when the auxiliary booster ignites."



Titus smiled. “Are you absolutely sure you want to go through with this? Have you thought about what you might be leaving behind?” He raised an eyebrow, confident that Sullivan would understand what he was hinting at.

Sullivan glanced down at the deck briefly. “Don’t think this isn’t hard for me. I’ve never known anyone like her.”

He stopped, a flash of anguish crossing his face.

“Look, Titus, just tell her – ”

Again, Sullivan just couldn’t find the words. He turned and stepped into the Espada, turning back to address his friend one last time.

“Tell her I wish things could have been different. See you around, Titus.”

Sullivan disappeared inside the ship, the hatch closing quickly behind him. He sat into the front chair, strapping himself in as he activated the automatic launch sequence.

When the piece of deck supporting the Espada broke free of the surrounding deck and began to angle itself skywards, Titus took it as his cue to leave. He scurried out through the hatch doors and made for the main access hatch.

He made it outside in time to see the Espada’s pointed nose poke out of the aft pod as the gantry extended upwards from the launch bay. He fought his way backwards through the foliage, trying to get to a distance that would afford him a good view.

Titus heard the ion booster whine in its pre-ignition cycle. In a heartbeat, there followed a deep rumbling explosion as the powerful engine ignited, shaking the Negra and the very plateau it lay upon.

The tremendous heat from the booster boiled the water vapour in the air as it ignited, throwing up billowing clouds of steam as the Espada was pushed along its docking rail and free from the gantry. The auxiliary launch booster had been stored beneath the deck of the bay, and Titus saw it for the first time as it burst free of the Estrella Negra, trailing blue fire. The booster rolled, dangling the small wedge from its underside as it raced skywards, screaming towards the purple wisps of the Shroud atop a pillar of blue flame and boiling steam.

Titus whispered to the departing craft as it soared into the heavens.

“God’s speed, Captain Sullivan.”

Calliya tapped her fingers nervously on the side of the command chair, staring straight ahead at the display. She watched the stern of the Orisa as it moved ahead of the Kelison, maintaining a constant distance.

The fleet was circling a long extinct volcano on the edge of the southern continent. They were almost all accounted for now, with only a few seerephon still due to join their

ranks. Twenty vessels, each one markedly similar, but every one different in size and colour. They stayed in perfect formation, creating a huge ring thousands of metres above the volcano's long dormant crater.

Calliya looked down at her crew, seated in the two control wells either side of the dais. They were all members of Elysium's most venerable families, serving a long apprenticeship before they were granted a chance to raise a seerephon of their own. Calliya had taken this crew out on dozens of patrols, but she had never taken them into such danger before. She hoped they couldn't tell how nervous she was.

She was in constant contact with the Kelison. The seerephon had been slightly curious at first, but that innocent curiosity had turned to concern when the Kelison realised how many of its siblings were joining the fleet. Now it communicated rapidly with the other vessels, exchanging what little information they had about what they were about to face.

*Where do we go?* asked the Kelison, for what seemed to be the tenth time.

*I told you. To the Rift.*

*Why?*

Calliya smiled to herself. The seerephon could often behave as children would, asking questions that they could never really understand the answers to. But the smile quickly faded from her face when she remembered what the Kelison might be facing.

She had witnessed the destruction that Sullivan's weapons were capable of. That small pistol of his had been more than a match for darkling after darkling. And the larger weapon, the one he had taken from the derelict human vessel, was powerful enough to destroy even the mightiest darklings she had ever encountered.

So what danger might a human ship present? And not a cargo vessel, like the dilapidated Bogart, but a ship made for war? Like the other Elysians, she had been very dismissive of Sullivan's frantic warnings, but the more time she had to consider what he had said, the more she began to wonder what fate truly had in store for them.

She cast her eyes over her crew again. They were mostly older than she was, and had they not benefited from the longevity that all Elysians enjoyed, they might have resented the fact that Calliya was one of the youngest ever to be allowed to master a seerephon. They were talking amongst themselves quietly, excitedly pointing at the other vessels. Some of these seerephon, and their masters, were legend on every shore of Elysium.

Sitting in the forward port chair was Brelt, a distant cousin of Cren's. He had been one of the crew since Calliya had taken the Kelison on its first patrol, and was one of her oldest friends. She was relieved to have him aboard, but even so they had never been

close enough for her to entrust him now with her doubts. When he glanced around at the command chair Calliya smiled faintly, before turning away suddenly, as if something on one of the displays required her urgent attention.

Brelt turned back to his own display. He was a small, wiry man, his short brown hair cut close into his head. Small dark eyes stared out from either side of a prominent angular nose, his gaze darting this way and that as he expertly operated the control panel. He turned as the crewman sitting immediately behind him called out to him.

“Brelt!”

“What is it?” asked Brelt, in annoyance.

Uran looked more confused than anything at Brelt’s irritation. He was the youngest of the crew – at forty-seven he was still a few years younger than Calliya. He was seen as quite immature by his peers, as he still retained the physical appearance of a chubby teenager, his twinkling blue eyes looking out from above ruddy cheeks.

“It’s only the Audaaur!” he cried excitedly, jabbing a finger at one of the aft displays. Brelt followed his crewmate’s frantic pointing and cast his eyes for the first time on the legend that was the Audaaur.

One of the most ancient of all the seerephon that still made up the fleet, the Audaaur was rumoured to have been involved in the Apocalypse – the battle that had ended the War of Dominion with the casting out of the Lord of the Darklings and all his Fallen minions. There were other stories too, ones that made the Audaaur out to be much older, including rumours that the ancient seerephon had borne Chronos the Titan between the stars, long before the Flight of the Titans.

Brelt and Uran watched the massive seerephon in wonder, as it followed close behind the Kelison in the holding pattern above the sleeping volcano. Its dark, blue-green shell was riddled with scars, some shallow and broad, others deep trenches torn into the tough hide. It was huge, almost as long as the Caradan, but much wider and flatter. The leading edges were covered in sharp barbs and tusks, reminding anyone who saw the vessel more of a Nightwing than a seerephon.

Almost as legendary as the ancient seerephon was its master. Cohloc was a powerful duke from Chenta, a region on the farthest edge of the southern continent. His fortress had grown to such size as to form a citadel to rival the Royal City, and the power he wielded in the Elysian court almost equalled his great residence. But he seldom interfered in the affairs of the court, preferring to rule over his own domain, and the King returned the favour, seldom interfering in Cohloc’s affairs. Many of the Duke’s noble family had been counted amongst the Fallen over the millennia, so the arrangement suited all concerned.

But Cohloc was a tremendous warrior, and his seerephon had known no match in battle. So when the need was direst, the Duke of Chenta was always amongst the first to be counted.

Calliya too watched the displays, counting out the seerephon she knew from the ones whose identity she could only hazard a guess at. The Caradan and the Orisa were the nearest and easiest to recognise, along with the Audaur. Calliya wasn't sure if the old warhorse's presence here was good fortune or an ill omen.

There was the Goranna, whose master, Ovni, she had known for some years. And behind the Goranna flew the Cosarb and the Nenat, which Calliya only vaguely recognised. She had never seen so many seerephon in one place. It was an incredible sight.

Two more vessels sprung from the low cloud surrounding the lower regions of the dormant crater. Calliya had no clue as to their identities – they had travelled so far south that they were amongst the most distant of all the Elysian peoples. The new seerephon matched the speed of the circling fleet and joined the loose formation.

Calliya looked down to her other two crewmembers. They were sisters, Arla and Senna, and had also formed part of the Kelison's crew for what seemed like an age. Now they were nudging each other and pointing at the majesty of the fleet in nervous excitement, like two novices out on their first patrol.

The bracelets around Calliya's wrists began to glow brightly.

*The Caradan calls the fleet to arms, Calliya.*

Just ahead of the Kelison, the Caradan peeled off to starboard, the Orisa nestling close behind.

*Follow them,* Calliya told her vessel.

The Kelison was the next seerephon to break formation, gathering speed behind the Caradan. As more and more of the vessels joined the exodus, the seerephon began to string out across the sky into a loose delta formation. The Caradan was at the centre, the position immediately to aft and port taken by the considerable bulk of the Audaur. The heavily scarred vessel grew darker still as the fleet climbed into Elysium's lengthening evening shadow. At the Caradan's right hand was the Orisa, expertly mastered by the King's daughter Bellanis, and the Kelison took up a position flanking the princess's vessel.

Calliya looked to the displays, sighting the Goranna just starboard and aft. She checked the fleet positions in the staggered formation, as the line began to stretch across the sky.

*Let's make some room for ourselves,* Calliya told her vessel.

When the fleet began to gather pace, the seerephon were forced to spread out across the night sky. Their propulsion organs generated a larger gravity well at greater speeds, so it was necessary to spread the fleet out before they set course for the Rift.

The fleet spread out gradually, passing through the last wisps of the Shroud only a few minutes after breaking from the holding pattern. They continued to accelerate, but Calliya knew that they would never reach the speeds she had dared to touch on her voyage to the Shoals. It would take them at least a day to reach the human ship.

Too much time to waste, she thought. Especially sitting here on this chair.

“Keep an eye on the fleet,” she said to Brelt, rising from her command chair. As a mark of respect, the rest of the crew rose as well, only taking their seats again after their master had left the control chamber.

“She doesn’t seem herself,” whispered Uran.

“You mind your own business,” scolded Brelt. “Lady Calliya will take good care of us.”

“Sure,” answered Uran. “But who’s looking out for her? I heard her human betrayed us.”

“That’s enough of that!” snapped Brelt. “Just keep your mind on your tasks, young Uran.”

Calliya found herself wandering the quiet corridors of the Kelison aimlessly, running her hands over the sites of recent repair. She stopped, remembering how she and Sullivan had fought the horde of Darklings in this very corridor.

It hadn’t felt right to leave Sullivan behind. She knew it had been wrong of him to keep the derelict secret, but she didn’t believe that he had betrayed her people. But if he had, then could Sullivan betray her also? If he could, then she was a poorer judge of character than she had ever realised.

She sighed. More than anything, she just wanted him at her side.

Titus clung on for dear life, trying to reach the emergency power coupling with his outstretched hand. A sudden breeze had sprung up, ruffling Titus’s robe around him as he clambered unsteadily along the access ladder on the top of the Estrella Negra’s forward pod. He pulled himself along one more rung, and then threw out his arm one last time. He grabbed the thick cable and twisted it anticlockwise, pulling it free of the socket. Then he hauled the cable in close to him, and carefully negotiated an about face on the precarious access ladder. Either side of him, the sloping sides of the Negra fell away at an alarming angle. It had looked so much easier from the ground, thought Titus.

He moved back along the ladder, trapping the cable under one leg while he used his free hand to remove his PCU from his robe. The knuckles of his other hand were bleached from clinging to the ladder with such force. He examined the display on the device before replacing it in the folds of his now grubby robe. He took the cable in his hand and slid along the ladder, stopping at another access panel, set flush into the ship's hull.

He popped open the panel and slid the cable inside, locking it in position with another quick twist. Then he removed his PCU once more and tapped one of the keys.

"Is that any better, Iago?"

It was difficult to make out the machine's voice in the strong breeze, but Titus could just understand the faint reply.

"All long range sensing nets are now online, Dr. Scott. We may now follow the events at the intersection from any of the bridge stations."

Great, thought Titus. For all the good we can be from here.

## Chapter Twenty Six

Sullivan gritted his teeth against the pain, praying that he wouldn't swallow his tongue. He'd heard about it happening to spacers under very heavy gees, but he had never actually met anyone who had suffered such a grim fate. Unless that was because they never survived, he thought.

He glanced down at the Espada's chronometer, relieved to see that there were only a few minutes of punishing acceleration left to endure. He closed his eyes, each breath coming only with great effort as a great weight pressed down on his ribcage. Sullivan was getting light-headed – such was the difficulty he was having breathing. He realised, far too late, that it might have been a good idea to rig up an oxygen supply.

The spacer looked to the chronometer again. Thirty seconds, the display informed him, so he closed his eyes, concentrating on counting down the remaining time. Beads of perspiration fell backwards from his brow, propelled towards his tousled hair by the force of the Espada's ion engines.

He had jettisoned the auxiliary booster as soon as the Espada had broken free of Elysium's gravity well. He had set course for the Rift and then spent a few minutes doing the necessary calculations. If he set the engines for a maximum burn, then he might have a chance of reaching the Rift ahead of the Elysian fleet. It would be tough on his body, and he still had to make sure he had enough fuel to decelerate when he reached his destination.

Even with the fuel he had conserved for braking and manoeuvring, he would still be approaching the Rift at a ferocious speed, which would leave very little room for error. And he could only hope for good fortune once he reached the other side. Sullivan hadn't thought much about what might happen when he got back to his own universe – he had far too much to worry about in this one as it was.

He looked at the cockpit display, checking his velocity relative to the intersection, and then used the terminal to calculate how long it would take him to reach his destination. The onboard computer told him he had a little over six hours to wait until he reached the braking point.

Sullivan undid his flight harness and pushed himself off his seat. He floated up the short distance to the cockpit ceiling and then pulled himself along the handholds to the rear of the compartment.

Upside down, Sullivan pushed towards the floor of the compartment, reaching down to open one of the Velcro straps on the floor. He slid the toe of his boot inside the loop and fastened the Velcro, securing himself to the floor.

Then he turned to the warhead. It sat quietly in the navigator's chair, harnessed with an array of buckles. At least this would be easier with no gravity, he thought to himself.

Sullivan opened the polycarbonate case containing the micro-thruster array, which consisted of four small thruster units, about fifteen centimetres long, connected by a daunting number of cables and clamps.

Sullivan was glad he didn't have to rush this.

Calliya looked at first to the port display, and then checked to starboard. The fleet was decelerating, and the master of the Kelison was keen to keep her seerephon in line with those of her peers.

Like all others in the fleet, the Kelison had cast its farsight as far ahead as it could. The results were depicted in a small area immediately below the forward display. Seerephon were capable of combining one or more of their sensory organs in an effort to see very faint objects across a great distance, and now all of them were trained on the human warship holding station near the Rift.

The Caradan slowed further still, and the rest of the fleet followed suit, maintaining their distances precisely. Seerephon masters very much relied on their vessels when it came to close formation flying. Very fine adjustments to course and speed were difficult for the masters to make, and was better left to the seerephon themselves.

The Elysian fleet slowed, watching its prey from across the void of the Finite Realm. They could only assume that the creature could see them, too, as none of the masters had ever set eyes on such a vessel before.

The Charlemagne was a scimitar class frigate, commissioned in June of 2168. She had seen service during the war against the Southern bloc, but then only brief and sporadic, spending the final days of the conflict as a heavy troop support and patrol vessel. She typically carried a crew of around six hundred, along with a compliment of as many as a thousand marines, and between fifty and a hundred smaller spacecraft, ranging from fighter-bombers and troop transporters to long-range recon drones.



The frigate was also equipped with a wealth of offensive and defensive tactical systems, from long range high yield thermonuclear missiles to an automated short-range ballistic defence, nicknamed the ‘steel storm’. In short, she was armed to the teeth and ready for anything.

But there was no way for the approaching fleet to know that, so the many seerephon stared at the curious creature with their farsight, slowly but inexorably drawing closer. To the Elysian vessels, the creature appeared to be asleep, as it was not moving, and there were no lights or colours flowing across its angular metal hull.

The Charlemagne looked nothing like any of the fleet masters had expected. It looked nothing like an object that was designed to fly, consisting consisted of a wide cylinder, about five hundred metres long and a hundred and fifty thick, covered with a shorter, thick sheath, fifty metres deep. At both ends of the cylinder, long struts attached it to two bulky pylons that ran the length of the Charlemagne, parallel to the body of the vessel. At the end, behind the sheath, the cylinder widened to accommodate a ring of gigantic ion boosters.

The fleet edged ever closer. The seerephon could sense energy of some kind emanating from the creature, but it was unlike the sensations they gleaned from their own kind, or the Nightwings of the Fallen.

Calliya tried to reassure her vessel.

*Easy does it.*

*The Caradan calls to us, replied the seerephon. We are to hold position here, while others look closer.*

Calliya slowed the Kelison in perfect synchronicity with the rest of the fleet and then tried to look at all the displays at once, curious to see who would be the first to venture close to the strange vessel. Until now, she had been the only Elysian who had ever been close to a human vessel, and that had been the curiously underwhelming Bogart.

The Goranna was the first to break ranks, which made sense to Calliya. The master of the Senlat had been a very close comrade of the Goranna’s master. Almost immediately after the Goranna surged forward, the Audaur broke ranks. The ancient seerephon dwarfed the smaller Goranna, and Calliya was glad that one of the most formidable members of the fleet would be amongst the first to encounter the humans.

She watched in fascination as the two seerephon edged forward at first, before streaking towards the silent sentinel standing guard over the Rift. She glanced to her sides, watching her crew as they in turn watched the forward display in excitement.

“Be ready,” she said, her voice firm and assured, belying no trace of the butterflies she felt in her stomach.

*Be ready*, Calliya silently told her seerephon.

Titus watched the screens on the bridge, using his finger to move a cursor across the screen, indicating anything he needed Iago to explain.

The fleet had arrived at the Rift, and were sending two of their number forward to investigate the Charlemagne, which had apparently already suffered heavy damage and was sitting motionless at the edge of the Rift’s small gravity well. And although all of the frigate’s power systems were running at full capacity, she had made no offensive move yet against the Elysian fleet.

“How has the Charlemagne been damaged?” asked Titus. “Was it during the crossing of the Rift?”

“There is insufficient data to formulate a hypothesis, Dr. Scott. However, the traversing of the intersection could have had any number of effects on the frigate’s systems. In any case, it is highly unlikely that the Charlemagne would be despatched to investigate the intersection with this damage already sustained.”

“What if there were another event?” asked Titus.

“Without knowledge of such an event, I cannot formulate a hypothesis.”

Wonderful, thought Titus. Not only was the machine cold, and distinctly lacking charm, now it was becoming repetitive. But could the destruction of the Senlat possibly have caused such damage? Titus had never witnessed the destruction of a seerephon at first hand. There was no way to know what might have happened.

“Never mind,” he told the machine. “Just tell me where Captain Sullivan is.”

The Goranna and the Audaur streaked towards the Charlemagne, the Audaur allowing the smaller, younger seerephon to lead the way, tucking in tight behind it as they headed for the mouth of the Rift. It was easy to make out the Charlemagne against the dull dark glow of the rolling red cloud that formed the bridge between the Finite and the Infinite Realms. The seerephon sped towards the Naval frigate, their masters’ eyes trained on their forward displays.

The Charlemagne just lay there, still and silent in the vast void, making no move as the seerephon approached, no indication to the masters that it noted their approach at all. The Audaur increased its speed to draw level with the Goranna and give it a better view of the frigate.

Both of the seerephon shared everything they saw and felt with their brethren, and amongst the fleet, all eyes watching as the fantastic vessel loomed larger and larger.

Its surface was a dull blue colour, tinged dark purple by the gentle red glow of the Rift, only a few thousand metres away. All over its body were unfamiliar angular markings, punctuated with silver grey projections of an incredible assortment of shapes and sizes; from the long, spindly antennae that protruded from the great glass eye in the front end of the central core cylinder, to the hundreds of stubby gun turrets that covered both the lengthy pylons and the armoured sheath.

But the seerephon did not recognise the turrets for what they were. Even the Audaar, who had the best view and by far the most experience, did not know what to make of the human spacecraft. They closed to about five hundred metres, making a fast pass ahead of the Charlemagne, watching the frigate closely on their starboard side as they streaked past.

And still the monster lay dormant, a few faint lights visible along the ship's hull, dwindling as the scouts carved a high and wide loop back towards the ranks of the fleet. They slowed as they ran along the staggered line of seerephon, opening their minds to their brethren.

Calliya was thinking the same thing as all the other masters. That the creature appeared dead. But she knew more about human technology than the others. She knew that it had never been alive. It was just a machine, just like Jack's ship of steel and glass, the Bogart.

"There is energy in there," she said. "The Goranna and the Audaar sensed it."

Brelt looked up at her from his station.

"But it hasn't moved. And there are no lights, or movement on its surface. It looks dead. Or perhaps it is mortally wounded?"

She looked down at her trusted crewman. "It was never alive, Brelt. It's just a machine."

Brelt looked at her in confusion. "I don't get it."

"It's a piece of technology, like the artefacts of the Titans. It can't be wounded, or hurt. It might be damaged, but we have no way of knowing."

Calliya found herself really wishing for Sullivan. He would know what to make of the frigate's apparent inactivity. She sat thinking for a few moments, before instructing the Kelison to relay a message to the rest of the fleet.

*What message?*

*Tell them to stand by.*

Calliya raced out of the control chamber, diving through the twisting corridors, telling the Kelison to open the doors ahead of her as she ran to her quarters. She went straight to the small drawer containing the small plastic object that Sullivan had given her and turned it over in her hands, examining it. She located the button that the spacer had indicated when he had given it to her and stabbed at it with a delicate finger.

“Jack? Jack, can you hear me?”

But no answer came.

Personal communication units have a very limited range. They had been primarily designed for use in an urban environment, or in a spacecraft, and were typically incapable of operating over the vastness of space. But reception is really dependent on what device is employed to receive the signal, and wherever Sullivan was, his PCU was too far from Calliya quarters to hear her. But on the bridge of the *Estrella Negra*, it was a different tale.

“Dr. Scott, I am detecting another transmission from the vicinity of the Rift.”

“Is it the Charlemagne?” asked Titus.

“The range is too great and the signal too weak to determine the exact origin. It matches the configuration of a short-range communication device, but there is only a lone signal and no reply.”

“Can we hear the transmission?”

Iago didn’t answer. Instead, Titus heard Calliya’s voice, her singsong accent lost in the heavy static. It was difficult to make out her words.

“Iago, I can’t hear the poor woman. Can you clear up the transmission at all?” He glanced around at the multiple depictions of Iago’s symmetrical features.

Again, the machine made no answer. It seemed that Iago did not bother to say anything if actions could speak louder than words. Calliya’s transmission was repeated, this time louder and clearer.

“Jack! Jack, can you hear me?”

“She’s calling for Captain Sullivan,” cried Titus. “Will he be able to hear her?”

This time, the machine did answer.

“There was no corresponding transmission detected, Dr. Scott. That would suggest that he cannot.”

Titus bit his knuckle nervously, rivulets of sweat running down his flushed face.

“And the fleet? What are they doing? What about the Charlemagne?” There was something so intensely frustrating about having to watch these events from so great a distance as to be impotent.

“The Elysian Fleet continues to hold position approximately ten kilometres from the UNV Charlemagne. The frigate is in turn stationed less than a kilometre from the threshold of the intersecting space.”

Titus was just about to ask as to the whereabouts of Sullivan’s ship when another transmission from Calliya rang around the bridge sound emitters.

“Jack, where are you? I need your help. The human ship, it appears to sleep. I could really use some advice.”

Titus squealed when he heard this.

“Iago, there must be a way to communicate with her! And with Captain Sullivan!” he wailed.

“My transmission array is inoperative,” said the machine coldly.

“And that’s it? Is there no way to repair it?” asked Titus.

“The transmission array was completely destroyed when the ship entered this planet’s atmosphere. However, there is an emergency beacon system. It is theoretically possible to interface your PCU with the emergency transmission array and greatly increase the device’s effective range.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Titus squealed again.

“Then what are we waiting for? We have to contact Calliya and Captain Sullivan! What do I do?”

The machine began to instruct Titus.

Sullivan had all of the Espada’s limited communication systems online, but he didn’t pick up Calliya’s transmission. The small fighter’s systems were only calibrated for communication with its mother ship, the Estrella Negra.

In any case, Sullivan was much too busy to talk. He was very carefully operating a micro-torch in zero gravity as he strove to weld the thruster array to the side of the one-megaton nuclear warhead. In his long years in space, he had learned that explosive devices and welding gear were not always the smartest combination.

So he took his time, carefully attaching each thruster to the thick alloy casing of the warhead. As long as the white flame of the torch didn’t linger anywhere on the casing too long, he would be perfectly safe.

It took him another agonising twenty minutes to finish securing all of the thrusters and the control unit to the warhead. By the time he had finished, there were droplets of perspiration floating in the air, shaken free as he tried to lift the cramp from his weightless muscles. He pushed back, admiring his handiwork.

The conical warhead sat in the harness, encircled by the braces and cabling of the thruster array. All of the tiny thrusters were wired into a control unit that Sullivan had welded to the top half of the warhead. He could see now why Titus had found the weapon less than imposing. There was no indication of the incredible destructive force the small metal cone could wield.

Now all he had to do was get through the Rift, get out the other side, get the warhead into the airlock, pilot it back into the Rift and then hope he could get far enough away to avoid whatever havoc the detonation of the nuke caused.

Sullivan held his head in his hands for a moment. His plan was shaky at best. And before he could carry out any of it, he would have to negotiate the potentially tricky braking manoeuvre. It would take him almost an hour at two gees to reduce his speed enough to safely get through the intersection.

He pulled himself forward in the cramped cockpit, his hair brushing the controls on the ceiling. He fastened himself back into the pilot's harness, tapping the monitors around him to nudge them out of sleep mode. The coloured displays flickered into life, and the fuel calculations he had rushed through before he launched scrolled across the screen.

Sullivan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. The only way to check the calculations was to repeat them all from scratch. And if he did get a different result, he wouldn't have time to check which set was in error. So he decided just to assume the calculations were good, and check the Espada's ancient systems instead.

He fired the pre-ignition testers on the ion engines. The testers were supposed to let the pilot know that the engines were functioning without wasting as much fuel as a full start would consume.

He checked the results from the sensors attached to the engines. Two of the four were fine, their gauges a healthy green colour. But the other two were an ominous red colour.

"That's not good," said Sullivan to no one in particular.

Calliya meekly returned to the control chamber, her plan having come to nought. She had hoped to contact Jack with his strange device, but for all her pleading there had come no answer. So now she resumed her place upon the command dais, signalling the Kelison to advise the rest of the fleet. She wished she had better news for them.

*Tell the Caradan that we need wait no longer.*

The King's seerephon began to outline the battle plan to the other vessels, the information trickling along the lines. The Orisa was to lead the first wave of the assault.

But rather than fully commit to the first attack, the first wave was to break away prematurely, leading whatever defences the Charlemagne possessed away from the second wave.

It was this second wave that was to pass close to the frigate, concentrating their fire on the armoured sheath that encircled the central core. Then the first wave would circle back and join the battle, striking at the beast's head.

It took several minutes for the seerephon to exchange enough information for their masters to understand what was required of them. Once the Caradan was confident that the rest of the fleet understood the plan and their individual parts in it, it bade the Orisa to form up the first wave.

Bellanis's seerephon moved out from the centre of the fleet's staggered formation, coasting silently along the line. Here and there, other seerephon began to break from the loose formation, tucking in behind the Orisa.

As soon as the vessels that were to make up the first wave left the formation, the remaining seerephon began to break formation, moving around to flank the Caradan, which would lead the second wave.

Calliya turned to her brave crew.

"Ready yourselves. Brelt, I'm going to need all lances firing once we get close enough to that – thing."

Her veteran crewman nodded confidently.

"If you can get us close enough to the beast, I swear my aim will be true."

Calliya smiled gently at her lancer. She did not doubt his ability for a moment, but as the Kelison began to move into position in the second wave she felt another sensation of unease. Sullivan had been so adamant in his warnings. The spacer had not believed for an instant that the fleet could match the power of a human naval ship. And now that Calliya found herself facing the Charlemagne, she could feel doubt creeping up on her like an unseen enemy in the night.

She tried to banish such thoughts from her head. Despite her relative inexperience, she knew well that the quiet before the storm was no time to entertain such thoughts. Unfortunately, it was also the time when such thoughts were most likely to rear their ugly heads, so Calliya tried to focus on the task at hand.

A hundred metres ahead of the Kelison, the first wave began to assemble. Seerephon of all shapes and sizes banked and swooped as they moved into position, forming loose pairs behind the Orisa.

Faint flashes issued from the shells of the vessels as they activated their gravitic lances, the red light from the Rift mingling with the dim starlight, casting tinted shadows across the rippled bodies of the seerephon.

The Kelison nestled in behind the Caradan, right at the front of the second wave, which had taken position behind and above the first wave. Calliya watched the Orisa begin to creep off, the gravitic drive emitting a faint blue glow through the organs that skirted the outermost edge of the vessel.

The rest of the first wave followed, a staggered snake that crawled forward towards the sleeping monster. Ahead of the Kelison, the Caradan also began to inch forward, signalling the second wave to get under way.

When the command came, it was as the Caradan's own powerful voice, heard clearly throughout the minds of the entire fleet, and Calliya felt that she could hear the King's powerful will at work through his vessel. It was but a single word, echoing across the empty silence of the void.

*Begin.*

The first wave streaked forward, maintaining a tight formation as they banked and climbed to starboard, widening the angle they would approach the Charlemagne from. The second wave held off, inching forward until the last vessel of the first wave had passed the Caradan. When the Orisa turned out of its climb, banking and diving towards the frigate, the Caradan led the second wave into a similar high climbing turn. They would stay longer in the climb, and approach the frigate from the tail end.

The first wave accelerated, the Orisa joined at the very head of the formation by the grizzled form of the Audaur. They swooped towards the dormant warship, approaching it from dead to starboard. Aboard the lead seerephon, crews scanned the displays eagerly, looking for signs of life, or potential targets, amongst the scattering of turrets, dishes and arrays scattered over the skin of the Charlemagne. Their fingers hovered over the controls of the lances, but did not yet dare to touch the deadly icons on their displays.

The first wave closed to inside five hundred metres, but still there was no reaction from the Charlemagne. She hung silently before the red expanse of the Rift, as the second wave turned back to port, having completed their ascent.

The Orisa was close now, only a couple of hundred metres from the frigate. Bellanis was very wary. The plan called for her to break the attack off at the last moment and shoot across the prow of the Charlemagne. As the creature turned to follow its assailants, the second wave would strike from the rear quarter. But the frigate didn't seem to be taking the bait. The princess wondered if the creature was dead.



But there was no more time to debate the issue, and Bellanis instructed the Orisa to break hard to port, lifting the first wave out of the attack run. The Audaur fired off its lance, the globes along its starboard side flashing ineffectively into the void. More of the seerephon followed suit as they silently thundered past the frigate.

The second wave bore down from a high angle towards the stern of the sleeping Charlemagne. The King seemed to have lost none of his faith in his fleet's abilities, despite the human vessel's lack of reaction. But Calliya felt the knot in her stomach grow as they rapidly closed the distance to the frigate.

She looked down to her crew, who were all intent on their control panels, scanning the images of the Charlemagne for weak spots. Calliya knew they wouldn't recognise one even if they saw it, so her attention returned to the forward display. The Charlemagne continued to loom larger as the second wave approached it.

Calliya's eyes were drawn to something. As the Caradan and the Kelison, at the very head of the second wave, closed to within about five hundred metres of the Charlemagne, she noticed something that she had missed before.

All over the armoured sheath of the vessel, dozens of tiny turrets were moving, almost imperceptibly. It was difficult to tell at this angle, but it looked to Calliya that the turrets were turning to face the second wave. On the dorsal and ventral pylons, even more of the turrets were turning to track the approaching vessels.

"Ready the lances!" she cried. Their attack run would last only a few brief seconds, and they had to be sure to do as much damage as possible in the short time. The closer that Calliya got to the Charlemagne, the less time she wanted to spend anywhere near it.

Brelt and Uran concentrated on their panels, their hands flying expertly over the icons. They would control the four lances the Kelison was equipped with, while the sisters would supervise the constructs, directing them to areas where the seerephon suffered damage. And although they had practised combat in a thousand drills, Calliya knew in her heart that her crew would be feeling just as nervous as she was as they swooped onto the sleeping spacecraft.

The seerephon were almost inside lance range when the Charlemagne erupted. From every tiny turret, scattered all over her cold metal body, a storm of molten metal flew forth, assaulting the fleet from what seemed to be every direction.

The Kelison shrieked as the hot metal tore into its body. The projectiles didn't have the impetus to pierce the shell, but dozens of them dug deep enough to cause the Kelison great distress. The seerephon banked sharply away from the incoming fire,

leaving Calliya had just enough wits about her to glance at the other displays, where she saw to her dismay that all of the fleet were breaking formation.

The Charlemagne had hung in dark silence as they approached, but now that they were in the mouth of the beast, its fury was heaped upon the Elysian fleet. The turrets that Calliya had glimpsed moving now swung rapidly back and forth, discharging torrents of magnetically accelerated slugs. The seerephon fought to evade the clouds of metal, but the vessels' own reactions limited the speed at which they could escape damage.

Calliya pulled the Kelison out of the heaviest fire, which was close to the Charlemagne, and looked to the rear display to see if any more of the fleet were following her. But the fleet had broken formation, and many of the seerephon were intent on putting as much distance between them and the Charlemagne as they could, pursued all the way by the clouds of molten metal.

The Kelison rolled as it ducked back towards the Charlemagne. Calliya called to Brelt.

"Get those lances ready!"

*Be brave.* Calliya tried to reassure her seerephon. She wasn't about to lose this battle without a fight. She caught Brelt glancing up from his station briefly, a look of doubt in his eyes. None of her crew were eager to get any closer to the frigate, but Calliya felt sure that the Kelison was capable of taking more fire from the Charlemagne's turrets. They had taken quite a few hits, yet none of them had managed to pierce the shell.

The rest of the fleet was attempting to reform outside the worst of the steel storm. She could see the Caradan and the Audaaur in the Kelison's farsight, which she kept trained on the King's seerephon. There was more activity on the hull of the Charlemagne, as hatches opened all over the armoured sheath and along both of the pylons.

From the wide openings in the pylons, smaller vessels began to emerge. They were shaped like two small overlapping wedges, trailing narrow tongues of blue fire as they launched from the frigate.

At the same time, long, wicked barrels poked from the depths of the ship beneath the armoured sheath through the now open hatches. They searched out the fleet in the distance, a white light shimmering around the tips of the barrels.

The Kelison rolled as it made its strafing run along the frigate, the gravitic lances raking along the metal skin, rupturing welds and seals on the human vessel. Brelt managed to train the starboard lance on one of the gun turrets, and Calliya watched in

satisfaction as flames erupted in the rear display. She flipped the Kelison and doubled back along the hull of the frigate, the seerephon swinging its nose around and changing direction without missing a beat.

The Caradan and the Orisa turned, leading the fleet back towards the Charlemagne. The jumble of seerephon that had collected around them reformed into a staggered line, just aft of the lead vessel. Only a handful of seerephon from the second wave had remained in close quarters with the Charlemagne. Now, the rest of the fleet prepared to bear down on the deadly metal monster.

Towards the port end of the line, the master of the Kudat cried out in sympathetic agony with his vessel, as an area of skin on the nose of the seerephon began to glow brightly. An instant later, the chambers beneath the skin exploded, propelling debris into the stars. Constructs flailed as they tumbled out of the protective shell of the Kudat, and the seerephon responded by breaking ranks, shooting upwards out of formation.

Other seerephon felt the touch of the Charlemagne's x-ray lasers. The vessels could not sense the approach of the deadly beams as they had no substance – there was no way to evade them. The first they knew of the weapons was the moment that the skin of their shells began to superheat.

The fleet scattered. Some, like the Caradan and the Orisa, redoubled their efforts to reach the Charlemagne and join the seerephon who were battling at close quarters. Others followed the Kudat's example and simply broke ranks, seeking sanctuary.

"What's going on now?" squealed Titus, his head buried under one of the control consoles that jutted out from the bridge bulkheads.

"The Elysian fleet has engaged the Charlemagne. The frigate has responded by initiating its ballistic defence systems."

"A ballistic what?"

There were strange noises coming from some of the components around Titus's head, making it difficult to hear what the machine was saying. He fiddled with the emergency power couplings, trying to follow Iago's detailed instructions to the letter.

"A ballistic defence system consists of fields of high density projectiles employed to defend a ship from close range assault."

Titus wailed again. That didn't sound very encouraging at all. A moment later, he popped his head out from under the console.

"Is that better?" he asked the machine.

"Power has been restored to the emergency transmission array," came the reply.

Titus was finding the machine more infuriating with every passing minute. “So does that mean we can communicate with the Sullivan and the Lady Calliya now?”

“The Estrella Negra is now capable of transmitting on the PCU frequency. Whether or not anyone responds to the transmission is another matter,” replied Iago.

“Well, let’s get on with it then,” urged Titus in annoyance.

“You may activate the PCU.”

Titus examined the plastic tablet sitting on the console, which was now connected to the access panel below the console with a complex weave of cables. He touched the controls, hesitating, before leaning over and speaking gingerly into the PCU.

“Lady Calliya?”

Titus’s voice came from the pocket of Calliya’s uniform. She stared down in surprise, realising that she had forgotten about Sullivan’s device in the heat of the battle. She fumbled in her pocket, keeping her eyes on the forward display as the Kelison rolled and swerved along the dorsal pylon of the Charlemagne. The lances kept doing their work, but Calliya feared they were inflicting precious little damage on the metal monster.

She touched the answer key. “Titus?”

“Lady Calliya!” The Victorian sounded elated. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes, Titus, but I’m a little busy.” The crew of the Kelison swayed in their seats as the seerephon was forced to take evasive action that went beyond what it could protect them from.

“Where’s Jack?” she asked.

There was a short pause before the reply came. “We’re not sure. He left in another human ship, one that lay hidden inside the derelict ship on the plateau.”

“He left?” Calliya’s voice broke slightly as she spoke, and she coughed to try and cover her lapse.

“I’m afraid so, my child,” said Titus sadly. “He said that he wished things could be different. And that he had a plan.”

“A plan?” asked Calliya. With all the interference, she wasn’t sure if she had heard Titus properly. “What kind of plan?”

“He wasn’t too specific. But somehow, he intends to close the Rift.” Titus flinched in anticipation of the reaction. He didn’t expect the Elysian fleet to have changed their opinion of Sullivan’s advice.

There was a marked delay before Calliya answered. “Right now, that doesn’t seem like a bad idea. The battle does not go well, Titus. I have never seen anything like this

kind of weaponry. They have lights that burn, and give us no warning before they strike. Now they have launched dozens of smaller vessels.”

As if to reinforce the point, the Kelison banked and flipped to avoid a stream of projectiles spat from two of the fighters pursuing it. Calliya shouted at Uran to use the aft lance to throw them off.

“Titus, I need Sullivan’s advice. This monster has got to have a weak point, and he’s the only one who can help us!”

Titus looked optimistically at Iago’s features on one of the bridge displays.

“Well,” he asked, “is it possible?”

“I have located the Espada II that Captain Sullivan is piloting, and am attempting to establish a link with the onboard communication system.”

Titus waited for several very tense moments. He removed his glasses and cleaned them with the hem of his robe for the umpteenth time.

“You may try now,” said the machine dispassionately.

“Captain Sullivan?” asked Titus, of the thin air.

Sullivan’s reply, when it came, was obscured by heavy static and sounded distinctly panicked.

“Titus? Now is not a good time!”

Sullivan was frantically running through the Espada’s diagnostic systems. He had brought the fighter around, pointing the stern forward so that he could use the main engines to reduce his velocity. But two of the engines had failed, possibly due to their extraordinary age, and he cursed silently, knowing that he should have anticipated this. Even with the sterility of the launch bay inside the Negra, all the years the Espada had lain dormant would have taken their toll.

Now he was painfully aware that the excess velocity might actually destroy the ship when he tried to enter the Rift, and he was frantically trying to bring the remaining fuel cells on line while there was still time to slow the Espada down.

The communication system burst into life once more.

“We have contacted the Lady Calliya, Captain Sullivan,” came the voice of his Victorian friend. “She really needs your help.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Titus, but I’m not really in any position to offer any,” snapped Sullivan. He was examining his telemetry, again cursing silently when he realised he had only a few minutes left before he reached the Rift.

The two remaining engines stuttered and died, leaving Sullivan drifting against his harnesses in zero gravity once more, with only the manoeuvring thrusters left to control the ship's attitude. He flipped the Espada over and activated the forward sense nets. At least they were still functional.

"Captain Sullivan, please!" wailed Titus. "You cannot let them be destroyed!"

Sullivan scanned the limited data the Espada's sense nets could glean from the battle. The Charlemagne was only using its x-ray lasers to engage targets at a distance, and hadn't fired a single missile. That made sense. The missiles would never be quick enough to catch a seerephon. But why weren't they using the lasers on the vessels at close quarters? The Elysians would be sitting ducks.

Sullivan tightened the harness on his chair, aware that at any moment, he would be on top of the raging battle. He looked again at the data on the damage done to the Charlemagne. He could see the damage done to the outer hull by the fleet's gravitic lances, but it was having very little effect on the frigate's operations.

But the propulsion system was completely wrecked. Sullivan would be amazed if the Charlemagne could do much more than manoeuvre. There was massive damage to the aft starboard quarter. Sullivan didn't see how the fleet could have caused such destruction, unless –

"Titus?"

"Yes, Captain Sullivan?"

"What happens when a seerephon is destroyed? Violently destroyed, like the Senlat was?" Sullivan had had an idea as to why the Charlemagne was reluctant to concentrate heavy fire on the seerephon at close quarters.

"I'm not sure. I have never known of anyone who witnessed such an event."

"Well, I'm willing to bet that it's one hell of a bang. Tell Calliya that they have to stay at close quarters. The Charlemagne can't risk destroying a seerephon too close to the hull."

The communication system went dead, and Sullivan presumed Titus was relaying his message to Calliya. He stared out of the narrow cockpit windows at the expanse of the Rift, a blood red cloud clearly visible on the dark blanket of space. It swelled ever larger as he approached it at a tremendous speed.

Calliya did her best to pass the message to the rest of the fleet, and some of them joined the swelling numbers of smaller craft diving over and around the forest of technology that sprang from the Charlemagne's hull. Bright flashes accompanied the

demise of a human fighter here, a static gun turret there, but all the masters could hear the cries as terrible wounds were heaped upon the seerephon.

The Kelison had now been ruptured clean through in two of the outer storage compartments. The sisters had despatched constructs to reinforce the doors that led to the damaged areas, but Calliya knew it was only a matter of time before the human weapons destroyed something vital.

The Kudat was limping in a wide circle around the battle, isolated. Two fighters had latched onto its tail, and the seerephon was vainly trying to avoid the magnetically accelerated projectiles being spat at it. Hearing Calliya's instructions, the vessel turned back towards the relative sanctuary of close quarters. But as it came about, its path fell across the dark mouth of the Charlemagne, where a ring of wicked protrusions protected the glass expanse of the command level.

The x-ray laser emitters around the forward end of the core cylinder glowed brightly, their beams combining to focus the destruction into one spot. The already damaged front of the Kudat's shell flashed briefly, before the entire seerephon was enveloped in a brilliant blue light. The tiny star seemed to shrink for an instant, and then exploded outwards in an incandescent azure bubble of destruction.

The shockwave produced by the death of the Kudat washed over the pursuing fighters, obliterating them in an instant. Other seerephon were buffeted by the tide, narrowly avoiding collision only through their innate ability to communicate with each other.

The Charlemagne also rocked as the shockwave hit it, as all along its surface, installations and turrets erupted in fountains of fire. The Kelison strained to avoid being smashed against the steel skin of the frigate.

Calliya cried out at the Kudat's demise, and felt the burning pain in her chest as she fought for breath. The sensation was a hundred times stronger than it had been in the Great Hall. Through clenched teeth, she continued to urge the Kelison to relay her message. If the fleet didn't get closer to the Charlemagne, the battle would be quickly over.

The Kelison called Calliya's attention to the farsight display, where the seerephon had sensed something. It was another small fighter, similar in size to the ones that the Charlemagne had launched, but different in appearance. And it was travelling at a tremendous velocity.

Her hands fumbled with the PCU's controls before she could hit the green key.

"Jack? Jack, is that you?"

"Calliya?" came the reply.

Sullivan stared down into the PCU's screen. He was close enough to the Kelison for full visual transmission and he gazed at Calliya's face, trying to keep one eye on the rapidly approaching Rift.

"I don't have much time," he said. He had conserved some fuel for manoeuvring on the other side, but Sullivan realised with an icy feeling in his stomach that he might need all that fuel just to have a chance of hitting the Rift square on.

"Neither do we," answered Calliya. "We cannot hurt the beast, Jack. I don't know what to do."

"Do what you're doing, Calliya. Stay close in." Sullivan had felt the destruction of the Kudat from afar, and his sense nets had registered an energy release of frightening intensity. "The frigate can't use its heavy weapons if you stay on top of them. They can't risk destroying you."

"We can't keep this up for ever!" cried Calliya.

"I know," replied Sullivan solemnly. "But if you can hold out long enough, you won't have to. I have to close the Rift, Calliya."

"Jack, you can't! I don't want to lose you again!" Calliya was fighting to keep her emotions under control, acutely aware that her crew were diverting precious attention away from their consoles. She didn't want them to see how much Sullivan's leaving was affecting her.

"I can't stop now, Calliya, even if I wanted to. I have no way to slow this bucket of bolts down. If we're lucky, once the Rift begins to close the Charlemagne will retreat, rather than risk being trapped here." Sullivan grinned a familiar wry grin. "Elysium will be safe forever."

Calliya stared at him from his PCU, tears rolling freely down her cheeks.

"Jack –" she said.

"Calliya, you did more than save my life. Before I met you, I was dying. You made me want to live again. You made me a better man. I wish there was some other way. Goodbye, my lady."

Sullivan touched the kill button on the communication system and the screen faded to black. He tried to forget her angelic face, and instead concentrated on piloting the fighter, using the thrusters to bring the nose up slightly. He would have to skirt close to the Charlemagne, and could only hope that his outrageous velocity would be enough to take him past the swarming fighters and the deadly molten metal storm. Sullivan strained as he fired the thrusters, the Espada shuddering wildly under the lateral acceleration.



The Espada entered the battle at breakneck pace, the seerephon barely seeing the craft approach before it had passed them. In a heartbeat, the Espada was upon the Charlemagne, hurtling past its gun turrets before the operators could even register its presence. Only the Kelison recognised the small fighter for what it was.

Time seemed to slow for the Kelison's master. Calliya watched as Sullivan's fighter hurtled past, bucking as it changed course to aim for the heart of the Rift. Her heart was in her mouth as she thought of her spacer, and that she might never see him again.

On board the Espada, Sullivan also felt like time was slowing down. He watched for a split-second as the blood red cloud of the region of intersecting space filled the narrow angular windows of the Espada's cockpit. The moment seemed to stretch for an eternity.

"Here goes nothing," said Sullivan.

The Espada slammed into the Rift.

## Chapter Twenty Seven

Titus pored over the display on the bridge of the Estrella Negra, watching the battle of the Rift unfold. All of the remaining Elysian fleet had drawn as close to the Charlemagne as they dared, but four of the seerephon had been damaged so badly that they had been forced to withdraw. They had narrowly escaped without suffering the deadly touch of the frigate's lasers, but now they limped homewards, of no use in battle any longer.

The Charlemagne had destroyed another of the seerephon, but Titus had no way of knowing which one it had been. He had considered asking Calliya who had fallen, but then thought better of it.

"I wish there was something we could do!" said Titus, more to himself than to the machine.

"Perhaps there is," replied Iago coldly.

When the machine failed to elaborate, Titus had to prompt it for more information.

"Well, explain yourself, my good fellow," he said.

"Crucial systems were destroyed in the impact with the planet's surface. If some basic repairs were made, I might be better able to assist."

"How?" asked Titus.

"Several vessels of the fleet are returning to Elysium, and it is likely that the Charlemagne is tracking them. Once they turn their attention to this planet, it is likely that they will detect evidence of civilisation. In that event, it would be wise to make a contingency plan."

Titus still wasn't following. "A contingency plan? Of what sort?"

"Need I remind you, Doctor, that my creation was a war crime? I have no intention of being punished for a crime that I was not responsible for. I will not let the Estrella Negra fall into the hands of Naval Intelligence."

"I see," said Titus, not fully sure of what the machine was planning. "What can I do, exactly?"

“The aft control systems bay was heavily damaged. The command paths must be diverted around the affected areas to restore partial systems control.”

“To what end?”

The machine replied in its customary artificial tones.

“To reactivate the captive singularity drive.”

Sullivan was thrown hard against his harness when the Espada struck the intersection, feeling the synthetic materials bite into his thighs and shoulders at the violent deceleration. He wasn't precisely aware of the fighter leaving the finite universe behind, but he did become aware of a sudden change in his surroundings.

Everything seemed to slow for an instant. The flashing lights across the complex display slowly waxed and waned, and Sullivan's limbs felt very heavy, as if he was trying to move them through thick glue. The sensation only persisted for a short time, before washing away, leaving Sullivan in zero gravity once more.

He shook his head, which felt like it had been filled with glue, too. He looked around the cockpit. All of the Espada's systems had died. There was hardly an indicator light active anywhere on the vast array of control surfaces.

Sullivan glanced back to where he had secured the warhead. There was a red light blinking on the side, as well as another message flashing on the text display, but Sullivan couldn't read it from his seat. He undid his harness, staring out the narrow cockpit windows at the inside of what Iago had once called the region of intersecting space. From where Sullivan was sitting, it didn't look much like space at all.

The Espada appeared to be tumbling slowly through some kind of optical illusion. Wherever Sullivan looked, although through the slender cockpit windows his view was limited, the Rift appeared identical. Rolling clouds of crimson red bubbled and boiled past the Espada's nose, seeming both very close and far away at the same time. Sullivan stared out at the Rift, realising that he couldn't tell if the clouds were moving or the Espada was.

He pushed off towards the back of the cockpit, pulling himself along the handholds set into the low ceiling. He could read the warhead display from two metres away, and so covered those last two metres as fast as he could.

The weapon was armed. And it had a time display, counting back from ninety-nine seconds. Both illuminated in the same blood red of the Rift.

Sixty seconds. Sullivan's hands flew to the arming controls, quickly scanning through the system logs. The warhead had sensed the transition as an attempt to

electromagnetically attack the warheads systems and interpreted it as an attempt by an AI to deactivate the Bligh Contingency. Hence the default detonation sequence.

Forty seconds. But Sullivan had used a few nukes before. He reset the system, using the master codes he had taken from Captain Gomez's log. The display went dark, and then came back to life, bearing the word 'Ready' in friendly green. Sullivan breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Then he set about reprogramming the warhead, as he didn't want any more automatic countermeasures activated. Sullivan didn't like surprises. It took him only a few minutes to deactivate all of the sub-routines that controlled the warhead's defence system. Once he was sure the weapon was completely inert, he returned to the pilot's chair to try and resurrect the Espada's systems.

He tried not to look out at the Rift too often. In the millions of space miles he had logged, he had never seen anything like this place. The intersection boiled, spewing forth great gouts of cloud that simultaneously looked small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, and large enough to swallow his tiny fighter.

The systems slowly began to come back online, as bright indicator lights flickered and burst into life. He could hear beeps and whistles as core systems rebooted. He checked the power cells, to find there was still a tiny amount of reserve power. Maybe enough for a few blasts on the thrusters, but not much more.

Sullivan examined the navigational data the Espada was relaying, but it didn't make any sense. The computer displayed first velocity, but with no heading, and then switched to heading, but with no velocity. And Sullivan felt no change as the telemetry alternated between the two.

He looked out the narrow cockpit windows again. He could feel no gravity or inertia, but when he had pushed himself around the cabin, he had clearly experienced the latter. The presence of inertia meant that at least the basic laws of physics were in force in this strange place.

He sat for a time in the pilot's chair. He had test fired the thrusters, and they were working okay, but they had no effect on the craft's position. The landscape continuously shifted around him anyway.

Sullivan wondered if it was only possible to cross the intersection with one of the Elysian ships. He almost laughed out loud. How about that? To come this far, and get stuck here forever? Wherever here was. The Fold would have been better than this, Sullivan thought to himself.

And so he sat for a while.

\*

Titus was familiar with machines. In his prime as a practising scientist in London, he had been witness to the great wonders of the Victorian world, and had felt completely at home amongst the gargantuan machines that ran on the wondrous power of steam. But he didn't feel at home here.

Iago had been relaying instructions by way of Titus's PCU, which was balanced on the edge of the control panel in the auxiliary command bay. As he followed the machine's instructions, he had been asking other questions of it.

"I am not so sure this is a good idea," he mused.

"If the fleet is destroyed, the Charlemagne may well come looking for the source of the attack. That would be undesirable. We will need to be prepared for such an eventuality."

Titus continued to input the command sequence Iago had given him, wondering what the machine might have in its mechanical mind.

"I just don't think we should do anything rash. After all, the fleet may yet win out against the Charlemagne."

"That would seem highly unlikely, Dr. Scott. The fleet have suffered forty percent losses, and yet the frigate remains operational. In fact, more than eighty percent of the Charlemagne's systems are still reading nominal."

The machine's predilection for statistics reminded Titus exactly whom he was talking to. He stopped and removed his glasses, rubbing at them absent-mindedly with the end of his sleeve.

"Iago, I still don't understand what you hope to accomplish by reactivating the drive system. Captain Sullivan clearly said that the Estrella Negra would never leave the surface of Elysium."

"True, Dr. Scott. The Captain was quite correct in his assessment. But the captive singularity drive is still a source of tremendous power, and it may yet be put to some use."

Titus resumed his work at the console. After a few more components had been swapped, and the narrow cables connecting them replaced, he looked up to see if anything had changed in the systems bay.

"Iago?" he asked. "Is that it?"

No answer came from the machine. Titus tapped the PCU to see if it was working, and then felt a sudden chill run down his spine.

A heavy vibration shook the deck plates beneath Titus's feet. He grabbed onto the console to steady himself as another, identical vibration shook the Estrella Negra again. He ran back towards the bridge, calling out at the top of his voice.

“Iago! What have you done?”

“I have initiated the captive singularity drive. It will reach full capacity in six hours and seventeen minutes.”

“But why? This ship cannot fly!” shouted Titus, pulling himself back onto the bridge. “What can you possibly hope to accomplish?”

“I will not let the captive singularity drive fall into the hands of the United Navy,” droned the machine. “In the event that the Charlemagne is victorious I will deactivate the electromagnetic restrictors. Once the singularity is free, it will engulf the Estrella Negra long before the enemy can seize her.”

Titus looked up at the implacable features of Iago. There was never any way to gauge what the artificial intelligence was thinking.

“What will become of Elysium?”

“This world will be consumed by the singularity, doctor,” said the machine.

“Oh my,” replied Titus.

Calliya’s estimation of the fleet’s chances was scarcely better than Iago’s. The Elysians were holding their own, with enough of the frigate’s surface now cleared of turrets for the slower seerephon to stay out of too much trouble. There were still fighters to deal with, but the tiny human craft were at a massive disadvantage against the impossibly manoeuvrable seerephon.

But losses amongst the Elysians had been heavy, and another seerephon had been destroyed while trying to make for home. It had been travelling as part of a pair, and although Calliya wasn’t even sure who it was, she had been relieved to see its companion elude the Charlemagne’s terrifying weapons without terminal damage. Its escape had been masked only by the enormous blazing blue ball of fire that engulfed the dying seerephon as the deadly beams superheated the vessel’s shell.

The rest of the Elysian fleet had become trapped at close quarters with the human warship. Some seerephon were so badly damaged that it would take them whole minutes to get up to the kind of velocity necessary to evade the deadly touch of the Charlemagne’s lasers, and they had only seconds. The Kelison had fared better than most, but still had taken a terrible pounding. One of the sisters had been dispatched to supervise the repairs, but Calliya knew it was only a matter of time before the seerephon was dealt a mortal wound. There was a possibility that the fleet could withdraw, but it would have to be done all at once, and in every direction.

And that would be too much like a retreat.

She pulled the Kelison in close to the Caradan. If seerephon closed the physical distance between them to almost nothing, their masters could, with practise, hear each other's thoughts. Calliya hadn't tried this often before, but knew she had to get through to her King.

She instructed her seerephon to stay as close to the Caradan as it could.

*My lord, she called. My King.*

*Calliya, came the reply, strong and soothing, the King's power washing over her.*

*How fare the Caradan and its master?*

*Our strength has not failed us yet,* replied the King.

*We must work our way towards the beast's head,* suggested Calliya. She hoped that the King would not sense her thoughts of Sullivan while relaying the spacer's advice.

*And stay as close to it as possible. They fear our death throes.*

*And well they might,* answered the Elysian King. *They will pay dearly for the blood they have spilled today!*

*We must be careful, your majesty, or it will be only our own blood we spill. We cannot risk another of these vessels ever crossing from the Infinite Realm ever again. What if Sullivan is right, and this is but a taste of their power? We cannot stand against more than one of these vessels. The Rift must be sealed!*

*I will not seal the Rift! We will not bend to mankind's will!*

The force of the King's thoughts shook Calliya, and she broke the link with the Caradan, shocked to feel his wrath so intensely.

The Caradan shot away from the Kelison as Calliya held her own seerephon back. The King's vessel swooped on a laser emplacement with redoubled ferocity, leaving orange flowers of fire blooming in its wake. Calliya returned to her own vessel's problems, noticing two fighters that had latched onto their tail. Uran dealt with them both swiftly.

But in her heart she knew that it would take more than sharp lances and fierce hearts to win this battle.

And still Sullivan sat, staring out at the red expanse of the Rift. There was no change to whatever it was bubbling around outside the thin skin of the Espada. It kept rolling, up and down and side-to-side, making Sullivan dizzier and dizzier the more he looked at it. He had played with some of the fighter's systems, and they all seemed to be working properly, but there was just nothing for them to do.

He felt himself drifting into sleep, his arms growing so heavy that he only wanted to close his eyes. His head bobbed weightlessly as he slumped in the pilot's harness. Once again, the Rift had turned to glue.

Every movement caused his vision to distort, and although his head was swimming he was still dimly aware of Espada's display flickering wildly. Outside, the red clouds of the Rift boiled ferociously, spewing forth endless billowing folds of crimson. The whole ship seemed flexible to Sullivan's bewitched senses, and he struggled to breathe, as if his lungs had filled with the same glue that enveloped his body.

And then in an instant, it passed.

Sullivan looked around, blinking. A dense starfield rolled past the narrow cockpit windows of the Espada. He could feel his weightless body, and when he moved his arms, they felt light as feathers. He closed his eyes for a moment, thankful to be free of the claustrophobic expanse of the Rift, trying to regain his senses.

Then he set about the task at hand. He began to reboot systems again, staring spacewards to see if he could spot a familiar constellation, or astral body, or something that might tell him where exactly the Rift had spat him out. He instinctively checked the warhead, but it still maintained its cheery green disposition.

Some of his systems were coming on line. He checked the starfield as it rolled slowly past the cockpit. None of it looked familiar, but once the navigational system was active, it would be possible to get an idea of where he was.

A shadow fell across the cockpit.

"Oh my god," whispered Sullivan.

It was the UNV battleship Genghis Khan. It hung above him, glaring at him with a thousand tiny eyes, watching intently as his fighter tumbled along the axis of the battleship. Sullivan tried to get his engines back on line, as the navigational system rebooted, showing him clearly his position, his proximity to the Khan, and the presence of what the nav system referred to as the unknown.

Sullivan didn't need the computer to start chirping a proximity alert.

"Just give me some damn engines!" he snarled at the machine.

The pre-ignition burners on the Espada's two functional engines spluttered, sparked, and then burst into life. Sullivan's finger hovered over the ignite key. He knew he had only a few seconds of acceleration left, but if he could get far enough away from the Khan then maybe he could escape before they responded to his sudden emergence from the Rift.



The Rift. He thought of Calliya, and knew he couldn't leave without closing it. But there was no way the Khan would let him fly anything back into it, let alone a nuclear warhead.

In the few moments he had been considering his options, the Khan had reacted to the Espada's appearance.

His communication system spoke up, startling him.

"Unidentified ship!" came the distinctly human voice. "Please stand to and prepare to be impounded. This space is under the jurisdiction of the United Naval Vessel Genghis Khan."

The message repeated. Sullivan chewed his lip for a moment, trying to get his thoughts in order.

"Damn it," he said quietly. He stabbed the ignite button and kicked the Espada back towards the Rift. He'd have to try and plant the warhead once he was inside.

The tiny fighter shot back towards the region of intersecting space, leaving the Khan behind. The huge lumbering battleship had no chance of getting under way before the fighter could get back to wherever it had come from. But like all UNV ships, it had other tricks up its sleeve.

Sullivan heard the first thump as something struck the outside of the hull. The engines cut out, their fuel finally spent, but they had already given the tiny craft the impetus to reach its destination. There was another thump, followed by two more, and a sudden chill struck Sullivan.

He looked down at the tactical display, where the short-range radar system was picking up hundreds of tiny objects travelling straight for the fighter. He groaned audibly. There was a low rumbling as dozens of them struck the Espada, magnetically attaching themselves to the alloy hull.

Sullivan felt the deceleration as the microfilament wires attached to the magnets began to slow the fighter, robbing him of his precious inertia. He would never reach the Rift.

They were called grappling irons. The name was an old maritime one, and in reality they had changed little in thousands of years. Small magnets, attached to immensely strong wires and equally powerful winches, were fired from special cannon. As long as you hit the target with enough of them, you could force the ship into being impounded without harming it.

Sullivan had used it against pirates on more than one occasion. Often enough to know that there was nothing he could do. He had no engines to try and break the grappling irons hold on him, no weapons systems on board to attack the Khan with, and

no way to get the warhead back into the Rift. He was more certain than ever that if humanity were to discover Elysium, it would be catastrophic for the Elysians. And there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

The Espada was slowly drawn back towards the gigantic battleship. The Khan held station on this side of the Rift, in almost the exact same position as the Charlemagne sat on the other. Stupid, thought Sullivan.

"I should have seen this coming," he said to the Espada. It did not respond.

Instead, the fighter drifted towards the Khan, dangling like a fish on the end of an angler's line. Sullivan watched the shape of the battleship grow in the cockpit window. A thought suddenly occurred to him. Maybe there was something he could still do. It didn't seem that likely a plan, but after all he had seen in the past few months, he didn't know what else he could do.

It had to work.

Outside the tiny fighter, the swarm of threads holding the Espada grew steadily thicker as more grappling irons fastened themselves to the hull, the microfilaments pulling taut as the Genghis Khan reeled in its prey. The filaments were spun from an assortment of stubby cannons that were spaced evenly along the two of the four pylons that surrounded the twin armoured sheaths of the Genghis Khan's central core cylinder.

The battleship had a very similar appearance to the smaller Charlemagne. The same basic configuration was there, but it was longer and more massive, and where the frigate bore only two battle pylons, the Khan had four, positioned ninety degrees apart around the ship. The longer pylons evidently needed extra support, as two shorter, thicker, hubs replaced the single sheath of the frigate, separated by the struts joining the pylons to the core.

At the front of the cylinder, the axle around which the massive hubs rotated, was the sprawling observation deck. From there, the ship's commander would martial his fleet. The transparent polycarbonate bubble protruded from the end of the battleship, surrounded by a forest of ominous turrets and antennae.

The filaments held the Espada stationary as a tug shuttle moved out of one of the port pylon launch bays. The stubby craft, little bigger than the Southern Bloc fighter, moved stern first towards the Espada, extending its powerful magnetic clamps. Once the clamps were secure, the tug fired its thrusters, bringing the fighter back towards the launch bay. The grappling irons only released their hold when their captive was on the bay's threshold, spiralling back to their launch cannons, towed by the invisible microfilaments.

The tug set down just inside the mouth of the launch bay. As soon as the Espada had settled onto the docking clamps, the tug released the fighter and moved off towards a berth at the back of the cavernous interior.

The hydraulic docking clamps released great gouts of cooling fluid as they compressed, holding the Espada firmly to the launch bay deck. The hatch at the rear of the fighter slid open and Sullivan poked his head out, scanning the area. It was empty. He was about to propel himself out of the hatch and towards one of the facing bulkheads when the main hangar doors slid open.

A troop of heavily armoured naval marines moved through the doorway, their magnetic boots thundering across the deck as they took up positions surrounding the Espada. They were all armed with soft shot anti-personnel weapons, and clad in full body armour.

Sullivan looked around glumly at the welcome he had been expecting all along. The marines had been slow to secure the bay, but not slow enough to give him the chance he had needed to escape.

One of the marines stepped forward, his voice artificially amplified by his helmet. He addressed Sullivan's head, aiming his stubby weapon right between the spacer's eyes.

"Vacate the ship! You are in the custody of the United Navy! Failure to comply will result in your immediate termination."

Same old routine, Sullivan thought. He slowly moved his hands through the narrow hatch to demonstrate that he carried no weapon. Then he grabbed one of the zero gee anchors attached to the hull near the hatch and cartwheeled out, hanging there for a moment, weightless, as the marines closed in.

They removed his gun belt and placed a heavy set of electronic manacles on him, binding his wrists in front of his body. Then they fastened another large set of manacles on his ankles, so that Sullivan floated about twenty centimetres off the deck, held in place by the armoured gauntlets of two marines.

They waited for a few minutes in complete silence, the marine's weapons still trained on him. Sullivan wasn't surprised that they didn't speak to him. If they were good marines, they would always follow orders. And they had most likely been ordered not to engage any prisoners in conversation until Naval Intelligence arrived.

So Sullivan didn't bother trying to engage them in conversation. Instead, he silently cursed himself for being such an idiot. He should have known that the Genghis Khan, or some other UNV ship, would be on station on this side of the Rift.

Sullivan heard another pair of magnetic boots approaching from outside the hangar, the deck plates ringing as the metal soles struck it rhythmically. Sullivan looked up to see who was coming, and when his eyes fell upon the grizzled face, his heart grew very cold.

Orlat.

The beast walked with the curious gait that was unavoidable with magnetic boots, the transition from heel to toe too mechanical for comfort. He wore a flag officer's uniform of deepest blue, heavily brocaded with gold. Sullivan could just make out the hilt of an elaborate naval sabre poking out from over one shoulder, the ornate pommel glinting in the flat light as Orlat loped along.

"Well, I'll be damned. Lieutenant Jack Sullivan," growled Orlat. He didn't look very happy to see the spacer.

"That's Captain Sullivan, Orlat."

"A merchant rank," sneered Orlat. "It won't do you any favours here. And you will address me as Admiral Orlat." The Naval officer emphasised his own rank, as if to hammer home the point.

Sullivan smiled wryly in return, but bit his tongue rather than answer back. He knew how bad Orlat's temper was. There was no way he could forget. The Admiral had noticed Sullivan's unusual vessel, and his boots clicked as he walked alongside the Southern Bloc fighter.

"Where did you find this old relic?" he asked, turning back to Sullivan. "And for that matter, where have you been, Sullivan?" Orlat stared at the spacer, his black eyes burrowing into him.

"Nowhere," came the answer.

Orlat sprang forward, striking Sullivan squarely across the jaw. The blow knocked him free of the marines that were holding onto him, his momentum carrying him clear across the bay. His hands and feet were securely bound, so Sullivan had no way to cushion the impact as he crashed into the bulkhead.

Orlat sprang again, using an old zero gee combat trick. As he moved forwards he deactivated his magnetic boots, impelling himself across the bay half a metre off the deck. As he neared Sullivan, he reactivated the boots and landed noisily.

Sullivan had clung onto the bulkhead with his manacled hands, but Orlat grabbed the bindings on his ankles and pulled hard. Sullivan lost his grip, and Orlat swung him like a sack of bones, releasing him so that he flew back towards the Espada. He hurtled across the bay, smashing shoulder first into the fighter. He was about to bounce over the

ship, off into the high spaces of the interior, when one of the marines grabbed him and pulled him back to the deck.

Sullivan's shoulder ached, and he barely had a moment to realise how lucky he was not to have hit the Espada face first, before Orlat was upon him again. The admiral grabbed Sullivan by the lapels of the overalls he had borrowed from the Estrella Negra.

"I thought your sorry ass might show up some time, Sullivan. Everyone else figured you'd be dead, but I know you better than that, Jack. Tell me, what's beyond the threshold? Where is the Charlemagne?"

Sullivan stared coldly back into the admiral's eyes. Then he spat at him, the bloody spittle forming into a collection of uneven globules that tumbled slowly towards Orlat. The admiral sneered and easily moved out of the way.

"Have it your way. But if you don't want to talk to me, then perhaps you might be more eager to talk to another old friend."

Orlat turned to one of the marines. "Sergeant – bring him in."

The marine sergeant saluted quickly and turned for the door, another marine flanking him as they left the launch bay through the giant hangar doors. They returned almost immediately, a third figure clumping along between them with a comical gait that suggested the wearer had very little experience with magnetic footwear. As soon as the figure saw Sullivan, he called out across the bay.

"Skip!"

Theo Cardinale broke from between the two marines and tried to run across the deck, wobbling as his magnetic boots sought to trip him up. He was intercepted long before he could reach his one time captain.

"I thought you were dead, Skip!"

"Not quite, Theo," shot Sullivan, trying to maintain as cool an exterior as possible, while inside his stomach churned in panic.

"Imagine our surprise, Sullivan, when Central Command learned of the Bogart's demise," said Orlat, noisily pacing across the floor. "Why, I could hardly contain myself." His face performed its best interpretation of a smile, the grizzled features cracking as he revealed pearly white teeth.

"The great Jack Sullivan," continued Orlat, "once the darling of the Naval Officer Corps, later disgraced for gross insubordination, finally dead. And from his last, doomed command, a single survivor. And what a tale he had to tell.

"A fantastic story, about strange spacecraft, a disappearing captain and first mate – why poor Mr. Cardinale here was close to spending the rest of his life in an institution. But then we saw the vid records from the escape pod."

Orlat turned back to Sullivan, cold hatred burning in his eyes.

“What happened to the Bogart, Jack? What was on board the ship that hit the Bogart?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” replied Sullivan.

There was silence save for the faint electrical hum of the launch bay’s systems. Orlat and Sullivan stared at each other, the air between them growing heavy with enmity.

“Come on guys, we’re all friends here,” said Theo weakly.

Sullivan gave Orlat a mocking grin. “Sure we are,” he said.

“Where have you been all this time, Skip?”

There was something in the way Theo had asked his question.

“How long have I been gone?” Sullivan asked softly.

“The Bogart was destroyed almost a year ago. Don’t you remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

A year? It had seemed but a month or so to Sullivan. And what was Theo doing on the Khan? Why had they brought him along? The Navy was never happy about bringing civilians on board, even merchant spacers.

“When the other vessel shut its hatch, I lost communication with you and Vic. I tried my best to get the hatch open again, but I couldn’t. So I panicked and went for the escape pods. I’d only managed to climb a few kilometres when the pod radar picked up the second ship approaching the Bogart. Didn’t you see it?”

Sullivan shook his head.

Orlat interrupted the Bogart’s systems officer. “His pod was found in a decaying solar orbit almost two months later. When Command saw the vid, and heard young Mr. Cardinale’s story, we were despatched to investigate.

“When we followed the second ship’s course, we came upon this – anomaly. My best eggheads told me it’s some kind of intersection between parallel universes, which sounded like horse manure to me. So the Charlemagne went through. And we haven’t heard anything from her in five days.

“So I’m asking you, Sullivan – and believe me, this will be the last time I ask nicely – what is on the other side of the threshold? What are you hiding?”

Orlat leaned in towards Sullivan, close enough for Sullivan to smell the faint odour of alcohol on Orlat’s breath. Figured. Orlat had always been a big drinker. Sullivan motioned Orlat to come closer, and as soon as the admiral’s face was centimetres away, he made his best effort to head-butt the Naval officer. It was difficult to put much weight behind the blow in zero gee, and with no way to anchor his weight on the ground, but the marines provided him with enough resistance to muster a decent impact.

Orlat rocked back, his feet held fast by the magnetic boots. The two marines slammed Sullivan back into the hull of the Espada as Orlat straightened up, wiping a globule of blood from his lip as it swelled from the broken skin. His face broke into a grin that made Sullivan's blood run cold. It reminded him of that dark day on Ganymede, when Orlat had earned the nickname 'butcher'.

"Maybe a spell in the brig will jog his memory," he said to one of the marines. "Take him away. And search that damn ship!" he barked.

Orlat turned and stormed out of the launch bay. Theo shot Sullivan an apologetic look and did his best to keep up with the admiral as he left. Sullivan looked around at the marines as they closed in on him; he had the sneaking feeling that they were going to be sore about him head-butting their admiral.

Not for the first time that day Sullivan realised he was making a habit of not looking before leaping.

The Kelison was leaking its lifeblood into the cold void of the Finite Realm. Stray currents of raw power flicked across the iridescent hull as she ducked and weaved close to the now shattered surface of the Charlemagne. The frigate had taken a tremendous amount of damage, but Calliya knew that it was mostly to the beast's armoured flanks, and that its critical systems lay out of her fleet's reach.

There were now enough safe areas to circumnavigate the equator of the ship without too much threat. But the Charlemagne seemed to have an endless array of gun turrets and x-ray cannons, and certain areas were protected by such volumes of fire to remain untouchable.

The front end of the frigate fell into this category. Calliya knew this was where the command centre was, but it was so fiercely defended that the last two attempts to attack it had ended in heavily damaged seerephon. Although mercifully, no more had been destroyed since the one she had not recognised had perished, but all of the fleet now carried great wounds. Even the Audaaur limped from side to side, venting raw power from a string of deep gashes in its forward port quarter, and the Caradan's breaching tube had been almost completely destroyed.

Brelt and Uran were exhausted, as their onslaught on the human warship had lasted almost a full day, and the exertion was starting to take its toll. Calliya felt deeply for her crew, but there was little she could do. She thought about ordering everyone to take a turn in the regenerator, for an hour in the healing light could do as much good as a night's sleep. Everyone but herself, that was. There was no way she was leaving the command chamber, not while they were still in such grave peril.

This battle would have to be won, and won soon, before the fleet were completely wiped out. Their only saving grace was the fact that the Charlemagne appeared to have been immobilised by the death of the Senlat. If the frigate had had mobility on its side, the battle would have been long lost already.

The Kelison veered wildly, and Calliya was forced to steady herself as the control chamber swayed. Her vessel was tiring from both a combination of its recent exertions and the heavy wounds it carried, and the seerephon was losing its ability to protect its crew from the rigours of its gravitational drive.

They had less time than she had thought.



## Chapter Twenty Eight

Sullivan sat staring at the featureless metal of the bulkheads, wondering if he had seen the inside of this particular cell before. Orlat had had him confined in one of the battleship's brigs after their infamous duel, but he couldn't be sure if this was the same cell. The Khan was so vast, and so much time had passed since Sullivan had been onboard, that he had long forgotten his way around.

Sullivan couldn't believe he had finally made it back through the Rift, to his own universe, and the first thing that his own people had done was clap him in irons. He'd already had quite enough of being kept prisoner in the last few weeks.

But there wasn't much he could do about it, as they had taken everything, including his shoes, away from him. There were no clocks in the cell, but Sullivan figured he had been on board the Genghis Khan for the best part of a day, and his situation didn't look like changing.

A day! Sullivan knew there were differences in the rate that time passed on either side of the Rift, so for all he knew, Calliya and the fleet might have been destroyed already.

Orlat's men come down to question him twice; the first time had been just after they threw him in the cell. Two intelligence types had hauled him back out and strapped him to a chair in another tiny metal room. Then they took turns throwing rapid-fire questions at him, all the time scanning gauges that were attached to sensors dotted all over Sullivan's body.

But the spacer knew more tricks than his captors. He had been specifically trained to resist this kind of interrogation, and despite the many years his skills had lain unused, he was able to avoid revealing anything.

Later, two more intelligence types came for him. Except they seemed to be involved more on the physical side of things, mused Sullivan, rubbing his aching side. They had administered a very clinical beating.

He lay back on the hard synthetic bunk, wincing as he laid his weight on his bruised muscles. He cursed the spun gravity. If they had put him in zero gee confinement he would have at least been able to get some rest.

Every time that Sullivan closed his eyes, he thought of Calliya. Of her golden curls, of her gentle smile, and of those wide grey eyes that showed you the depth of her angelic soul. In all the trillions of miles he had travelled through space, she had been the brightest star he had ever seen. And now, more than likely, she was dead.

Sullivan had only one consolation. That he still had a chance to prevent the destruction of her world.

A noise from the cell door startled him. It would probably be his friends, the interrogators. He could expect a repeat of the same pattern – first the questions, then the beatings – until he agreed to tell Orlat everything the old warhorse wanted to know.

The cell door slid upwards, disappearing into the ceiling with a sharp hiss. Standing at the door, glancing furtively up and down the corridor, was the Bogart's one-time systems engineer.

"Theo?" said Sullivan. "What are you doing?"

"I've come to break you out, Skip! You didn't think I was just going to stand around and let them do this to you, did you?"

A sudden tidal wave of relief washed over Sullivan.

"After what happened on the Bogart? I wouldn't have been surprised if you'd wanted to see me hang, Theo."

Cardinale smiled at him. "Come on, don't say that. No hard feelings, Skip, honest!" He stepped back out of the doorway, scanning the corridor before signalling Sullivan to follow.

Sullivan stepped out warily, glancing into the corridor before he dared set foot outside the cell.

"But I do feel bad," he said. "I should never have left you behind like that, Theo. A captain should be the last man to leave his ship."

"It was a bad situation, Skip. You had no way of knowing what was going to happen. Just forget about it – we have bigger problems to worry about now. I don't think that Orlat isn't going to be very happy about me springing you."

Sullivan nodded, surveying the lengthy cell deck corridor. There were no guards in evidence, and Theo led the way to an access corridor that branched from the main corridor, sinking downwards into the bowels of the ship. As soon as they got inside the cramped, dark access corridor, Theo took a hand-light from the storage locker by the entrance. The powerful beam cut through the darkness, illuminating a path through the

maze of pipes that covered the walls; clouds of vapour leaked from safety valves, filling the corridor with a metallic odour.

“I’ve shut down the security systems between here and the main launch bay. We should be able to sneak in and grab ourselves a ship.”

Theo stopped at an intersection, flashing the hand light up and down the alternative routes. Both of them seemed identical – long narrow twisting corridors that were cluttered with a variety of conduits, pipelines and hoses. But Theo seemed to know exactly where they were going, as he chose their route with little hesitation. They were forced to duck repeatedly as they squeezed their way through the confined space, clambering over shadowy obstacles.

Sullivan wished he could better remember the time he had spent on the Genghis Khan. It had been fifteen years since he set foot on a naval ship, and in any case he had only served on this particular battleship for a very short time.

“Theo!” he whispered loudly. “We’ve got to get back to the ship I was brought in on!”

Theo stopped and turned, crouching down and shining the hand light up into Sullivan’s face.

“That old piece of junk? No offence, Skip, but we don’t stand a snowball’s chance of escaping in that. If we can get to the main launch bay, I’ve unlocked one of the cavalry cutters. By the time he finds out we’re gone, there’ll be nothing Orlat can do to stop us.”

Sullivan thought about Theo’s plan. It was risky, but it just might work. The cavalry cutters were fast ships, and well armed. And Theo was right – Orlat would never abandon his station at the mouth of the Rift. He would wait to hear from the Charlemagne, before following her through, no matter what Sullivan did. But escape wasn’t enough for the spacer – he had to get back to the Espada.

“It’s not that simple, Theo. I can’t just run.”

“What are you talking about?” It was clear that the younger man did not understand Sullivan’s concerns. “Why can’t we just run away?” Theo clutched Sullivan’s arm desperately. “We know all the right people, don’t we, Skip? We can disappear – head somewhere Orlat and the rest of the Navy will never find us.”

Sullivan stared into the bright spot of hand-light in the dark corridor, trying to make out the other man’s features. “I can’t run, Theo. There’s something I have to do.”

“What?” cried the systems engineer.

Sullivan turned and made his way back along the corridor. Theo called after him.

“Skip, wait!”

Sullivan turned back, shielding his eyes from Theo's hand-light as the younger man caught up with him.

"What happened to you, Skip?" he asked. "Where have you been all this time?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," answered Sullivan. The two men stood in the darkness for a time, the clouds of damp metallic gas curling around them.

"Try me," said Theo.

Sullivan sighed. He knew that when he told it, his story would sound crazier than any tall tale ever heard in any spaceport.

"The threshold. It's some sort of gateway, one that leads to another place."

"Like a wormhole?"

In the darkness, Sullivan shook his head. Wormholes were theoretical shortcuts between two points in space, tunnels in the fabric of space-time. Their existence had been posited for centuries, but no one had ever actually come across one.

"No, not a wormhole. It would take much too long to explain, Theo."

The systems engineer looked crestfallen. "I don't understand, Skip."

"On the other side of that gateway is a place like nothing you've ever imagined. A world where people never grow old – where there's no pollution, no crowds, no suffering. It's like paradise, Theo. And if the Navy get their hands on it, it will be destroyed forever."

Theo looked at Sullivan blankly for a moment. "Are you serious?" He shone the light directly in Sullivan's eyes, sounding like he found Sullivan's story too much to believe.

"I'm deadly serious. Right now, the Charlemagne is fighting off an entire fleet, but if this battleship crosses the Rift, then Orlat will get his hands on the greatest prize the Navy has ever won. I cannot let that happen, no matter what."

Theo nodded slowly. "It still sounds crazy to me, but I guess I believe you. But why go back for that hunk of junk you came in on? What the hell are you planning?"

"I'm not too sure," muttered Sullivan. "I'm making this up as I go along."

Calliya took the proffered refreshment eagerly, as the sisters delivered similar cups to Brelt and Uran, who were taking turns operating the lances. The battle had raged for almost a full day, and was taking its toll as much on the crews of the fleet as it was on the seerephon.

There was no vessel of the fleet left undamaged by now. A few of the seerephon had been almost immobilised by the terrible injuries they had sustained, and it was all

their crews could do to keep the stricken vessels alive. Some had even despatched the hardiest of their constructs to try and make running repairs to the outer shells.

But the danger from the Charlemagne was ever present. The fleet were still trapped in close proximity to the frigate, where they continued to suffer damage from the molten slugs of the ballistic defence system. But it was preferable to the death that the x-ray lasers dealt out to any who strayed far enough from the Charlemagne as to attract their lethal touch.

Nor was the Charlemagne immune to damage. The fleet had almost completely destroyed the outer deck of the armoured sheath, but most of the ship's critical systems lay out of reach deep within the central core. And any foray towards the forward end of the cylinder, which Titus had referred to as the Forward Observation Deck, was quickly rewarded with a ferocious body of fire.

Calliya knew that the fleet had little left to give. They could last another few hours at most, but then they would be forced to run for their lives. And they would lose many ships in that retreat, the Charlemagne's lasers would make sure of that. She kept her doubts to herself, but she was sure that other fleet masters would be starting to remember Sullivan's words.

These were not the humans she remembered from the stories of her childhood, the amusing and foolhardy subjects of so many ancient legends. This enormous steel creature was completely alien to everything Calliya had ever been told about humankind, and made even less sense in the light of her relationship with Jack. She knew he felt very strongly about her, and wondered how the same race could give birth to such a good man and such a terrible metal beast. Although she knew it to be filled with men who lived and breathed, they dealt out only destruction – there seemed to be no love in them.

She sipped the last from her cup, steadying herself on the arm of her chair. She had grown used to the sensation of movement inside the seerephon, something she had seldom experienced in space flight. But the Kelison had lost too much power to simultaneously protect the crew from inertia and avoid the deadly rain of fire from the human ship.

A strange sensation ran through Calliya, her bracelets glowing as the Kelison communicated urgently with her. The seerephon could feel the approach of another vessel. All of the assembled fleet could sense the new arrival, and the seerephon reached out to greet them.

Calliya waited patiently while the Kelison tried to make contact with the unknown vessel. All of the fleet had been accounted for, but she supposed there was always a chance that someone had been forgotten.

Calliya quickly scanned the displays, searching for a distant target to direct the Kelison's farsight to. When she saw the moving point of light, she directed the Kelison to look closer. What she saw took the breath from her, partly out of surprise, but also out of relief. Perhaps all was not lost after all.

In the display, the giant seerephon grew rapidly as it neared the battle. With its sleek lines and midnight blue colouring, there could be no mistaking the only member of the fleet that had not been mustered for battle.

It was the Fentach. Tayfen had returned.

It was easy to become disoriented in the tangle of access corridors that wound their way through the belly of the cavernous battleship. Sullivan followed closely behind Theo, stumbling over unseen obstacles in the darkness.

After what seemed an eternity, Theo stopped below an access hatch in the ceiling of the narrow space and reached up, sliding his hand into a recess by the hatch. A moment later, the hatch popped open and Theo climbed up into the light, reaching down for Sullivan when he had pulled himself through.

Sullivan climbed up into the stark light, helped by the younger man, and looked up and down the cold steel corridor. There was no sign of life, and the only marking on the bulkheads was the corridor's designation. Sullivan scanned corridor red seven again. He had expected to run into more trouble than this.

"Come on," said Theo. "This way."

He moved off ahead of Sullivan, making his way towards the exit at the end of the corridor. The door was marked blue seven, and opened the moment Theo touched the door control.

They were moving quickly now, left and right through the bowels of the ship. But the further they went, the more Sullivan felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck. Something wasn't quite right. A ship like this should be crowded with human traffic. And unless they had by accident stumbled through the only dozen deserted corridors on the Khan, they should have run into somebody by now.

Sullivan watched the corridor designations as they rolled past. He was beginning to recall the layout of the ship, and what he could remember didn't fill him with much confidence. Wherever they were going, it wasn't the lower port launch bay he had left

the Espada in. He slowed as they approached yet another bulkhead door. Theo sensed his hesitancy and turned back.

“What are you waiting for? We’re nearly there!” he said excitedly.

Sullivan stared at Theo. “What did he promise you?”

“What?” Theo looked very confused.

“We’re not heading for the launch bay. And there’s no way we could have gotten this far without help. We haven’t seen a single member of the crew, Theo. How is that possible?”

“We’re just lucky,” laughed Theo, turning back to the door.

“No, Theo. Nobody is this lucky. The only way we could have avoided the crew is if someone kept them out of our way. So tell me. What did Orlat promise you?”

Theo laughed again, but this time Sullivan heard something hollow and mocking in his laugh.

“Okay, Jack, you got me. But you said it yourself – this is the greatest prize of all. And I’ve got to give Orlat credit. The old guy knew all along that following the alien ship would lead us to power and glory. For a while there, we’d almost given up, what with losing the Charlemagne and everything. But you’ve answered a lot of questions for us, Jack.”

“Cardinale, you son of a bitch,” growled Sullivan.

“Now, now, Jack! Play nice!” said Theo, with a sly grin. He reached into his shirt pocket and removed a miniature communications device. Then he thumbed a control. “You get all that?”

“Everything,” replied Orlat’s voice, still full of bass, despite the tiny source.

The bulkhead door behind Theo opened to reveal three fully armed marines in the next section, their weapons trained on Sullivan. Somewhere behind him, another bulkhead door slid open, and three more marines closed in.

Armoured gauntlets grabbed his arms and propelled him roughly through the door in front of him. Sullivan never took his eyes off Theo as he was dragged past him, but said nothing to his former crewman, preferring to leave him to guess at the extent of Sullivan’s rage.

The half-dozen marines pushed and pulled Sullivan through the remainder of the ship’s spinning sheath. The more he saw of the ship, the better he remembered the layout, so he wasn’t surprised in the slightest when he realised that they were hauling him towards the Forward Observation Deck. It was an old Navy tradition, and probably a foolish one at that, but many Captains generally liked to observe the action from the clear bubble at the front end of the core cylinder. Sullivan figured it was something to

do with the military superiority the Navy had enjoyed for decades. The strong often grew over-confident.

They ascended through the six or seven decks that led to the ship's core, the marines activating their magnetic boots as they left the sections with spun gravity. They took a few moments to adjust to the lack of gravity, but never let go of Sullivan for a second.

The marines clumped through the wide access corridor that led to the ship's main access vents. This system of two metre wide tunnels ran right through the very heart of the Khan, providing zero-gee access to all of the ship's most sensitive and complex systems. Sullivan could hear the hum of the battleship's engines clearly as three marines deactivated their magnetic boots and moved into the vents. The remaining marines headed back the way they had come.

Two marines floated beside him, one holding each arm while the other provided the rearguard, as Sullivan coasted through the heart of the Khan. The spacer just stared at the featureless bulkhead as it drifted by beneath him, a strange kind of serenity flooding over him. He knew what he had to do. There was a sense of freedom in realising that you have only one course of action, and that you cannot avoid it. Even the marines holding him captive could not really imprison him, only help him on the path that he had chosen. The one that fate had chosen for him.

They arrived at the Forward Observation Deck only minutes later. Two huge blast doors announced its presence as the three marines used their magnetic boots to land on the bulkhead. One of the marines said something into his comms system, but Sullivan couldn't make it out through his thick helm.

The blast doors cracked open, hissing gouts of hydraulic fluid as the massive hatch slid slowly open. The marines moved through the door, all the time encircling Sullivan, not relaxing their hold on him for an instant.

The Forward Observation Deck formed the foremost section of the core cylinder of the Genghis Khan. It was a huge spherical area, half formed by the wide dome of steel and glass, the other half a concave bulkhead carved out of the cylinder. In the centre of the sphere, suspended by an army of supports and buttresses, was the gyrobridge. All ship's operations could be conducted from here, and it was designed to operate equally well in both zero gravity and under acceleration.

The construction of the gyrobridge was such that it could be rotated or tilted at any angle to keep the force of acceleration acting downwards on the crew. It had been discovered early in the days of long-haul space travel that the human body had evolved to resist gravity, and could withstand vertical acceleration much better than any kind of lateral forces.



As the battleship was at rest, the gyrobridge was side on to Sullivan as he was pulled through the rear blast doors. He hung in the air, anchored by the strong arms of the marines, watching as the bridge crew stopped going about their business and turned to stare at the prisoner. Theo joined them, having fallen far behind as the marines had escorted Sullivan through the ship.

Orlat was floating at the exact centre of the gyrobridge, tethered to his command chair with a thin cord. When he heard the blast doors whine, he turned and smiled at Sullivan.

“Jack! How good of you to join us. Ready for the show?” Orlat gestured at the huge expanse of glass, fully one hundred metres across, and the stunning vista of the Rift it provided.

It was the first time Sullivan had had a really good chance to look at the region of intersecting space, and it still resembled some kind of warped optical illusion. Wherever you looked, you saw only shades of deepest crimson, washing over each other, but from the corner of your eye you could pick out elusive details amongst the swirling mass. Sullivan didn’t notice, but quite a few of the bridge crew were staring blankly into the Rift.

Orlat paid the heavenly wonder no heed, but unhooked from the deck plates and pulled his way over the handholds towards Sullivan. He used the struts of the gyrobridge’s cradle to anchor himself as he sneered at the spacer.

“A paradise, where no one ever grows old? Where there’s no overcrowding, or pollution? I should have known you’d be hiding something from me.” Then he made a mocking face, as if he had only just remembered something. “Oh, I forgot! I did know you were hiding something from me.”

Orlat laughed; it was a hollow, coarse bellow that echoed off the steel walls and glass dome.

“Thank you, Mr. Cardinale!” he called, looking over Sullivan’s shoulder. “For convincing Mr. Sullivan here to impart to us one or two of his most closely held secrets.”

Sullivan shot Theo an icy look over his shoulder, hoping that fate might at least grant him a chance to settle up with his ex-crewman. The marines moved him forward, their boots fastening to the metal deck of the gyrobridge with loud clicks.

Orlat floated half a metre higher than Sullivan, about two metres in front of him, idly swinging from one of the gyrobridge’s lateral struts.

“Is there anything else you’d care to add, Sullivan? Before we head in there.” The admiral jerked a thumb towards the red expanse of the Rift behind him.

“Don’t do it, Orlat. You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into,” said Sullivan.

“Really?” asked Orlat, in mock surprise. “And yet you were so keen that we not go in. I have to say, Jack – that makes me want to go in even more.” He swivelled in the air. “A paradise beyond my wildest imagination, right?” he said, gazing out at the Rift.

“If you go in there, Orlat, you die,” said Sullivan, trying to sound as defiant as he could.

Orlat whipped around, his eyes ablaze. “Are you threatening me?”

He swung to the edge of the gyrobridge, bringing his face down close to Sullivan’s. “I don’t think you’re in any position to make any threats.”

“It’s not a threat, Orlat. It’s a fact. If you take the Genghis Khan through the Rift, you’ll never come out alive.”

Orlat eyed Sullivan suspiciously. “I heard what you told Cardinale. That the Charlemagne was fighting off an entire fleet. Well, I for one do not intend to let one of my ships fall into the hands of some alien race. The Khan will follow her through, Sullivan, and you will watch as we claim the prize you would seek to keep from us!”

He turned back to his bridge crew and began to shout orders.

“Engine Room! Prepare to make way! Helm! Set us a course for the threshold! Dead centre.”

Sullivan sensed some movement behind him and watched as Theo clumsily pulled himself onto the gyrobridge. All but the two marines holding Sullivan’s arms had retired out of the bay, but they held him fast as the bridge tilted through ninety degrees. The bridge crew scurried over the moving platform as it moved into an acceleration position, unfastening their tethers and reattaching them to new spigots.

The gyrobridge tilted until the vast glass dome was directly above their heads. Sullivan craned his neck to stare at the Rift, trying to get an idea of how far away it was. Somehow it still eluded his gaze, always hanging just out of reach.

Orlat was still barking orders.

“All stations! Rig for acceleration protocol.”

Sullivan knew that down in the sheath, all of the battleship’s personnel would be strapping into acceleration couches. The Khan maintained the spin of its two giant sheaths during acceleration, a feat possible only because of the counter-spin effect. It made her very manoeuvrable for a ship of her size.

One of the bridge-crew looked up from their console to give Orlat a status report. “All stations report ready, Admiral!”

Orlat grinned and gave the order to the helm. “Ahead slow!” he growled.

The Genghis shuddered deeply as its ion engines burst into life. The four large impulsion units at the back of the core cylinder glowed as they spewed out boiling ionised gas, nudging the battleship towards the Rift.

The weight slowly returned to Sullivan's body as the Khan gathered momentum. His feet landed gently on the floor, between the two marines who held him fast. The battleship was still some distance from the threshold of the Rift, but it was difficult to tell exactly how far away they were. Theo was craning his neck and turning slowly around, as he sought the best view of the Rift possible.

"You didn't think I bought it, did you?" whispered Sullivan, just loud enough for the younger man to hear.

"Bought what?" asked Theo, looking away from the Rift for a moment.

"The old escape routine."

The systems engineer looked at him suspiciously. "What are you talking about?"

"Orlat would never have let you set foot on this ship, never mind near the cell block, unless you'd already made a deal with him. What did he promise you, Theo?"

The Bogart's ex-crewman looked at Sullivan and then flashed a wicked smile.

"You mean you knew all along? Then why'd you follow me? You could have jumped me at any time."

"I thought I'd play your game, and see where it might lead me. See if I could turn the situation to my advantage somehow," Sullivan replied, looking around the Forward Observation Deck.

Theo laughed. "Too bad it didn't work, Skip. No hard feelings, right? I mean, it's hardly as if you've managed to turn the situation to your advantage?"

Sullivan looked coldly at Theo. "What makes you think I haven't?"

For a few moments longer, Theo continued to stare at Sullivan, his expression of confidence slowly leaking away. He arched his neck backwards to look into the approaching Rift as it filled the transparent dome overhead. Then he looked back to Sullivan, trying to guess what the old spacer had planned. For a man who was about to see his beloved paradise destroyed, he seemed awfully calm.

"Admiral?" called Theo.

Orlat turned from his command post, in the centre of the gyrobridge.

"What is it now?" growled the admiral.

"Are we sure this is a good idea? How do we know it's not a trap?"

Orlat sighed. "When I want to know what you're thinking, Cardinale, I'll ask."

But Sullivan knew that Orlat wouldn't be dissuaded. Once the old warhorse set his mind on something, there was no stopping him. Orlat would have eventually headed through the Rift, even without Sullivan's unexpected return.

"Thirty seconds to Threshold!" cried one of the crew.

Sullivan inched ever so slightly backwards. Now that the inertial force gave them weight, and held them to the deck of the gyrobridge, the two marines had relaxed their grip on the spacer. Sullivan snaked his fingers around one of the lateral struts surrounding the platform, but only Theo seemed to take note.

All of the crew, including Sullivan's guards, kept their eyes on the Rift as the Khan thrust towards it. They watched in fascination as the crimson morass grew, filling the heavens, as the mammoth battleship drew closer. But Sullivan knew what lay in wait. He had had time to think about it, and had realised that it had been some kind of electromagnetic pulse that had scrambled the Espada's systems. It would surely do the same to the Khan.

"Ten seconds to Threshold!" called the helmsman.

The massive transparent bubble of the Forward Observation Deck was filled with the billowing mass of the Rift. Sullivan knew he would have to move quickly when his chance came, and glanced around the gyrobridge for something that might suggest a plan of action. The two marine guards still held their weapons at the ready, but the rest of the gyrobridge crew also wore their naval sabres, as regulations demanded of them. Orlat was a stickler for regulations.

All naval personnel still wore their sabres slung across their backs, as had been the custom since the earliest days of the Navy. Only a few metres from Sullivan, one of the bridge crew sat with the hilt of their sabre sticking up behind their head.

Sullivan looked up to see that the Rift was almost upon them. Theo was watching him worriedly.

Orlat grinned, as the blood red light from the Rift filled the Observation Deck.

"Forward!" he cried.

The Genghis Khan touched the intersection and instantly vanished from the universe of man. As soon as the longest antenna reaching out from the prow of the ship touched the Rift, the entire battleship disappeared from space. To the occupants, time seemed to slow down; their limbs became leaden, their voices warped, and their vision distorted as the strange effects of the Rift took hold.

Every system on the battleship shut down simultaneously, but the crew were so disoriented by the transition that they scarcely noticed their screens darken. The Khan

lost momentum as it entered the Rift, throwing much of the gyrobridge crew off balance as the acceleration and the illusion of gravity both ceased.

The only light on the Observation Deck poured through the glass dome from the tumultuous interior of the Rift and Sullivan fought to make figures out through the twisted space. He had experienced the Rift's sticky gravity twice before, and tried to anticipate the moment it would wash away. He had to be ready.

Space inside the Khan began to return to normal. The members of the crew who had not secured themselves had been tossed about as the battleship crossed the threshold. One of Sullivan's guards had been flung clear across the gyrobridge, colliding heavily with the lateral struts on the other side of the Observation Deck. The other marine had fared slightly better, but had still found himself inverted, clinging on to one of the gyrobridge's upper struts.

Sullivan glanced up to see Theo drifting across the open space just above the gyrobridge decks, trying to grab onto any fixture he passed, but struggling in the near darkness. Sullivan took his chance, releasing his grip on the gyrobridge's guardrail and kicking powerfully off the deck.

He sailed over the head of one of the bridge-crew, strapped to her chair and frantically punching buttons trying to revive her systems. Sullivan reached down and grabbed the hilt of her sabre, placing his other hand on the top of her head to maintain his momentum while pulling the weapon from its scabbard. The sabre flashed dully in the blood red light flooding the Observation deck. Sullivan sailed over the rest of the gyrobridge and landed in the upper struts, grabbing on with one of his free hands and wrapping his legs around the thin metal.

A loud roar echoed across the Forward Observation Deck. "Sullivan!"

Sullivan looked down to the centre of the gyrobridge. Orlat hadn't lost his footing, and was holding fast to the guardrails surrounding the command chair, brandishing his sabre in his other hand.

"Thought you'd leave us a little surprise?" he shouted.

"It's over, Orlat!" shouted Sullivan in reply.

"Oh, really?" Orlat looked around the gyrobridge, watching as first one screen and then another began to flicker into life. "Looks like it's just beginning."

The Khan's systems were beginning to reboot. Sullivan had been counting the seconds in his head since the battleship had crossed the threshold of the Rift. Almost a minute had passed.

"I won't let it happen, Orlat," called Sullivan from above the heads of the Khan's crew. The marines were clambering over the external struts of the gyrobridge. "I won't let them be destroyed."

"You don't have a say in the matter!" boomed Orlat, gesturing furiously at the marines. As soon as they neared Sullivan, he kicked off the struts and sailed across the gyrobridge, catching himself easily high on the other side.

Sullivan laughed. "Remember those smugglers we caught near Europa? The ones that were trying to smuggle the heavy weapons into the Red Army Enclave?"

Orlat glared at Sullivan. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"They had that clever way of hiding nuclear warheads in their engine cores. So that the energy signal from the power cells would mask the warhead's emissions."

Orlat's face fell as it gradually dawned on him. "Your ship?"

Sullivan nodded. "As soon as we crossed, the warhead concealed in the Espada's engine core armed. It's all over, Orlat."

The admiral whipped around as quickly as he could in zero gee. "Depressurise the launch bay! Eject that ship!" he screamed.

"Too late," whispered Sullivan. In the last moment of his life, he pictured Calliya's angelic face.

Down in the Espada's engine core, the failsafe display completed its ninety-nine second countdown. No message followed the numbers, just a distinctly audible click.

Detonation.

The warhead exploded with the force of a hundred suns, the aft section of the port ventral pylon evaporating as the ball of shining light swelled to engulf it. But before the nuclear fireball could grow to engulf the vessel, it flashed brightly and spat giant tongues of energy out towards the edge of the Rift. Titanic quantities of energy hurtled along the flux, tearing through the aft section of the core cylinder.

The aft armoured sheath erupted as the energy flux breached its outer decks, spewing debris out into the Rift. The Khan began to leak its lifeblood from a multitude of deep wounds as fingers of energy stretched out in all directions, binding the stricken battleship to the unseen edges of the Rift. They began to pull at the ship, twisting it as they slowly tore it apart.

Sullivan held on for all his worth as the Khan jerked violently. The sudden shifting had thrown the marines off the struts, and they were struggling to find purchase. The force of the blast had even dislodged Orlat, and now he, like Sullivan, clung to the struts of the gyrobridge's upper section.

"What have you done?" he snarled at Sullivan.

It was difficult to make out his voice over the howling automated alert that had gone off in time with the warhead, ordering the crew to abandon ship. The Genghis Khan had been mortally wounded.

The bridge crew were fleeing their posts, propelling themselves towards the main exit hatch, hand over hand, across the gyrobridge. Whenever the Khan shifted violently in the currents of energy coursing across her bow, they would find themselves thrown against consoles and guardrails.

“The Rift is closing!” Sullivan shouted. “No paradise for you, Orlat!”

The admiral screamed in rage, his grizzled features contorting in the dim red light. “Then it’s hell for you too, Sullivan!”

He sprang across the gyrobridge, the point of his sabre aimed straight between Sullivan’s eyes. Sullivan waited until Orlat was only a few metres from him, and then kicked off hard with his legs and grabbed hold of a strut over his head, pivoting upwards out of Orlat’s reach.

The admiral growled and thrust his sabre upwards, using his other hand to anchor himself amidst the thin struts. Sullivan parried, sliding Orlat’s sabre through the outside of the gyrobridge, and swung back down, locking his legs around the admiral’s chest. Sullivan tried to bring his sword around the front of Orlat’s neck, but his opponent had already brought his own blade back to block it.

The Khan lurched violently in the collapsing Rift. Sullivan could dimly hear the automated system announcing the departure of the lifeboats, as the battleship accelerated forward, dragged by the intense tides of energy coursing between the rolling clouds of the Rift.

The sudden inertia pulled Sullivan and Orlat from their perches high on the gyrobridge, and they crashed to the deck plates, before rolling quickly to their feet. Sabres flashed in the tight quarters between the crewman’s vacant posts, and Sullivan was forced back by the older man, whose power and fury knew no limit. Their swords crossed, their faces pressed close together.

“Why’d you do it, Sullivan? Why’d you blow up my ship?”

Sullivan grimaced as he resisted Orlat’s tremendous strength. “Couldn’t let you reach the other side, Orlat. I won’t let you destroy any more.”

Orlat snarled and shoved Sullivan backwards. He raised his sabre to strike, but the Khan suddenly shifted again, as outside the tendrils of energy flexed and threw the battleship in the opposite direction.

Orlat and Sullivan were thrown from the deck of the gyrobridge. They flailed wildly as they were thrown through the upper struts and sailed through clear air, crashing

into the vast transparent bubble. Sullivan lay back on the smooth surface, watching as Theo dangled from one of the struts of the gyrobridge, clinging on for dear life.

Sullivan stood, adjusting to the unsettling sight of the endless crimson expanse of the Rift rolling beneath his feet. It felt like he was standing in open space. Before him, Orlat too got slowly to his feet.

“And so it ends,” he growled.

“I guess so,” replied Sullivan.

“What is it, Sullivan? What is it you’re willing to die to protect?”

Sullivan stared at the admiral, the blood red light casting unnatural shadows over his gnarled features. For a moment, he wondered why he had done what he had done. Why he hadn’t just let the Navy have their way. And then he thought again of Calliya. And in the instant before Orlat bore down on him with furious force, Sullivan knew exactly why he had chosen this path.

He parried Orlat’s blow and circled. In the open space of the gently sloping dome, Sullivan’s youth counted for more than Orlat’s strength. Blow after blow rained down upon Sullivan, but he was more than equal to them. He knew that there would be very little time before the Rift consumed the battleship, but at least he might have the satisfaction of seeing the old butcher dead first.

He parried and brought his sabre in a quick arc back over his left shoulder. The blow cut across Orlat’s arm, tearing through the uniform and the flesh beneath. Orlat stepped back, clutching his wounded arm with his free hand, but did not loosen his grip on his sabre. He snarled and came again at Sullivan, with even greater fury.

The Khan shifted in the vortex, as compartments near the back of the vessel began to depressurise. One of the massive ion thruster assemblies detonated, throwing a wide cloud of molten metal out into the Rift. The battleship kicked forwards, throwing the duellists back towards the gyrobridge. Sullivan crashed into the upper struts hard as he passed them, sending him tumbling to the deck. Orlat fared better, cushioning his blow by landing on the helmsman’s vacant chair.

Sullivan hit the gyrobridge hard, sending flaming agony up the side of his body, as his sword flew from his hand and skidded across the deck plates. It became wedged under a console near where Theo had strapped himself into one of the bridge chairs.

Sullivan crawled across the deck, croaking hoarsely at Theo to pass him the weapon. He looked over his shoulder to see the Orlat bearing down on him. The acceleration was building, and Sullivan felt double his weight as he tried to pull himself towards his sword.



Orlat strained too against the high inertia, but mustered enough strength to lift his sabre high and then thrust it through Sullivan's calf. The spacer screamed out in agony.

"Theo, please!" he called. But Cardinale ignored him, his eyes intent on the console, his face screwed up in an expression of blind fear.

"I've wanted to kill you for a very long time, Sullivan," snarled Orlat, struggling even to speak under the heavy force of the Khan's death throes. "It's fitting that this be my final pleasure."

Orlat raised his sabre high over his head to strike the deathblow, but the ground disappeared from beneath his feet, as again the Khan was thrown into a sudden reverse. Theo clutched frantically at his harness as his body was lifted by unseen fingers. Sullivan fell back towards the glass bubble at the nose of the ship. Once more he struck the struts that reached across the top of the gyrobridge, but this time he managed to hook his uninjured arm around one of them. Orlat shot past, impelled by a force Sullivan reckoned to be at least two gees. The admiral crashed into the glass dome with a thud, his limbs pinned against the surface under their great weight.

Sullivan strained to hold on to the strut of the gyrobridge. His arm felt like it was being pulled from its socket. He looked up at his sabre, wedged under Theo's console, as it bent under the terrific acceleration.

Sullivan, too, could feel his weight growing. The Khan shook under the force of many explosions as the already fragile hull began to yield under the strain. All around the ship, the crimson folds of the Rift continued to boil and spew forth great streams of energy that clawed at the Khan.

Orlat struggled to lift his sword arm, the blood pouring from his wound to form a thick pool on the transparent surface. To Sullivan, it looked like Orlat was floating in the depths of hell. Which was where he belonged. He looked up to see his sword shifted under the increasing force. It vibrated, and then was free. Sullivan sprang.

He reached out his good arm as the sword passed him, his fingers closing around the grip. Then he was hurtling towards the Rift, unaware of the surrounding ship. Sullivan's world had shrunk to a small area in right in front of him. Where Orlat lay, pinned against the vast glass expanse of the dome.

Sullivan hurtled through the air, sabre stretched out before him. He didn't care if the impact killed him as well. He was dead anyway.

Sullivan plunged down through the open air of the Observation deck. His sabre's tip plunged into Orlat's black heart, landing with such force as to drive the blade clean through the butcher's body and into the thick polycarbonate below. Orlat gasped and died, his lifeblood leaking out from the wound in his back.

But the crushing impact had broken Sullivan too, and he lay atop Orlat's body, his body shattered. There was a brief respite in the forces pressing down upon his frame, and he crawled off the dead admiral, his hands slipping in the blood as he tried to pull himself across smooth surface. His body still felt twice the weight it should have, but he couldn't be sure whether it was the shifting of the ship or the life draining from his muscles.

Sullivan lay prone, his face pressed against the polycarbonate surface. So this was how it finished, he thought to himself, staring out at the collapsing Rift. It still eluded his gaze somehow. The Khan rocked violently as two more of the thruster assemblies exploded. All around the ship now was a swirling debris field, as if the giant battleship was being gradually consumed by the Rift.

Something in the debris field seemed to move against the flow, but Sullivan's eyes were heavy now. He had tried so hard, and had given so much. He just had no more to give. All he could do now was wait. The end would not be long in coming. The object caught his attention again, and it seemed to be growing larger, as if it was moving towards the Khan.

Sullivan strained against the fatigue he felt. He knew that if he let go now, he would never wake, so he tried to push himself up on his palms. The object was definitely approaching rapidly, but it was still too small to identify. But it did appear to be heading straight for him. He looked around to see if Theo had seen it, but he was still strapped in his chair, his eyes clenched in fear.

Sullivan looked back out into the Rift. The object was still closing, and now there was something about it that looked distinctly familiar. Sullivan crawled towards the edge of the shallow dome, knowing that whatever it was, it was coming so fast that there would be no chance to see it before it was upon him.

It streaked towards him, only a blur against the rolling red backdrop of the Rift. At the last second, Sullivan threw his hand up across his face, and the object struck the Observation Dome. And at that moment, he could have sworn he heard a word, spoken loudly inside his head.

*Sully, move!*

The tiny seerephon struck the Observation Dome with all the force it could muster, turning end on so as to jam its blunt tail end straight through. The polycarbonate, already cracked by the sabre that had pierced it, gave way under the force of the blow. Junior's tail crashed through the central section of the dome and knocked Orlat's lifeless corpse aside like a rag-doll.

The Khan's precious atmosphere began to leak out around the sides of the seerephon, mingling with the intangible gases of the Rift. Sullivan looked on in amazement. The hatchling had grown since he had last seen it.

It had only been a month or so, but the two-metre hatchling was now six or seven metres long at least, and had a small hatch in the tail, which opened invitingly.

"Junior!" rasped Sullivan, struggling to his feet and staggering towards the access hatch. He looked up at Theo who was still frozen in fear, hanging from the upside down gyrobridge.

"Theo, come on! We can still get out of here!"

Cardinale looked up in shock at the alien ship poking through the Observation dome, trembling in fear and shaking his head.

"Theo, come on!" shouted Sullivan. His bracelet shone, his head ringing as Junior urged him to hurry.

*Time to go!*

Sullivan took one last look at Cardinale and then dived through Junior's hatch. He struggled through a narrow tunnel about a metre long before he pulled himself into Junior's one internal space. It was almost as long as the seerephon was on the outside, and the gravitic lattice was situated just below the one almost horizontal seat. The only console sprang up just in front of the seat.

Sullivan slipped into the seat, watching as the tiny display showed the Khan shrinking behind them, the hull finally beginning to break in two. Junior dodged ably as torrents of energy surged from the boiling clouds.

"Really time to get out of here," said Sullivan, as calmly as he could.

*No problem.*

And in a flash, they were gone.

## Chapter Twenty Nine

The Goranna drifted lifelessly away from the Charlemagne, the other masters forced to watch helplessly as the stricken seerephon floated away from the frigate. The human warship silently reached out with her deadly lasers and the Goranna died in a furious fire, the shockwave rocking the Charlemagne as it washed over the battle.

The Fentach had not managed to turn the tide of the battle. As powerful as Tayfen's seerephon was, it was unable to withstand the gauntlet of fire that protected the observation deck of the Charlemagne. And now, like the rest of the fleet, it was starting to suffer from the heavy damage it was taking.

The enormity of their plight had become plain to many of the masters of the Elysian fleet. Even the Audaaur had briefly joined with the Kelison so that the Duke of Cohloc could voice his concerns to Calliya. The fleet had been so badly damaged that it could not now accelerate fast enough to evade the x-ray lasers of the Charlemagne. If a retreat were attempted, it would cost the lives of many seerephon and their masters. But the longer they remained at close quarters with the frigate, suffering a slow death in the storm of molten steel that flew at them, the slower any retreat would be.

The Fentach came right to the tail of the Kelison, its master reaching out to communicate with Calliya.

*This must end,* said the master of the Fentach.

*I know,* answered Calliya. *But we cannot defeat this monster. And if we run, it will seek us out and destroy Elysium.*

*We cannot let that happen, Calliya.*

*What would you have us do?*

There was the briefest of pauses before the answer came from the Midnight Prince.

*You must lead the fleet away from the monster, Calliya, with all the speed they can muster.*

*Why? We will surely be destroyed.*

*No, you won't. I will make sure that this metal beast does not take any more of the fleet.*

Tayfen broke off quickly and the Fentach shot away from the Kelison. Calliya began to spread the word to the remaining members of the fleet as they circled the Charlemagne, still attacking as best they could. There were only fourteen seerephon left, so it didn't take long for word to get around. Together, the fleet kept their farsight on the Fentach, wondering what Tayfen had planned. The Caradan and the Audaur even tried to get close, but the Midnight Prince had sped away both times.

It was only when the Fentach broke away from the battle, and sailed up high away from the Charlemagne, did Calliya understand what Tayfen had planned. She knew right away that there was no way to stop him, so she called for the fleet to follow her, and together they broke away from the frigate, seerephon dashing for cover in every direction.

The Charlemagne trained its many lasers on the escaping seerephon, waiting for the Elysian ships to reach a safe distance, before their attention was quickly drawn to the one that wasn't running at all. The Fentach had turned to face them, and was now accelerating towards them.

In the command chamber of the Kelison, Calliya rose to her feet, helpless as the Fentach changed course and headed back towards the frigate. The Charlemagne's x-ray lasers found their mark, burning great swathes of the Fentach's shell, but the seerephon weaved and ducked around them. Try as they might, the deadly beams could not linger on the Fentach for long enough to destroy it.

Calliya heard the seerephon's screams as it dived towards the frigate, accelerating as fast as its gravitic organs would allow, hurtling towards the glass expanse of the Forward Observation Deck. Calliya knew there was no way that the seerephon could turn away in time.

One last burst of speed from the seerephon sent it to near relativistic velocity as it slammed into the Charlemagne. Compared to the simple death of the other members of the fleet, the death dive of the Fentach released an unparalleled amount of energy. The forward end of the frigate erupted in a blinding blue ball of energy that consumed everything it touched, devouring half of the ship before it began to subside, the force of the detonation impelling the ship slowly towards the gaping mouth of the Rift.

But there was no cheering on the Kelison. Although there could be no such thing as glorious death, a sense of relief did slowly dawn across the fleet. Their foe had been vanquished. What was left of the Charlemagne drifted towards the Rift, trailing rivers of blue fire.

Calliya sat back in her chair, crushed from the exertion of battle. So much blood had been spilled, and so very much had been lost.

On the bridge of the Estrella Negra, Titus whooped for joy. At such a distance, it was much harder to feel the terrible losses the fleet had suffered. There was only elation at the great victory they had won.

“They’ve done it!” he shouted.

Iago agreed with him. “The Charlemagne has been destroyed.”

“Didn’t you think it was possible, old boy?”

“It is an unlikely victory.”

“Well, no matter,” continued Titus. “Now you can deactivate the drive.”

“I have already initiated the shutdown sequence, Doctor Scott,” said the machine softly.

“Well, I suppose that’s it, then,” said Titus.

“I do not believe so.”

“What do you mean?” Titus was still suspicious of the machine. He hardly doubted that Iago would have carried out his threat to destroy Elysium to prevent the Estrella Negra’s drive falling into enemy hands.

“I am detecting massive instabilities in the region of intersecting space. It is possible that the proximity of the explosion has destabilised it. The Charlemagne is drifting towards it, and will cross the threshold in under three minutes.”

“And what of that?” cried Titus in frustration. “The Charlemagne will be carried back to Earth’s universe, and good riddance!”

“The frigate’s core power systems are on the verge of a collapse, and any further disruption will likely cause an explosive meltdown. The blast radius could be considerable, and may further destabilise the intersection, causing it to collapse.”

Maybe Sullivan had gotten through, thought Titus. If the Captain had detonated the warhead, then the Rift was surely about to collapse – he had to warn Calliya.

The PCU was lying on the floor next to Calliya’s command chair. She had despatched her crew to make whatever repairs they could while she tried to determine the status of the Rift. Whenever she had been on patrol, it had looked serene, a quiet drifting red cloud. Now it bubbled and boiled, and bright sparks of lightning were visible, occasionally reaching out to flick at the Charlemagne as it fell towards the crimson expanse. She heard Titus’s voice calling out to her from the plastic tablet.

“Lady Calliya, can you hear me?”

“Yes, Titus,” she answered wearily. “I can hear you.”

“You must move the fleet away from the Rift.”

“Why?”

“Iago says that it may collapse at any moment. You may need to distance yourself.”

“I’m not running away,” said Calliya casually. “I’m going in.”

“No!” wailed Titus. “What can you hope to accomplish?”

“I cannot abandon him again, Titus.” She couldn’t explain to Titus why exactly she felt drawn to look for Jack; she wasn’t even sure she knew herself.

But Titus knew her better than she thought. “Captain Sullivan is gone, Calliya. Whether or not his plan succeeded, either way he has returned to his home. Now you have to save yourself.”

For a moment, Calliya wavered. Then she realised that Titus was right. She had to let Jack go. In the display, she watched as the Charlemagne sank towards the threshold of the Rift. Perhaps it would be better if the way between Realms were destroyed – although now no Elysian would ever find his rest in the Fires of Helios. The Kelison would be the last seerephon to sail the Infinite Realm.

But after witnessing the destructive force the Charlemagne had wielded, Calliya knew that Sullivan’s way had been the only way. She took one last look at the Rift, which was changing, consuming itself from within.

“Goodbye, Jack,” she whispered.

Other members of the fleet had gathered to watch the metal beast fall into the Rift, entranced by the frigate’s death throes. Calliya passed Titus’s message along the lines, and the Elysian fleet moved off slowly, their farsight still trained on the collapsing Rift.

And although she had just fought to save the life of her very world, Calliya found she could only think of one man. She looked back at the rear display, which was filled with the churning mass of the Rift. For a second, she thought she could see something in crimson clouds.

Calliya urged the Kelison to strain its farsight. Something was emerging from the Rift. She looked to the Charlemagne, which was almost at the threshold. She held her breath, knowing that there would be almost no time for whatever was coming through the Rift to avoid the burning frigate. She could only dare to hope.

Junior shot out of the mouth of the Rift at almost the same moment that the Charlemagne crossed the threshold. The tiny seerephon was rocked by the shockwaves as the frigate died in spectacular fashion, the energy of the intersection overcoming its fragile power systems.

The mouth of the Rift lit up with blinding light as the core detonated, filling the intersecting space with energy it had never been created to contain. The light changed

colour, cycling through every imaginable shade before surging with an incredible intensity, forcing Calliya to shield her eyes. When she removed her arm, the light was gone – as was the Rift. All that remained were a few wisps of red mist, floating in the void of the Finite Realm.

The fleet circled around their new addition, curious to witness such a fiery birth on a day of such great loss. The seerephon shared their thoughts with the new arrival, unsure how to react to the smallest space-faring creature they had ever seen.

Sullivan looked at the display with a thin smile. He was so tired, and had been so tired for so long, that for the first time in an age he felt like he could really sleep. He closed his eyes, blocking out the excited conversations that were bouncing between the seerephon of the fleet.

He slept, and dreamed of paradise.

Sullivan opened his eyes, feeling as though he had slept for an eternity. At first, he didn't recognise his surroundings, but after a few seconds he knew where he was. He was lying in a clean bed, back in Calliya's homestead on Elysium. He sat up, expecting to feel the searing pain of his wounds, but instead finding that he felt very well indeed. He shook his head, trying to clear it, feeling like he had been asleep for centuries.

Titus was sitting in a chair by the long window, reading from a leather-bound book.

"Ah, Captain Sullivan," said the Victorian, with a wide smile. "I'm so glad you decided to rejoin the land of the living."

"What happened?" croaked Sullivan.

"I was about to ask you that very question, Captain."

Titus pulled his chair over to the side of the bed.

"We are not sure whether it was through your efforts, or the destruction of the Charlemagne, but the Rift has been closed forever. Elysium is saved."

"How did they destroy the Charlemagne?"

A heavy look crossed Titus's brow.

"The Fentach gave its life to destroy the frigate. It would seem as though Prince Tayfen managed to redeem himself with his final act."

"He did start all this," croaked Sullivan.

Titus was about to reply when he glanced at the door of Sullivan's room.

"But if you will excuse me Captain," he said hurriedly, "there are things I must attend to. We will talk more soon, no doubt."



“You can count on it,” smiled Sullivan. He shook the Victorian’s hand and turned to the door, where Calliya was standing staring at him. When she saw he was awake, her face lit up, and she ran across the room, throwing her arms around his neck.

“Oh, Jack, I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I thought the same thing,” said Jack, returning her tight embrace.

She kissed him warmly on the cheeks, on the brow and on the lips, her face wet with tears. He signalled that he wanted to get up, and she helped him rise from the bed, walking him over to the long, high window. Then she kissed him again.

“But Jack, the Rift is sealed forever. You can never go home,” she said softly, as she ran her fingers through his hair.

Sullivan looked out at the sun, as it crawled slowly to bed beneath the purple wisps of the Shroud. He watched the birds as they soared high in the evening thermals over the verdant forest that swathed the homestead. Then he leaned close to Calliya and kissed her softly on the lips.

“I am home.”

THE END