

Abstract

This thesis is divided into two parts. The first one is the novel *Star of Darkness* which is a science fiction novel and the second part, the exposition, explores the writing process of *Star of Darkness*. The story in *Star of Darkness* centres on a space expedition going towards one of the last unexplored planets in the universe. The crew will be pitted up against a harsh environment and an ancient terror that threatens all life in the galaxy. The world in *Star of Darkness* has other elements in it than just an ancient terror. Elements of religion and science are in the background of the story and have shaped the characters and their society in the story. Both science and theology are combined to create a space-exploring society that places great emphasis on explorers and saints. Saints are one of the major foci in the story and the question whether they are chosen by a higher being or are moulded by their trauma and experience is raised and answered. The exposition part investigates the creative process of creating a science fiction story and some of the pitfalls an author can fall into and how to prevent them. The author will also discuss the evolution of the story and how the characters change draft after draft. Marquito will be examined and the process of how he grew from being a secondary character to becoming the protagonist of the story and what adjustments had to be made to facilitate that change will be detailed. Brandon Sanderson's lectures on worldbuilding helped the author craft a world and to keep the novel neat and trimmed. Sanderson's laws are detailed and shown how they were implemented in the crafting of the story. The question of what a successful story is will be brought up and answered with notes from Murakami and his thoughts on the subject matter.

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Star of Darkness

Sigfús Haukur Sigfússon

Many look up towards the stars and are content with only seeing them. While others reach their hands up towards the stars and try in vain to catch them.

Prologue

The sky was clear of stars. Captain Dawn Hart examined the dark void which waited for her on the other end of the reinforced glass. Ever since her childhood Dawn always thought of space as an enormous beast which swallowed every man and woman who dared to try and conquer it. Yet, humanity continued in its struggle to conquer the vast emptiness. Each planet colonized was a step towards man's own immortal greatness and a reminder that a magnificent force was leading them. The wars of previous years had sundered the great empire. Colonized planets wanted freedom from the Terran rulers. She looked at the silver medallion hanging on her neck, the name Kavak Hart stamped into the hoary metal next to her own, Dawn Hart. The rebellions had been delt with and the traitors executed and replaced. All the while an invisible hand played its part in picking out the few chosen to shine when the darkness seemed overwhelming, and the beacon of hope was extinguished. It was a silent force that the priests on earth prayed to and spent their entire lives seeking all the while the voice remained silent. She tried for a while to seek out the voice when calamity struck her, yet all her prayers had been unanswered. Nothing had changed. Still, she held on to the belief that there was something greater out there. That it was watching her and guiding her onwards. It was a pulsating energy inside her stomach which she interpreted as a sign of her own sainthood.

“Captain.”

She placed the two medallions back into her tunic, the cold metal pressed up against her warm skin. She faced the clean shaved man. It was Herald, the ships first mate. His aquiline nose protruded forwards before slipping down. Black rings that hung under his eyes told tales of many sleepless nights lying awake. He wore an ill fitted shirt which clung to his limbs. He was nothing like Maus whose figure seemed to want to burst the seams of his clothing.

“What is it?” Her soft voice floated towards him.

“It's about the course that you've charted.” He brought up the map. The light from it illuminated the room with soft blue tones. Stars appeared and mingled. Herald zoomed in to a portion of the map where a chunk of stars were missing, “It's dead space. Reports that I've dug up show that three colony ships have perished in this sector here and here.”

“You seem to forget that we are a smaller ship than those behemoths.”

“It's dead space, ships that have entered have all perished. The void storms overheat the engines. The thick asteroid belts are a death sentence.”

“You want us to take the longer route?”

“No...” He remained silent. He took a deep breath then said, “It is however preferable.”

She came closer to him. Taking the map from him she zoomed in onto the Manfred system and placed a small dot there.

“We’re not the only ship going to Tyr 23.”

“What are you referring to, captain?”

“A message we received from Terra few days ago states that ‘The Rock’ arrives there in 45 days. Even if we run the engine on full throttle we will not be able to get there in time. The planet would be under the rule of the Mansfield royalty, the ones that made peace with Terra war council during the colony war.”

“That would signify that the expedition would all be for naught.”

“That is why we need to cross it.”

“Have you...”

“The navigator is planning the course right now. It is all under way, Herald.” Dawn shut down the holomap.

“I’ll notify Maus, he will”

“There is no need for that Herald, let him sleep. Last thing I want is for him to stir up trouble.”

“Alright captain.” He saluted.

“And Herald...”

“Yes?”

“Get some sleep will you.”

Herald left. She stood by her lonesome and watched the abyss. Behind that was Tyr 23, the green jewel of the Aquarius system. The most coveted planet which man had been trying to reach for centuries yet all expeditions had failed due to lack of technology or human error. But now, the green jewel would be hers. She would become the one to bring it under control. She, Captain Dawn Hart would be the one to ascend to sainthood. She would be the one to clear her families tainted name.

Chapter One

A Suicide Mission

The corridor ended by a large hydraulic door. Two men approached it. Marquito looked to his partner who was deep in thought. Ravines ran along his mentor's face. The three suns of Portekus had burnt his skin two decades ago and he still bore mark of that Terran's failed conquest. Marquito noticed that his mentor was watching the walls of the ship with a keen eye. It was a nervous tick that the old man displayed whenever something was weighing on his mind. They came up to the door leading to engineering.

"You seem tense, sir," Marquito said.

Quietus, the old mentor, straightened his back.

"Do I?" he said, before placing his palm on the hand scanner. Light emitted from underneath his palm.

"What's the matter?"

The hand scanner beeped twice. The door hissed. Three ton of metal moved to reveal two armed men standing on the other side. One towered over them while the other had to look up to them to speak. Marquito caught a whiff of discharged gunpowder and sweat emitting from the two guards.

The two guards looked at the newcomers, the smaller of the two said, "evening sirs."

Marquito was always dazzled by the large figure of Shawn. Shawn always reminded him more of a warrior statue chiselled by a master craftsman rather than an actual human. However, his eyes always betrayed his humanity. Gentle warmth radiated from them.

"Evening," Marquito replied.

They passed the guards and went deeper towards the heart of the ship.

The door to engineering hissed opened. A person stood by a large window facing a great metal sphere. Along the edge of the sphere thirteen large shields rotated in the air. Sparks of lighting discharged in the room and struck the metal.

"Anything to report, Theos?" Quietus asked, entering the room and picking up a tablet.

"Nothing too major. Engine is heating up. We're going to need to increase the coolant intake."

"Have you done so?"

"No."

"Why?"

“The captain, that’s why.”

Quietus nodded, “we’ve entered dead space, haven’t we?”

“It seems so, old friend.”

The two chief engineers stood and watched the rotating sphere.

“How long can this be sustained?” Marquito asked.

“Eleven hours,” A female voice said.

Marquito could see the owner of the voice, Yin. Her black hair was tied in a tight bun and from her eyes emanated coldness.

“Thank you,” Marquito said.

She did not reply, instead she turned her attention back to her calculations.

Theos stroked his beard. He took out a case of mint and offered Quietus before having one himself.

“Eleven hours...” Quietus said, “we could inject the heart with coolant every three hours, that should give us more time to work with while minimizing the loss of propulsion.”

“That could work.” Theos said, picking up his coat. The chair to Marquito’s left scrapped the floor and before he knew it only him and Quietus were left alone in the control room with a ten-inch security glass separating them and a sphere that held the power of living sun.

Chapter Two

For the Dead

The bridge was quiet after three hours of turmoil. By a miracle, Dawn had navigated the ship through the worst of the asteroid belt without sustaining any critical damage. A few bumps from close encounters with rogue asteroids was the only damage that the ship had sustained. Now that the ship had flown through the worst of the asteroid belt, the navigator and ensigns were charting the rest of the course. The navigator was a grotesque sort, one that she felt a sliver of pity for. He was a mass of flesh and cybernetics, a shadow of his former self. The implants had deformed and festered the man's once healthy body. He had a scar running along his temple and a toothless mouth fed by a tube. The poor man's eyes had long been plucked out like berries by surgeons and replaced with optical sockets that were now plugged into the ship. No matter how strong you were, knowing what took to create a navigator always robbed you a piece of your soul. Their creation showed both the ingenuity and cruelty of the Explorer's Guild.

"Captain."

A fat man approached her; it was Maus. He handed her the damage report. She read it. There was minor rupture in the hull. Engineering had suffered a small dent, and an asteroid had punctured the crew quarters; fifteen were dead.

"Have you dealt with the breach?" Dawn asked.

"The area has been sealed off. I've dispatched a repair team to weld it shut."

"Good."

"Also reports suggest that the engine has been hit but no asteroid pierced the inner layer."

Dawn Hart sighed, she nodded her head.

Maus returned to his station. Dawn looked over the report again. She turned her attention to the star on the map blinking. Out there was Tyr 23.

The door to the bridge hissed open. A short man wearing an oversized coat entered; it was Herald. He looked over the room. He summoned an ensign who handed him a report. Herald skimmed the document, then turned to find Dawn sitting in the captain's chair. His eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep and his skin was pale. He reminded Dawn of a ghost. She checked her watch, only three hours of sleep for him.

He saluted her.

"Captain. I've heard there was an accident."

“It is under control.”

“There are fifteen dead in the crew quarters, sucked out into the void. And you say that it is...” Herald stopped. The captain stared at him and submitted him to her will. She had that way with people, an iron will that broke a man’s courage. He sighed. His hands were tied.

“You know my stance on this course,” Herald said.

“We’ve shaven thirty days of transit. You knew we had to take this course or return home. Look at the crew, how long do you think they can hold out in this dark metal tomb of theirs. Don’t think I did this without a thought in my mind. I knew the risk.”

“I...” Herald stammered, “we should have...”

“The consequences of my action weigh on me, not you,” Dawn said.

The lights on the bridge flickered. Turbulence struck the ship.

Herald got back up.

“Status report!” Dawn commanded.

Herald watched the void which awaited them. Whips of yellow light flashed and struck the hold. The navigator whimpered.

“An electric storm from sector f3, captain,” Maus said.

The bridge was in disarray. Men rose to get back to their stations.

“Full speed ahead. The death of the fallen shall not be in vain.”

Herald looked at her in horror. He was sure they were going to die.

“Aye, aye, captain,” Maus said.

Herald looked at the map; the course she had set was straight through sector f3. She was going to sail through the storm.

Chapter Three

Ad Astra Per Aspera

(Through Adversity to the Stars)

The lights were flashing red, Marquito engaged the shield brake; the shields surrounding the sphere continued to turn. Marquito noted the temperature, it had increased by sixty degrees. The shields kept turning. A magnetic pulse had disrupted the engine's equilibrium and plunged it into chaos. The EPD drive shrieked from inside its prison of revolving shields. Sweat ran down his forehead. He had lost control over the drive whose power, rivalling that of a living star and possessed enough power to detonate an entire planet, spiralled out of control. Sparks flew as metal met metal. Marquito moved to Quietus' control panel. He punched in lines of commands into the computer. Each click of the keyboard was followed with a loud screech that penetrated his ears. A pair of rotating shields collided with each other. In a flash, a large steel splinter broke off from the two colliding engine guards and came flying towards him. Marquito Rosa blinked. The ten-inch security glass shook in its frame. He found himself sitting on the floor facing the tip of the large metal fragment that peaked through the ten-inch security glass. The other remnants of the two shattered shields had implanted themselves into the wall and floor of the engine bay. The lights died down as the engine screamed in agony. A door hissed open behind him.

"What is happening?" The man growled. Quietus' large hand pushed him away from the instrument board.

Marquito could not say a word. Sparks flew inside the engine bay.

Quietus adjusted the setting of the shields and looked at the core. The room shook. Quietus turned a knob which injected cold liquid air into the EPD drive and slowed down the engine's revolving core. Next, he powered down the large steel guards that were sliding down and activated the emergency magnetic stop. The floating shields froze mid-air. Through the damaged security glass Marquito saw the shields quiver while the two forces pulled at it from different directions. At any moment the force would split the shields apart and shoot them towards them. Quietus leaned on the instrument board in front of him. He wiped the sweat off his brow before reading from another blinking light that there was still an error to be found inside the engine. Quietus looked at the engine temperature. It was still rising.

"The heat... its—"

"Be silent!" Quietus cocked his head closer to the glass. Chuck Chuck, Tiss, Chuck Chuck, Tiss. Quietus turned to the instrument board. The temperature gauge shook in the red.

He looked to the wall where the schematics of the engine was on display. Sixty tubes ran into the heart of the drive and pumped it full of different fluids and gases. Of the sixty, forty were designated for cooling the engine. Quietus read the error codes coming up on a small black monitor next to the instrument board. Pressure was down on intake pipes twenty-two, twenty-three and thirty. He flicked off the corresponding pipe intakes.

“Splinters from the two colliding shields must have penetrated the piping. The drive is overheating,” Quietus said. He stopped for a moment. “We have to manually fix the leak.” Quietus removed a large ring from his middle finger and turned to Marquito,

“Get the tools.” Quietus said and placed his ring inside a small cloth and left it on the instrument board.

“What, we can’t go in there, the heat will kill us—”

“Only one of us has to go in there.”

“You want me to?”

“Get the tools.” Quietus said.

“No, can’t you see that entering the engine bay is suicide,” Marquito said.

Quietus looked at the young man in front of him. Marquito’s hands shook and the young man’s face was a shade of pale. He would be useless inside the engine bay.

“Stay here, then.” Quietus put his mask on. He noticed Marquito’s hands were stiller. Blood returned vitality back to his cheeks. Yet his eyes were on the brink of releasing a flood of tears.

“What are you doing?” Marquito asked.

Quietus ignored the question.

“When I give you the signal you rotate shield thirty to the left by thirty degrees.”

Quietus reached into his pockets and produced from it thick woven gloves; he put them on and grabbed the tools lying inside the tool cabinet.

“You’re not going in there... are you?”

“The emergency brake, release it for ten seconds before engaging it again.” Quietus gripped the large austenitic stainless-steel roll tight. The light flickered.

“Ten seconds, not a second more,” Quietus said.

“I’m—” Marquito stammered.

“Save it, just make sure the shields stay still,” Quietus said.

Marquito’s eyes followed him to the door separating the control room from the engine bay. Marquito looked into the eyes of his old mentor. For a moment he saw a strange sadness hiding behind the brown bloodshot eyes. He felt that this was their final goodbye yet neither

man said a word. Quietus entered the airlock and pulled on his thick hood. Marquito went back and sat down behind Quietus' control panel. The screen in front of him was beginning to melt.

Sweat poured down his back. The thick woollen fibre of his boiler suit clenched itself up against his skin. Quietus had to hurry. His thick boots left a residue of rubber with each step he made towards the large sphere in the middle of the engine room. He looked back and saw Marquito watching him through the window. This could be it for him. His day of reckoning, the day the universe finally let him go. The thought excited him and spurred him on. Sweat began to evaporate as he willed his body towards the heart of the ship. Quietus turned back and waved at the window. The shield groaned. A wave of magnetic energy pulsed through him. The force drew him towards the centre before a second force pulled him back. He turned and a small opening in the shield wall appeared. The engine spat hot mist at him. It smelt of electricity and sweet coolant. Whether he lived or died, he had to mend the engine. The sweltering air embraced him.

Marquito watched Quietus disappear behind the shield wall surrounding the engine drive. He looked at the temperature gauges on the wall. They were all in the red. His eyes went back to the small opening that he had made in the shield wall for Quietus. An uneasy sensation came over him. It was a pang of guilt and his own feeling of inadequacy. Marquito had the feeling that he should have dealt with the engine, not Quietus. He examined the temperature gauge. The engine temperature was increasing. A push from outside the ship struck them and he fell to the floor. His head hit the edge of the desk. The lights flickered; the shields behind the screen began to rotate. Marquito wanted to lay in the dark longer and let it rock him to sleep. The intercom buzzed; demanding attention. He listened to the engine. Chuck Chuck, Tiss, Chuck chuck, Tiss

The hums of the engine continued lolling about. He had to get up, otherwise Quietus would boil alive, trapped behind the shield wall. Marquito rose and reengaged the emergency brake. The engine screeched out for a moment. Marquito recoiled when the shields surrounding the engine came to a halt.

Marquito watched a silhouette of a man stagger out from the small opening in the shield surrounding the sphere. It was Quietus, his olive tanned suit had turned black. The mask seared into his skin. Quietus collapsed in front of the shields. The emergency brake failed, the shields surrounding the sphere turned. The engine began to work away. A wave of nervous energy sprang up inside Marquito. He jumped up from the chair and ran to the intercom, he needed Doctor Max.

Quietus lay on the metal floor, listening to the smooth sound of the magnetic discharge propel the ship onwards into the uncharted void. He felt vague, as if he were just a thought, just a loose entity floating in the abyss. The hum was loud, yet it did not force its presence. The air around him cooled down. He grinned. Him and the engine had a mutual understanding. Quietus would fix her no matter how hard she would try to push him away.

“He’s over there!” Marquito called out.

It was this sort of love that also protected Quietus from being hurt. An inanimate object wasn’t going to leave you nor die on you. His thoughts went to the life he had before enlisting onboard The Saint. The unavailing hopelessness of it all. Watching his loved ones slip away. No matter how hard he held on to them, they always dissipated in front of his eyes. Love had changed him for the worst. He coughed. The pain was everywhere, like a shield of agony surrounding him. If he stayed still it would dissipate on its own. The room he was in began to dissipate. At least the engine was fixed. Quietus could comfort himself with that.

“Hurry!” Marquito’s voice called from the ether.

The voice pierced his thoughts. He tried to move his hand and gesture that he was there and alive. Pain flared with each movement he made. Each breath he exhaled equalled more parts of him disintegrating. A strange tide flowed through him and grated his innards. Each breath became a Hercules challenge on its own.

“Relax, we got you,” a soft woman’s voice whispered in his ear.

An invisible tide carried him away. Hands grabbed his limbs and pulled him up. A sharp sting; a needle jabbed into his right arm. Before the invisible tide could carry him away his mind went hurling towards oblivion. His body no longer his. A rush of euphoria came over him and smashed him into thousand bits.

He was falling, faster and faster. His stomach churned. The sick longing to hold on became too much. Quietus’ body wanted release from its torment and to be one with all. Blood dripped out of his eyes and blinded him. He wiped the blood from his face. His feet touched the ground and the loud clatter of people chanting and screaming grew louder. He opened his eyes.

The Saint was written in white bold letters on the portside of the ship. The white contrasted with the awe-inspiring burgundy that covered the hull from top to bottom. Though the ship was large, its size did not rival that of the giant colony class ships. Those ships could carry ten thousand people up to the stars and settle them on a new planet. The Saint on the other hand was crewed by one hundred and sixty persons. But, what The Saint lacked in

ferocity and size it made up for in agility and speed. This Quietus Orsus knew. His neck itched and the stiffness of his new clothes stung him. He adjusted the collar of his shirt, the itch did not go away.

“No need to adjust sir, you look splendid as is.”

The man standing next to him in the crowd spoke. It was Marquito Rosa. He wore the badge of Planetary Engineering proudly on his chest. Quietus watched the olive tanned man bask in the camera flashes. A wave of Déjà vu came over him. Marquito waved towards the wild crowd. A youth blinded by the ideals of the heroic saints and the propaganda fed by the church. Yet he had shown during the recruiting phase of the mission a great skill in jury rigging and technical know-how. He was invaluable to the first ground team. A swift wind blew across. It shivered Quietus to his bones.

“The sooner we’re inside the ship the better,” Quietus whispered. Thinking that he was following a strange script. As if he was an actor on stage now, reliving old times.

Marquito laughed and turned his attention to the crowd. Quietus eyed the crew more. A veiled figure hunched behind one of the marines tried its best to avoid the attention. Behind the veil was a strange sort of a man. It was one of the researchers recruited by the guild to archive and document the new planet. Members of the research guild were known to be shy and meek. They spent too much time behind a book and not enough time conversing with other people. Quietus also noticed the back of a short cropped head among the crowd. It was Doctor Max, a woman with a certain zeal and serenity to her. She turned her head and looked back at him. Her face was lean, her eyes crystal blue. Tears streaked down her cheeks. The cameras flashed. Quietus closed his eyes. Would that change anything? He opened his eyes again. The ceremony was almost over. He looked to the front row where Alisdair, a man whose body was decorated with various tattoos. One tattoo stood out for Quietus. It was a pair of crossed daggers inked into the nape of the marine. They peaked out from underneath the parade uniform Alisdair wore. He could see the hilt of the daggers peeking out from underneath the white collar. Two skeleton hands held the knives and disappeared back underneath the cloth. Next to Alisdair was Herald, the captain’s second in command, the clothes hung around his limbs while the opposite could be said about Maus, whose short snout face and heavy sacks of fat pulled at the tight clothes he wore. Alisdair eyed the crowd in front of him while Captain Dawn Hart walked towards the podium.

“Today, marks a changing point in human history. For the first time we will be able to go further than prior explorations have gone. The Saint will trek the uncharted space and

conduct important research. The veil will be lifted, and The Saint and its crew will be known as the heroes that paved the way for future generations.”

The crowd rose in fervour to her words. Chants and claps filled the air surrounding the crew. To the crowd, the crew were saints that were willing to risk their lives for the betterment of humankind and to show the colonies that had rebelled thirty years prior that Terra was still relevant to this day. He closed his eyes; the constant flashing was beginning to give him a headache.

“Quietus.” A voice whispered in his right ear. A voice he had not heard since he was on Portekus during the colonial war...

There was blood on his hands. The man lying in front of him made terrible noise as he searched for air. Quietus looked at the sharp piece of metal sticking out of the dying man. His hands fumbled with a bandage that the wind tried to snatch away. Giving up, the wind turned its attention to the medical kit which it blew across the hot desert sand.

“I can fix this.” Quietus tried wrapping the bleeding neck, then he ripped the bandage and turned to the large gap in the chest where the metal protruded from. Sand had begun crawling its way inside the dying man’s insides. A hand touched his.

“It’s alright...” the dying man whispered. His eyes searched for Quietus before seeing the warm eyes., “it’s alright. Here... take this.” The dying man removed a ring from his middle finger and handed it to Quietus.

“I won’t leave you...” Quietus clutched the dying man’s hand, feeling the grip soften. He squeezed it harder, holding him close in his hands as the blood flowed into the sand. A sharp stone hit the wreckage of their transport. Dying men lay scattered across the dune. Someone approached the two and grabbed Quietus.

“We need to go now!” the newcomer yelled over the wind. He dragged Quietus away from his dying brother. He looked at the dying men around the wreckage praying for a swift end. They left them all behind. The veil of the sandstorm engulfed them.

Quietus woke up with a startle. He was in the mess hall of the ship. In front of him lay a tray of supper. The canteen was filled with excitement and joy. The crew delighted to be able to eat real meat for the first time in months. He remembered this date well. It had been after an accident. When Manfred, his assistant had suffocated in the engine room. A miscalibration on his part had robbed Manfred of his future.

“Feeling alright?” Marquito asked, sitting down next to him.

Quietus nodded, turning his attention to the food which lay untouched.

“Not good, I suppose.”

"It's fine," Quietus said.

"You're not eating?"

"Why does it matter to you if I eat or not?"

"It's supposed to be good, I'm more of a vegetarian myself." Marquito took of the lamb. He saw the man's face light up as the taste of lamb hit his palate.

"You should try it."

"I'm not hungry, here, you can have it." Quietus slid the tray to Marquito.

The young man stopped eating.

"I'm sorry about your assistant," Marquito blurted out.

Quietus rose. His headache was getting worse and the last thing he wanted was to have someone feel sorry for him.

"No, no, please sit down, I'll stay quiet. I just thought that since I've been assigned to your shift I thought, we should get to know each other better. But if you don't want to, I can leave..."

The hazel eyes that the boy had betrayed too much youth and sympathy. Quietus half envied the young soft skin the boy had. The lack of natural light had of course taken most of the colour out of that once olive tanned body but there was a soft gentleness to him. He was a contrast to the hardened skin that clung like an iron armour around his own face, the callous hands that knew nothing but hard labour. There was however a potential in him. A yearning to learn from him. Was that the reason he yearned for his attention? Or was it simple pity for him? Marquito waited for an answer. Quietus walked away.

"I'll see you in half an hour." Marquito called from his seat. Opening his mouth he took a bite of the lamb. It looked all so strangely familiar, Déjà vu. Quietus looked around. The people seemed real, all of them lifelike, yet... He turned back and approached Marquito. The man continued to eat. His hand reached out to touch him.

He blinked; blood blinded his eyes.

A voice whispered, "Quietus."

He was falling again.

Chapter Four

A Sudden Promotion

Alisdair followed behind him. Marquito tried to ignore the overwhelming stench of sweat and gunpowder which clung to the warrior, but found it too difficult to ignore. The smell for him painted a picture of combat yet to come. The hyperreal pictures of casualties from the colonial wars that he had once seen were brought to life by this man of war.

“Who goes there?” The guard stationed outside the captain’s quarters asked.

“It’s me,” Alisdair said.

When Polo saw his commander, he smacked his boots together and stood at attention.

“At ease, Polo.”

Polo relaxed.

Alisdair gestured to Marquito, “he’s here to see the captain.”

Polo eyed Marquito. Alisdair was about to enter when Polo stopped him. Polo’s hand looked small on the colonel’s chest.

“I can’t allow that; the captain is busy.”

Alisdair stepped back and nodded, “the one from the research guild?”

“He’s been coming around a lot these past few days,”

“Any issues with him?”

“No, the man is as meek as they come. Thanks me each time I let him through,” Polo said.

“Quietus told me that they are known to be extremely shy. It is weird that he is coming to her so frequently.”

Alisdair glanced at Marquito who leaned up against the wall. He knew that he was right. On the crew list there were twenty researchers registered. Most of them he never saw mingling with other crewmembers.

“Well, not this one.” Polo looked at him and smiled, “each time the man comes around he is delighted to be able to see her. He must get quite lonely being holed up in the small research corner listening to the empty space.”

“Perhaps he found something,” Marquito said.

“I don’t think so, there’s nothing out there to be found. We’re the only living beings in the galaxy and if there was a civilization out there. Well, we would have found it by now.

Don’t you agree colonel?”

Alisdair looked at his watch. He ignored the question. Alisdair ran his fingers through his grey hair.

They stood staring at the steel wall in front of them. Each man lost in his own thoughts. Curiosity had gotten the better of them. The door to the captain's quarters opened and a frail old man wearing a blue robe exited the captain's room. He had gone bald a long time ago, only small specks of hair clung to the side of his head. His beard was uneven, and patches sprouted out from his face. Ridges ran along his face, signifying his great age.

"Thank you," the man said to Polo. He eyed the two newcomers and unable to say a word he scurried the other way, disappearing down the corridor.

Polo took a step to the left, "you may enter now."

Marquito was led into the captain's chamber. It was luxuriously decorated, though not decadently. Wooden panelling covered the cold metal walls, and the flooring was made from synthesised wood. Marquito noticed the large bookcase in the corner. It would not be unlikely that the bookcase held biographies of every saint, from Rimus to Zelliot. Faint scent of tobacco smoke wafted through the air and clung to the room. The captain sat by a large desk, writing notes onto a piece of paper. A lit cigarette rested on the edge indentation of the ashtray. The embers from the cigarette crumbled down into the ashtray.

"I've brought him as you've requested, captain."

She looked up from her paper at the two men standing before her. She picked up the cigarette and inhaled it before crushing it down into the ashtray, extinguishing its embers.

"You're dismissed, Alisdair."

He saluted and left the room, leaving the two alone.

Marquito wandered towards the bookshelves and examined the titles. He had not guessed wrong, she held in her library all the biographies of the saints. "Rimus, arrival of the god engineer" "Atridices, the machine whisperer" and then "Captain Marcus's journey towards the centre." He tried to remember what Quietus told him about the saints but failed to recollect it in that moment. It had been profound though, words that had shocked him. His mind wandered to Quietus. He hoped that he would soon see his old friend again.

"You like what you see?" she asked him, continuing to write as she spoke.

"An impressive library you have here,"

"It took me decade to collect them all. It was worth it though. The saints are distinguished figures in our lives. Guiding us through the most turbulent parts of our lives."

"Quite so," Marquito replied.

She looked up from her paper for a moment and gestured to the seat across from her.

“Sit,” she said.

Her attention turned back towards the paper while he found himself settling into the leather chair across from her. He could see the captain’s pulled back hair and the pale skin on her forehead. A soft smell of perfume neutralized the mist of cigarette smoke that clung to her clothes.

Dawn finished writing before turning the paper towards Marquito.

“Read this.” She opened a cigarette case, offered Marquito one, which he refused, before taking one herself and lighting it with a golden cigarette lighter.

It was a captain’s decree, Marquito read it in silence before turning his attention to the captain who had put her feet onto the table. She took a drag from her cigarette.

“You’re promoting me?” he asked.

“Yes.” Dawn cocked her head and studied the man in front of her. She had hoped for a more cheerful response. She inhaled more of the cigarette before crushing it into the ash tray next to the other one.

“We need a good man, and you and Quietus worked well together. I expect that you learned a lot from him.”

“But, Quietus...”

“Max doesn’t think he will pull through, she is making his passing as comfortable as she can.” She watched the wave of emotions burst forth in Marquito’s face. His lips trembled; the colour drained from his face.

Marquito sat silent in the chair. Reality seeped in. His mind went back to the small steps he had taken to get here. The recruitment agency, the courses on space travel and engine maintenance, his longing to get away from Terra and explore the galaxy. All these small steps had brought him here. He did not feel like he had done anything to deserve this.

“I can’t...”

Dawn leaned back into the chair.

“Both you and I know that this was an accident.”

“But, Quietus is still the—”

“He’s not coming back. Deep inside you know that. All we can do for him now is make his last stretch as comfortable as possible.”

Marquito wanted to puke.

“I need time to think. If he pulls through, then the balance will be...”

“Take your time, process this.”

“He’ll pull through, I know he will...” Marquito’s heart was beating fast. Deep inside he knew the truth though that Quietus would not survive and that someone would have to assume Quietus’ role.

“I’ll let you know, until then, you’re dismissed.” Captain Herald said, folding the paper neatly and placing into Marquito’s trembling hands.

Chapter Five

Remembrance

The shields rotated along the engine. The hum echoed throughout the room. Marquito adjusted the intake of coolant running into the engine. A soothing hiss reverberated from the other side of the glass. Everything was chugging along nicely. However, silence hung over the room and penetrated his heart.

A light flashed and Marquito adjusted the speed of the shields, slowing them down. The heat gauge lowered its dial by 5°degrees. He checked his watch; the second shift should have been here already. Fatigue muddled his mind, and each thought was an effort on his half. He hated being the chief engineer. Each time he entered the cafeteria he could hear crewmembers whisper his name. He knew they were talking about him. How they blamed him for the death of Quietus, blamed him for not taking responsibility of his own failure. Marquito felt he deserved that sentence. Only Max, who he saw occasionally, supported him. It helped him get through the shift. Still, each time he heard “Marquito” whispered a part of him died and like a scar turned callous. He felt alone, like an ancient mariner doomed to carry his sin for eternity.

Marquito approached Quietus’s workstation and looked out towards the engine. A thin coat of dust had settled on the controls and gauges. His hands grabbed a rag of cloth which lay on top of the control desk. He felt a circular object inside it. Marquito gently opened the rag to find a titanium ring inside it. The words “Ad Astra Per Aspera” which translated into “through adversity to the stars” adorned the ring. It had been Quietus’ motto. Marquito recalled his old mentor’s story. Quietus had volunteered to serve in the Fanguine’s Hussar division with his brother. He never told Marquito the reason why he joined the war. Either way, Fanguine’s Hussar division came to a swift end on the desert planet Portekus, where the rebelling colonists dug themselves into the desert sand and destroyed each tank after another. The heavy beasts were never suited for such guerrilla tactics.

“Quietus...”

He felt the ring in his hand before trying it on. It was too big. His slender fingers did not possess the same girth as Quietus’ fingers. Marquito placed it back into the cloth and pocketed the ring.

The door to the control room hissed open. Theos and Yin walked in. Her demeanour was cold and calculated. Theos look haggard. His beard had grown wild and his eyes were heavy. Theos planted himself into Quietus’ old chair. Yin sat down in her usual spot.

“Anything abnormal?”

“No, the engine is running smoothly. You might want to keep an eye on the coolant levels and make sure that we don’t run —”

“Fine, fine.” Theos said, he rubbed his eyes, wiping away teardrops.

Something was up. Marquito felt the whisper of death crawl up his back. He had tried to ignore it all his shift, but he could no longer ignore the signs. A question brewed inside him. His eyes turned to Theos, whose whole demeanour was pale as that of a ghost. It could only mean one thing. Yet, he had to know.

“Any news of Quietus?”

Theos froze. Marquito noticed his left-hand shaking. The older man tried to say a word, but no word came. Theos looked in desperation to Yin.

“He passed away,” Yin said.

Marquito stared at the ceiling. Each night brought the same nightmare. Each time he lay in bed he had the feeling that an angel of justice was watching him from the corner of the room, judging him. Thoughts appeared in the darkness and snuck their way inside his head and made him question if he was really man enough to be on this mission. Marquito closed his eyes. In his nightmares the incident repeated, each time with a different consequence. In his dreams he would tweak the event just a little. A word said here, action done differently there. Marquito would try his best to save Quietus from entering the reactor which always result in Marquito taking Quietus’ place on the engine room floor. He could see how his skin turned black and his lungs gasped for air. At this point in the nightmare, he would awake and turn on the lights to examine his hands. Then a sense of relief would come over him, which when he realized the situation, was drowned out by a wave of guilt. Those two aspects played on every night. Marquito turned and gazed at the ring lying on the top of his nightstand. He could hear the wave of guilt approach him. He closed his eyes and felt the wave crash on top of him.

Chapter Six

A Funeral for a Friend

The steel bolts that fastened the lid on the coffin had the symbol of Rimus inscribed on top of them. Max, Dawn Hart, and few engineers stood and watched the proceedings. Alisdair and four of his marines stood by the coffin, armed with rifles. The funeral looked more like a spectacle rather than a proper funeral. The captain stood in her podium which towered over the coffin. Marquito looked at the steel coffin. Inside it lay the body of his mentor. Marquito remembered the charred body they had brought out of the engine room. How the skin was shrivelled, and how Quietus' charred fists were clenched shut. The dying man had been unrecognisable.

"He had been a remarkable man, showing courage in face of danger and sacrificed himself for the safety of others." Dawn's voice boomed in the small room. In another life she would have made a great preacher. Preaching eternal life to her flock. All eyes were on her. Yet Marquito kept staring at the coffin. In another world, that could have been him lying there and Quietus would be standing in his spot. A pair of eyes from the engineer group caught his attention. They belonged to Yin. Her grey eyes stared at him. However, Marquito did not find Yin's eyes threatening. Where some would perceive the grey eyes to be cold and threatening, Marquito found them warm and comforting.

"Not all could face their deaths as openly as Quietus, to gallantly walk into the furnace and be cleansed in a crucible while knowing, that this was it." Theos looked towards Marquito. He noticed other people glance at him. Judging eyes surrounded him from all corners of the room. "Today, my time has come," Dawn continued, "and I will not waver from my path. My faith is my shield. And come as may, for my soul is there for the stars to keep." Marquito thought of Quietus. How little she knew him. Quietus had never been a religious man.

They were sitting in the control room. It was their fourth month working together. Quietus turned the dials of the shield rotation while Marquito watched him closely.

"It all comes down to precision. A small adjustment here will mean a small saving overall. And if you calculate that for me."

"That means we're going to have a surplus of at least an extra month's fuel supply. By the gods you are a genius."

His small smile twisted into a scowl.

“Don’t bring any gods into this.” He rose from the chair and looked out towards the engine, “there is nothing divine about this, gods are crutches for the weak. For those that do not seem to realize that we are truly alone in this universe. Nothing exists out there, no other species nor large celestial beings that we might consider to be gods. We are alone in this universe. And when we die... we just die.”

Marquito returned to his station. He did not say a word. He contemplated the words Quietus had spoken.

Quietus turned to look at the man sitting behind the controls.

“What about the saints?” Marquito asked. “How can you rationalize them? The gods guided their hands, did they not?”

“What saints are you talking about?”

Marquito thought for a moment then the name “Rimus,” escaped from his mouth.

“The original creator.” Quietus chuckled. “Rimus was the right man, at the right time. It was only after his death that the churches used his image to propagate their own agenda, and spurred religions into hero worship. Creating myths about how an extraordinary men and women were created by the gods or were guided by the gods to save them. This does nothing but degrade the memory of the dead. Rimus was an extraordinary man yes, but was he guided by the gods? No, rather I would say that he was guided by the human spirit. To do the right thing at the right time, no matter what consequences were. It is something everyone should do, yet, when push comes to shove, almost everyone fails to take that decision.”

They stayed silent for a while. The light in the room flickered. The deep bass from the engine rolled over them. Gliding sound of the shields.

“But your answer for death is lacklustre. There is no explanation, we are made from matter and therefore something must happen to the matter when we die. Objects never disappear. Sure, the state of the matter might transform but it is still there,” Marquito said. Quietus thought for a moment. He scratched his newly shaven chin.

“Perhaps, perhaps we change in one way or another but the fact of the matter remains the same: We die. Perhaps we spiral down into the cold abyss, perhaps nothing happens. But I will warrant you this, there will be no saints awaiting your arrival when you get there. And you, the you standing in front of me right now, will no longer exist, the same with me. When I die, there will be nothing left off me.” Quietus sighed then turned his attention back to the dials, there were more things to be done to make this engine run even more efficiently.

“Standby!” Alisdair shouted. The marines exited the airlock and through the window in the ceremony deck the crowd watched the vacuum of space carry the coffin away.

“That is why,” Dawn continued, “guided by the divine hands, Quietus was more than a man. He was a saint in disguise, working away to make sure that our ship would reach its destination. That is why, he gets the full honorary ceremony. It is a celebration, a celebration for his ascension to sainthood. That is why, we allow him to return to the stars, to be with the saints that await him. May his name never be forgotten as long as humankind exists.”

The crowd dispersed. Marquito stood by the window and watched the coffin disappear into the abyss. He saw the reflection of a woman approach him, it was Max. Her hair neatly trimmed, she looked more like a soldier than a doctor in her ceremonial outfit.

“How are you holding up?” she asked, staring out into the void of space. Her eyes subtly examined him as he stood there tense and uncomfortable.

Marquito allowed a moment to pass. To gather his thought before he answered.

“She did not know him,” he said, “all those things about being with the saints. That’s not how it works.”

She patted him on the back, “sometimes, a little lie helps make the pain a bit more bearable.”

He did not answer.

“How are you sleeping?” Max continued, hoping to keep the conversation going. She could sense the pain residing inside Marquito. A motherly longing to fix what was broken inside him rose from seeing Marquito in such mental angst.

“Fine, just fine.” Marquito said, shutting her off and pushing her away.

Max examined him in the reflection, the sign of fatigue, the bags under his eyes. His olive complexion was gone now, only a faint hue of brown clung to him. The sleepless nights were getting to him.

“Here.” She produced from her left pocket a bottle with white, blue pills.

Marquito rejected them, “I don’t need them.” He turned towards the exit. His shift was about to begin.

Max stood alone, catching the last glimpse of the coffin. How strange. Those that seek glory often end up chasing dead ends, while those that try to avoid it end up becoming saints. She took up another pill canister, produced from it a red pill and swallowed. Work awaited her.

Chapter Seven

Arrival

The stench of human sweat and electricity turned the bridge into an inhospitable place for those not accustomed to the smell. Maus was the worst. Sweat pearls ran down his face, disappearing into the folds of flesh below his chin. Maus stood up and adjusted the telescope. His fat fingers manipulated the dials on the telescope until he could see a grey marble in the distance. The planet however did not fit the description of what the captain spoke of. In fact it didn't look anything like the coveted green jewel they had sought out in the first place. Maus checked the charts, the location was correct yet the planet was off.

Maus turned to an ensign, "get the captain in here, will you! She needs to see this."

The holographic projector displayed a grey marble that floated in the air. Dawn and Herald watched Maus punch in a code which added more depth to the picture.

"Here look at this."

Dawn's attention turned to the image on display. Dawn Hart was surprised, the coveted green jewel wasn't there.

"This can't be..."

"I've run it through all sorts of filter, this is the planet." Maus said, taking a seat, "at least that's what the coordinates say."

She looked at the planet that awaited them. Strong tempest engulfed the whole planet with streaks of lightnings running through the clouds.

"It looks nothing like what the guild talked about."

"The computer detects a strong atmosphere and plenty of oxygen and nitrogen. It's breathable though unpleasant due to a small amount of sulphur that has mixed in with the atmosphere." Maus said, putting on the screen the other different chemicals that the computer had picked up on.

"It's breathable?" Herald asked.

"Should be... not pleasant though. The air down there stinks."

"Is it safe to send a ship down?" Herald asked.

"If we get through the clouds, it is safe." Dawn turned her attention to Maus. "How many days of transit before we reach it?"

"Two days, captain." Maus replied.

“Is there anything in orbit around the planet?” Herald asked. He leaned up against the holographic projector and scrutinized the planet. Herald’s cautious nature took hold of him. His eyes searched for hidden space debris which circled the planet and brought down any ship that tried to enter the planet’s atmosphere.

“There’s nothing there, I’ve checked,” Maus said.

Herald pulled himself away from the hologram. “It’s a dead world,” Herald whispered.

“Captain,” Herald raised his voice, “we should head back. There is nothing down there.”

“No... the clouds, the distance from the sun. This planet should be able to sustain life.” Dawn said, “there might be life underneath the veil.”

Dawn examined the globe in front of her.

“There is a hint of mist in the air.” Maus said, examining one of his tablets, “it’s not dead. Rather, I would say that the planet is slumbering.”

“Can you see what lies underneath the clouds?” Herald asked.

“No, but if there is underground lake or sea underneath the planet’s crust, we can have an engineer team create water well when we land planet side.”

“We’re going to need to send an expedition team to collect data, first” Dawn Hart said, “I want to know the level of radiation, what the planet is made out of and the minerals that might be worth mining out, the whole thing. We do this by the books.”

Dawn got back into her chair. “Prepare the ship for orbit, let engineering know.”

A crewmate wearing large headphones and a white boilersuit nodded and began to relay those orders into an intercom. He spoke fast and, in a moment, looked back to Dawn and nodded, orders have been confirmed. Herald looked at the man. His nose was long while his whole face was concaved. The man’s headset buzzed, and he turned to the console and spoke fast into the intercom.

“Herald,” Dawn said, turning her attention to the planet in front of her, “I want you to put together a group to help Herman Cabot and his team planet side. You pick the best.”

He looked at her in disbelief.

“Captain, what about my duties here? Shouldn’t Alisdair go he has more field experience and the old dog would want to stretch his legs.”

“Alisdair will go down with the second team and Maus will perform your duties. Herald, it is imperative that a commanding officer follows the first team. We’re making history here.”

“What about the dangers, have you considered the fact that we might hit something in the clouds.”

She looked at him.

“Don’t be scared.”

“I’m worried, captain, that’s all.”

“I’m not sending you out on a suicide mission. Compile the list Herald, and have Marquito join you as well. He’s the head engineer after all.”

“The head engineer, if something goes wrong on the ship then—”

“He was hired primarily for his expertise as an adaptable planetary expedition engineer. Though he has served us well onboard this ship his skillset is best utilised planet side. Theos will survive without him. Don’t worry, everything will be fine.”

She smiled at him, disarming him. There was nothing he could do now, she had decided. Herald took out a pad and brought forth the crew list. He began to examine the names. Herman Cabot though, was a strange choice. A man approaching his seventies. In Herald’s opinion, he was too old. He looked at the captain and knew that there was no reason in trying to talk her out of sending him down with Cabot.

“I’ll get a crew together.” Herald said, standing up and disappearing. Her eyes still glued to the priceless planet that hovered in front of her. Somewhere on that planet was the key to her sainthood. She smiled as she dreamed up a statue of herself. Dawn Hart, the saint of the explorers. The captain of the ship that first discovered remnants of another civilization.

Chapter Eight

The Drop

He had overslept and missed most of the preparation duty. The past two days Marquito had only wanted to sleep. However, each night brought with it the same nightmare, and the same suffocating guilt. He cursed himself for being late and hoped that his assistant had managed to prep everything they needed. A strange sensation came over Marquito when he entered the hangar. The large open space after such a long time confined to the narrow corridors felt unnatural. Few mosquitos, a class five attack crafts, lay in the hold waiting. A weird choice for an explorer mission, it could be that the captain wanted to do some light recon where speed outweigh the carrying capacity of a crew carrier. His attention soon turned to the feeling of dread that came over. In this open space he felt exposed, there was too much freedom for his liking. The air inside it was cold. An Explorer, an exploration jeep named after its inventor, idled in the hold. The engine revving was a roar from a beast that had been too long confined in its cage. It wanted to go and stretch out its muscles. A pipit, a troop carrier used in the colonial wars and named after the extinct bird, stood with its maw open. On the starboard the number two was written in white. A forklift exited from it. Marquito changed the frequency on his transmitter. His ear was bombarded with voices shouting.

“Finnigan, get the explorer in here!” It was Herald’s voice that issued the command.

“Aye, aye sir.”

The large all-terrain vehicle roared while it climbed up into the hold of the pipit and disappeared. Another forklift came to a sudden stop, the crate it was holding fell with a loud bang.

The forklift driver, a small man waved towards Marquito.

“Can you give us a hand here.”

The forklift driver jumped down, on his collar was his name, Seweryn Kolwski. He was a short man with a thick black beard. Others had joined them and were trying to lift the crate.

“If the two of us join in we might be able to put it back onto the forks. You take this side with Griff and Bessy while I’ll take this one with the boys.” Seweryn pointed to the other corner. The six of them bent down and gripped the crate.

They groaned while the box slowly lifted from the ground. The weight pulled down on Marquito’s arms. A soft veil of numbness crept up his arms. His fingers began to slip on the

wooden frame. He bit down and adjusted his grip. A foot slipped and he lost the grip on the box. Marquito jumped back. The crate came crashing down where his right foot had been.

“It’s too heavy for us,” Seweryn said.

Sensation returned to Marquito’s arm and he clenched his fists over and over in order to get the blood flowing again. A large man, wearing grey black fatigues approached. He looked at the people sitting by the box sighing and catching their breaths.

“What seems to be the problem,” the man asked in a deep tone.

“The box, we’re trying to load the forklift.” Marquito said, looking at the man’s strong features. The tag with the name Shawn Bernard was sewn over the chest pocket of the newcomer’s fatigue.

The newcomer bent down. His large hands moved underneath the box and gripped it. He took a deep breath before lifting the box up. Marquito watched in awe. The arms bulged and flexed while the veins in the man’s face grew. He got the box up and carried it. Each step carefully planted onto the steel deck. Shawn placed the box onto the forklift.

“There.” he patted the cab of the forklift. Seweryn got into the forklift and drove the cargo up the ramp before disappearing inside the pipit. The people in the crowd looked at the giant. Marquito noticed that there was a sense of disbelief and shattered egos among the men of the group. The giant nodded.

“If you need help, let me know. No need for you to break your backs.”

“I think we’ll be able to take it from here.” Griff said. The crowd dispersed leaving only Shawn and Marquito left.

They looked at each other. A voice came from the intercom. It was time.

The two of them walked towards the pipit.

“So, you’re the engineer?” Shawn asked.

“Yes.”

Shawn studied him, each step they took Marquito felt the giant’s big eyes on him.

“I’m sorry to hear what happened to your friend.” Shawn said, they stood in front of the pipit’s maw. Marquito could not answer. He wanted to tell Shawn that it did not matter anymore. To lie and tell him everything was fine, but before Marquito could answer their attention turned to a loud blast that came from their left. The forklift was stopped on the edge of the ramp leading into the belly of the ship. A clean shaved man wearing a black beret and holding a helmet stood in front of the forklift and refused the forklift entry. Obscene language and death threats came from the forklift driver. Shawn and Marquito watched the man stand firm while the horn of the forklift blasted him.

“Who is he?” Marquito asked.

“Get out of the way!” Seweryn shouted.

“It’s the pilot, Shazim,” Shawn said.

“There will be no more loading of goods.” The pilot spoke. His hands crossed, the helmet dangling in his right hand.

Herald appeared at the entrance of the ship. He was confused by the situation.

“What is going on?”

“The ship is already over encumbered. If he loads these crates onboard, then I’m not flying.”

“The mission is a simple land and unload. It’s not a combat mission, the simulations run state that it should be no need for any fancy air maneuverer, I’ve gone over the weather reports and run the simulations, the captain herself —”

Shazim shook his head.

“I’ve examined the reports myself, the simulations are nothing but half truths. If we crash, the crew will die, you will die and I will die. Trust me on this one, we can always come back and get it if it is important.”

Herald looked at the pilot. His eyes were watery and open, an oasis in the desert of his dark skin. Herald nodded his head and turned his attention to the forklift driver.

“Take it off. A second bird will bring the rest of the supplies next week. This bird is packed and ready to go.”

“But sir, the captain’s orders.”

“I’m the mission leader, and what I say goes... do you get me?”

Seweryn nodded, “I get you sir.” He reversed the forklift down the ramp.

“Well that was a rare sight.” Shawn said, picking up his duffle bag and ascending the ramp. And thus, Marquito slung his duffle bag and followed the people entering pipit two. He knew some of the crew joining him, others he had never seen before. The researchers were the ones Marquito thought were the most interesting. Their eyes scanned the unfamiliar faces and he sensed that there was a feeling of superiority and mistrust from the researchers towards the other members of the expedition. Marquito needed to speak with Herald. A person behind him grabbed his duffle bag and placed it in the cargo hold. Three marines stood in front of Herald.

“Sergeant Finnigan, pleasure to have you on board.” Herald extended his right hand to Sergeant Finnigan. Marquito noted the rugged face, a face whose features had been chiselled and cut by ravenous storms of war. Behind the high cheekbones he hid his away his two

cybernetic eyes that whirled and churred while they adjusted the focus. Each time he swung around or moved Marquito could hear the jingle of dog tags clinking together.

“Pleasure’s all mine, sir. You can count on me and the boys to keep you and your team safe.” Sergeant Finnigan released his grip and gestured to the two other marines, the tall one and the smaller one to follow him.

The small one turned and Marquito recognised his face; it was Polo.

“There is nothing to fear, when the marines are here.” Polo retorted, throwing a quick salute before climbing up the stairs to the crew’s quarters.

Marquito made his way to Herald. Before Herald could greet him Marquito had already spoken.

“I’m sorry for my tardiness. Has the gear been transported into the ship?”

Herald looked at him, he scratched his clean shaven chin.

“It tarnishes the team when the head engineer oversleeps and misses most of the final preparations.”

“It won’t happen—”

“Never mind that. Your assistant filled in nicely for you.”

“I’ll have to thank her when I see her.”

“Well, she’s right behind you.” Herald said, grinning with glee.

He turned to face Yin, her face hard as that of a marble. She moved past them.

“Welcome aboard Yin Scott, your expertise is a great addition to the team. Get yourself strapped in,” Herald said.

Before Marquito could say how grateful he was she had already spoken.

“Nice to see that sleeping beauty has finally woken up.” She said, giving Marquito a sly smile before she climbed up the ladder to the seats.

“Is everything packed?”

“All the necessary assets.”

Herald followed her up the ladder.

“There was some stuff we couldn’t take, I’ll give you all the detail on the way down,” Yin said.

“I’m grateful for —”

“I know.”

Men and women were seated in their harness. Marquito sat down next to Yin. Across from him sat the marines. To his right on the other side sat Max. She rubbed her face while blinking her eyes in a slow fashion. Beneath him, Marquito heard the mouth of the pipit close.

The sound of Herald climbing up the stairs. Red light replaced the cold white light inside the hold. Herald walked past them and entered the cockpit. The tension in the air was palpable and all Marquito could think was if he had forgotten something.

Shazim clenched the throttle. He closed his eyes and felt how his ship moved in the hold. The hydraulic launcher bringing him to the launch room. He checked the seal integrity and crew department. Everything was in order. A small light flashed in the corner of the launch room. The red light and a klaxon blared. He felt the tingle of excitement tickle his every fibre of his being. The vastness of space opening up in front of him.

“3,” a computer voice said. Shazim primed the engine, pumping fuel into the engine.

“2.” How long he had waited for this moment. Stuck inside the hull of the ship, a caged canary in its red cage. He and his pipit were finally free to fly and explore. Do the job they were meant to do. To fly off into the unknown.

“1,” The hydraulic launcher below him hissed. The force pushed him back into his seat. An invisible hand squeezed every organ inside him. The grey hold disappeared from his peripheral view and the vast space greeted him. The ship floated in the abyss, turning slightly towards the planet. Shazim flicked the ignition on. He heard the thrusters wake up, a soft growl permeated the air and shook the ship before it finally resided.

“Pipit Two, reporting in, everything is green on my end. Preparing for planetary descend now.”

Shazim beheld the giant Astro body below. Lightnings crashed into each other in the clouds below. It would be rough, he knew that, but orders were orders. He looked back to see that Herald was rubbing his neck and adjusting his helmet.

“Don’t worry, Herald. The plating on the ship are storm proof, only enemy fire can pierce this baby, and if I’m right this is a dead planet like the thousand planets before it. There is no need to be scared.”

“I’m not scared,” Herald replied.

Shazim grinned and increased the throttle. The storm clouds hovering over the planet twisted in anticipation, and the planet below awaited them.

Chapter Nine

Flawless Cowboy

Every nut, bolt and screw shook. The silence of space was replaced by the howling of the winds smacking the pipit thrusting its sides while it made its way through the stratosphere. Shazim looked at the storm coming towards him. Lightning bolts swam and flashes blinded him. The thunder gods beat their tattoo. The yoke shook in Shazim's hands. He pulled it towards him, the ship's nose rose. The wall of clouds were equally beautiful and dangerous. Soon him and his ship would be swallowed up by the clouds.

Marquito watched the grey metal walls shake. He could feel the walls behind him reverberate into his spine. His head smacked into the headrest while the wild gusts of wind bore down upon them relentlessly. The thought of dying entered his mind. If he were to die would he be happy? Dying would be a relief from the nightmares and the constant wave of sorrow pulling at his heart. In a way, dying would put the world back into equilibrium. The rotten flesh would be cut off and the world would get time to heal instead of the wound becoming festered and putrid. Marquito turned his attention to the crewmembers sitting around him. They were either praying or crying. He noticed Max. She sat across from him. Her hair neatly trimmed and her white coat shaking with excitement while she herself remained unusually calm. He could not be as stoic as her. Each bump he felt sent a rush of adrenaline into his body. He wanted to run, but the harness stopped him. Max looked to him and smiled. Before blinking and turning her head towards the marines. The marines displayed a cool demeanour while they sat back in their seat. Shawn had his eyes closed and his head rolled around. Polo stared intently at the ground in front of him. He looked like a philosopher, deep in thought in regards to some unnecessary problem or moral dilemma. Sergeant Finnigan looked at Marquito. Marquito knew he was studying him; finding out if each bump would scare him. Marquito waited for Finnigan to ask him if he were scared. If he was going to go and hide now. The truth was that each bump terrified him more than the last. Something was going to break. He knew it. Marquito raised his head and looked left to meet the sergeant's gaze. The sergeant's cold metallic eyes met his brown eyes. The ship shook and both men showed no sign of fear. He suppressed it. But deep inside, Marquito was screaming like the raging storm outside. The engine screeched like a wounded animal. All went dark.

Shazim saw something slither its way through the cloud bank on his starboard side. The instruments were gone, they were flying in blind. His gut told him to pull up. Shazim jerked the yoke towards him, pulling the ship up.

He scanned the clouds; something was slithering in them. Like a white serpent stalking its prey in the tall grass.

“You’re going off course!” Herald screamed over the wind.

“We’re being hunted,” Shazim whispered.

“What?”

Out of the corner of his eyes Shazim saw blue fire shoot out from the clouds to his right. The ship shook and turned. They were going down. The sudden increase of g-force pressed his body up against the chair. He saw red. His consciousness started to fade, the g-force becoming too much to bear. Shazim pulled the yoke to the right, correcting the course. A light blinked; he had lost control of the right stabiliser. The airbrake, his right hand pushed through the g force and pulled lever back. A shockwave went through the ship. The loud creaking sounded outside the glass. Lightnings streaked across the windshield, licking the metal.

“This is Pipit two, I repeat this is Pipit two. We’re going down, I repeat we’re going down!”

Rain blinded him. A white speck flew across his vision and disappeared into the clouds. The speed. The clouds broke away to reveal the black sanded ground below. He took a deep breath and gripped the yoke. He could save the ship, pull it up decrease the speed and land gracefully Shazim smiled. He would be able to pull the impossible off.

Chapter Ten

Wounded Star

Gravity pushed the small drop down. No matter how hard it resisted gravity, it could not postpone the inevitable. Each second the crimson drop struggled to cling closer to the warm body, the harder gravity pushed the droplet away. It was forced to follow the predetermined journey which the other drops had made. Alongside the jagged metal, up to a small edge. It stopped there; the drop looked towards the great beyond. Gravity gave it a final push and then it fell.

Marquito woke up to droplets dripping down onto his forehead. The drips trickled down his cheek to his neck, tickling his naked skin before the collar of his coveralls soaked the blood in. His cheek hurt and each tooth shook in disbelief. The taste of blood swirled in his mouth. He spat. He ran his tongue alongside his teeth, the dazed seal searching for a gap in the enamel ridge. Marquito opened his eyes to see the red emergency light blink. Each blink revealed bodies that hung across from him. Their limbs lay limp in the air. Their harness stopped them from falling. Blank eyes stared down at him. The mouth hung open, revealing crooked teeth. A piece of jagged metal ran through the hung man's stomach which blood dripped down from; following the jagged edges before dripping off the metal and onto his forehead. The ringing in his ears subsided enough for him to hear the sound of groaning and sobbing. A body fell to the ground next to him. It was Seweryn. The bloodied blank face turned to his. Blood seeped from the hairline and ran down into the empty seat next to him. He could not look. He had to get out. His fingers fumbled with the large lock on the straps of his over-shoulder restrains. Marquito forced his thumb down on the button and heard the click of release. Marquito got up. His body tingled with numbness. Yin, his attention turned to the empty seat next to his. He moved the body off the seat. It was empty. A cold gust of air tainted with a hint of sulphur caressed his hair. Marquito patted his chest and felt the ring press up against his skin. He breathed a breath of relief. Marquito noticed that a rift in the ceiling allowed air in. The hull had been breached. At least the air was breathable. Marquito looked up to see the dead and dying. The marines were not among them.

"Mar...quito." A soft voice whispered from inside.

He approached it. The red light blinked.

"He..re."

Marquito looked up to see the owner of the voice. It was a woman who held her hands close to her stomach. He studied her face, then realizing that it was Max. The trimmed black hair contrasted with the pale skin. He tried to reach her but found her too high up.

“Don’t...” Max whispered,

“The harness, release the harness I’ll catch you,” Marquito said.

A drop of blood dripped onto his cheek. He saw in the red emergency light how the slender wormlike intestine was trying to escape from her grip. He backed away.

“I... wanted to say.” She swallowed, blood dripped down from her hairline.

“I won’t leave you, I... I’ll get a medic.”

He stood there looking at her disembowelled gut. The snake like intestine worming away from her fingers. Yet, Max clung on to them. Not yet ready to accept her situation, not yet ready to die. Marquito’s strength was fading while her last strength was spent in prolonging her eventual demise.

“What happened wasn’t your fault...”

“Don’t, just... this will be alright, Max.”

“Marquito!” a voice called from outside. He turned to see two metallic eyes, the twirling and churning piercing through the sound of soft wind. It was the sergeant; his face had a nasty cut on the left side which bled down into the man’s trimmed beard.

“Max...” Marquito pointed to the dying woman hanging in her harness.

Finnigan shook his head, “Sorry, but there’s nothing we can do for her.”

“But we can help her...”

“We can’t save them all... come Herald needs you.”

“No.” Marquito backed away.

“Don’t act like a boy, come with me.”

A wave of anger seized him.

“Just... remember...” Max whispered.

“Come.” Finnigan stepped forward, “take my hand.”

Marquito could not move. He was helpless. He allowed Finnigan to grab him and lead him outside. He tried his best to ignore the sound of dripping blood behind him and the faint splash reverberating in the slaughterhouse behind him as guts hit the ground.

The remnants of the team had gathered outside the crash site. Hector and Riff, two of the geologists, sat on boxes that had been flung out from the pipit. Blood stains covered their clothes and faces. Marquito felt the sticky skin of coagulated blood on his neck. He tried to

rub it off, but it was to no avail. Griff sat sobbing in the black sand, clutching his hand over his face while Yin tried to comfort him. It amazed Marquito that Cabot had somehow survived. He stood looking towards the horizon. In Cabot's right hand was a long spy glass which the old man held up to his right eye and scanned the tundra with. Herman Cabot hobbled a bit, his right leg gamey. The only other researcher that had survived the crash was Lulu Jasmin. She stood by him and whispered in his ear.

Finnigan sat Marquito down on the black gravel ground.

"Are you okay?" Finnigan asked him.

He could not say a word. The faces of the hung were burned into his retina. Each time he blinked he could see them. Blood dripping down on him. He rubbed his neck.

Wind brushed Marquito's hair. Both Finnigan and him looked at the smouldering crash site. Marquito's mind wandered to Max. He pushed that thought out of his mind. He could not stand it. There was nothing he could do now to make the situation better. There never had been a chance for him. He wiped a tear away. The wind picked up the black smoke and carried it away. The wounded lay outside on the cold ground. The fog from their breaths was stolen away by the frigid wind. There were not many of the crew left. Mary and Leo lay on the cold ground breathing their last breath. Polo went from one patient to another, dressing wounds and whispering reassuring word to them.

"Where's Herald and the pilot?" Marquito asked.

"I have Shawn working on that at the moment."

They heard a loud bang coming from inside the pipit. Finnigan's eyes ran up to the horizon, scanning it for any sign of landmarks. He turned to Marquito, "I need your help with unloading the ship. Do you think you can do that?"

Marquito nodded, "Sure, we might find the long range radio equipment among the supplies."

"It would be worth a shot."

Finnigan examined the clouds above them. Marquito could hear the gyros inside Finnigan's eyes whirr.

"That is, if we can get a signal through to them," Finnigan said.

The frigid air cooled their exposed skin. Marquito followed Finnigan's gaze up towards the clouds above. A bolt of lightning ran along them and for a moment illuminated a thread like shape which disappeared into the clouds. Marquito felt like he was being watched. A figure stood in front of him. It was Yin.

"Is there anything I can do to make myself useful?" She said.

Finnigan nodded.

“Well, let’s get to it then.” Yin said.

Shazim shook. Each breath felt like someone was poking his lungs with a hot poker. He dared not move his neck. His body felt out of place. Limbs were in strange positions; the left hand bent backwards and blood dripped down his fingers. They were still attached, that was a good sign. A loud thump echoed behind him. A tap on metal.

“Herald...” Shazim said.

No response.

“Are you there?”

The thump continued.

“Herald...”

Shazim moved his right hand to the door button. He pressed it and the door behind him clicked open.

Shazim listened to the heavy footsteps enter his cockpit.

“Shazim?” a deep voice asked.

“I’m here, Herald, is he?” Shazim began to cough. Blood along with one of his tooth sprayed out from his mouth and onto the controls. He gasped for breath.

A large hand began to wrestle with the harness.

“Let me.” Shazim said, reaching with his left hand.

“No,” Shawn said, “you’re in no condition to move.”

He turned his head left. He tried to move his left thumb but no matter how hard he forced it, nothing happened. A wave of vertigo assailed him and from underneath him an eternal abyss reached out and plunged him into darkness.

After an hour Shawn and Finnigan managed to pitched a tent on the cold ground. The tent was in a constant battle with the alien element. Violent gusts of wind would periodically lift the flap of the tent up, threatening to freeze the wounded and extinguish the meek flame that the survivors huddled close to. The wounded were laid there, one by one. Marquito, Yin and Finnigan had explored the hold and learned that the explorer had rolled over during the crash landing and destroyed much of the research equipment, weapons, and supplies. The team had managed to scavenge from the wreck ten days’ worth of ration, three portable gas heaters, four rifles, five pistols, a portable welder, a broken radio, and a drone.

“It’s not much...” Herald said. His face was languid, his head wrapped in white bandage. His eyes followed the swaying fingers of the flame that reached out and searched for something to burn. Shawn had found him inside the cockpit with a nasty gaze on his forehead. The impact of the crash had knocked him unconscious. The team’s doctor, Max, had been killed in the crash resulting in Polo being appointed as the new one. Shazim had been unlucky. Both his hands were broken to smithereens. Polo thought that the man had broken ribs as well. He gave Shazim twenty hours to live. Any longer would be a miracle.

“Can we radio for help?” Shawn asked.

Shazim wheezed, he lay in a sleeping bag, staring up into the ceiling of the tent, watching with intent the wind play with the nylon fibre that shielded them from the elements. His breathing was shallow and rapid. Every fourth breath he took was deep enough to send pain cursing through his sides and paralyse him for a moment. He would have clutched his chest had he strength in his hands to do so. Instead, he clenched his teeth and drew in a shallow breath.

Riff nodded, “we tried sending a signal but only got static.”

“What about the radio we found, would that be able to send a stronger distress signal?” Shawn asked.

“It won’t matter,” Riff said, “the clouds, the electric storm above blocks the signal. We would need a clearing in the storm to broadcast a message to them, and to tell you the truth, I’m sure that the whole planet is enveloped in a storm.”

“We’re screwed, aren’t we?” Polo said,

“No, we’ll make it” Finnigan said.

A lull came into the conversation. Marquito patted his chest, he found Quietus’ ring still hanging around his neck. He rolled it around in his hand. Marquito looked at their faces and how the flame washed them in the gentle glow. They had been through a lot. The wind outside beat the tent. The sound was followed by a low pitter patter of drops falling onto the tent’s canvas. At that moment Herman Cabot stood up. He looked over the crowd. In that instance he reminded Marquito of an old orator who would come to his school every Friday and preach the good words of the saints. The words of the old curator echoed in Marquito’s head. “To become a saint, is to become a divine human being and do the impossible when all hope seems lost.”

“There’s water.” Herman smiled. He faced the group.

“I can see that this situation is dire, but there is the objective of our mission we must consider.”

“You got to be kidding me... the mission. Don’t you see the state we’re in. Half of us are dead and the other half completely—”

“Polo,” the sergeant’s word cut him off.

“Sorry sir, it’s just...”

Cabot nodded, “It’s just the fact that if we are stuck here on this star we might as well do what we came here to do.”

“That’s going to be hard,” Sergeant Finnigan said, “what with no transport and not enough manpower to warrant an expedition.”

“I agree, it will be hard, but not impossible.”

“No, Cabot, we can’t risk moving out, we have wounded to tend to, and we have no idea if there are any lifeforms hostile or otherwise here.”

“So, what is the plan then, Sergeant?”

“Hold up here, hope that the storm clears out soon. When it does, we call for evac and regroup onboard the Saint.

“That might be a problem, sir.” Marquito turned to Riff. He continued “storms on planets like these can go on for weeks, months. I’m afraid that if we don’t contact the ship, they might presume we are dead and rather than risk another pipit they might just leave us here.”

“She won’t leave...” Herald said, he gazed at his left hand, clenched it before relaxing it, he looked at the people around him. The fog in his head had lifted for the time being, “another mission will be flown in after a week, no matter what.”

“Then you must agree, Herald, we should send out an expedition. What do we got to lose? We should use the time to explore rather than lick our wounds.” Cabot said.

Herald did not respond; haze had gathered around his eyes again. Finnigan noticed the commander’s silence.

“We’ll talk about this later, Cabot, the commander needs some rest,” Finnigan added, “Shawn, Polo, get some shut eye, I’ll take the first watch and set up the emergency beacon.” Finnigan lowered the gas intake on the heater. The shadows on the canvas danced a slow elongated dance on the tent walls in rhythm to the patter of wind and rain.

“I’ll come with you,” Marquito said.

Finnigan looked at him, then nodded.

“Come then.” Finnigan got up and grabbed his scoped rifle.

Chapter Eleven

The First Watch

Rain and wind did not dissipate the stink of decaying flesh which emanated from inside the pipit. The stench hung in the air, made worse by the wind which wafted the bad memory from the pipit towards him. The raindrops were small and disappeared straight into the dry ground. Marquito saw the sun float on the eastern horizon.

“Finnigan,” Marquito said.

“Not now, help me with the stake.”

Marquito picked up the sledge and raised it up. With a swing, he drove the stake down into the ground. The beacon was set in place.

“There, that should do it,” Finnigan said,

Marquito looked to the east.

“Look.” He pointed east.

Finnigan followed his gaze.

“What?”

“The sun is shining through the clouds.”

“I can see that.”

“That means that there are no clouds over there. We could send out a signal.”

“We could, in theory. Let’s focus on the task at hand and find a good vantage point.”

Marquito looked up at the large carcass of the dropship.

“We could use the ship. Sure, we would have to climb it but it would give us a unobstructed view of the tundra.”

Finnigan studied the sleek body of the pipit. Marquito had made a good point.

“How do you intent for us to get up there?”

Marquito walked to the side of the Pipit where the lightning had struck it during the descent. He turned to Finnigan.

“The holes on the side of the ship. We can use them to climb up.”

Finnigan nodded his head and slung his rifle.

“Let’s go.”

Their hands and feet found grip in the fist size holes on the side of the ship. In the sunlight Marquito could discern the scorch marks surrounding the holes. Burnt metal extended outwards, making it hard for him to grip the edges. With a free hand Marquito touched the holes, they were smooth where the metal had melted away before solidifying

again. The damage surprised Marquito. Quietus had often talked about the pipits and their superior design versus other crafts. The hull plating was made to withstand every conceivable storm and weather condition during a planetary descent. The lightnings on this planet have to be abnormally powerful to pierce the hull. Marquito's hand slipped.

He landed on his back. Air escaped from his lungs. Marquito lay on the ground, slowly catching his breath.

"Are you okay?" Finnigan called from above, he leaned over the edge.

"I'm coming." Marquito got up. He climbed, focusing more on the climbing than examining the holes on the ship.

Finally, Marquito reached the top. He sat down on top of the pipit, while Finnigan peered through the rifle scope towards the west. The sun peaked through a small clearing in the veil; a faint ray of sunlight came from the east. Marquito listened to the whir coming from the sergeant's eyes. The sunray on his skin felt divine. The sun, how much he had missed it in the dark chambers of the ship. Longed for it. He closed his eyes and swallowed every ray of sunlight. Letting the hot rays dance around his skin while the raindrops kissed his bare skin.

"I think you are right," Finnigan said.

Marquito opened his eyes,

"I think there's a clearing in the east," Finnigan said, "the sun shines through."

"So, you think we should go there?"

"No, there are too many unknowns. It's an unnecessary risk for the expedition. Plus sun shining through contradicts what Riff said."

Marquito examined the planet around him. There was no sign of life. To the east and south lay the endless tundra which waited for them. While in the west rocky hills sprung up from the ground like broken teeth put proudly on display. In the north rose a impressive mountain range whose rough cliffs barred them from entering. He knew they could not stay there forever, they had to move.

"Sometimes people get things wrong, and no matter how you look at it our hope for contacting the Saint lies in going east."

The rain pitter pattered on the hull.

"We can wait it out, let them come to us."

"How many people do you think will die if we do so? Shazim is in critical condition, Mary and Leo will not make it through the night. We can't wait around."

"Maybe, but we can't guarantee that the people we send east will come back."

"It is a necessary risk. Who knows if the clearing will be there in the morning?"

Finnigan heaved a sigh.

“And you’re willing to take the responsibility if someone dies because of you?”

Thunder roared in the distance. The drops became heavier.

“I...”

Finnigan unbuttoned his shirt and brought out from underneath it a fistful of dog tags that clung together. Marquito looked at them.

“I’ve lost twenty-seven squad mates. Some took a bullet for me, others died due to my orders. It’s a heavy load to carry, twenty-seven lives. Are you willing to carry that burden if something goes awry during the expedition?”

They looked towards the eastern horizon. Marquito quelled the guilt that tried to overwhelm him.

“If it were for the greater good... then yes. I would carry the burden.”

Finnigan placed the dog tags back inside the tunic and buttoned his shirt.

“You say it now but the guilt can be a heavy cross to bear.”

“I know.”

A thunder flashed.

They looked to the storm raging to the north.

“This planet, can you feel it? It doesn’t feel right,” Finnigan continued, “the endless storm, the rain. Breathable air, drinkable water yet there is not a single living soul here.”

“It’s not the green jewel that they promised us,” Marquito replied.

“No... far from it. But then again, we might just be unlucky with our landing.”

“You think we shouldn’t send out a scouting party?”

Finnigan shook his head, “if there is a clearing there, we have no chance of getting to it before the weather changes and the clouds block it off. It would be a waste of time and effort. But I agree with you, our chance of contacting the ship depends on us getting there before it’s too late.”

“What if we get the explorer operational?”

Sergeant Finnigan looked at Marquito.

He knew that the sergeant would think it was worth a shot. The Saint had anticipated that it would be hard to get a radio signal once they would breach the clouds, but pure radio silence. He would have to hope that the Saint would realize something was wrong. However faint his hopes were the beacon was the next logical step for them to take and it would guide the rescue shuttle to them. However, the gathered clouds huddled closer around them and

stayed suspended above the base. Like an untouchable hand gripping their necks and asphyxiating them.

“You think you can fix it?”

Marquito did not say a word. He placed the ring hanging around his neck into the palm of his hand. It felt heavy.

“Few jury riggings, spot welding and engine tweaks. It should be enough to get it going again.”

“What are you saying?”

“I think I can get it operational again.”

Finnigan nodded.

“How long do you need?”

“Ten maybe fifteen hours.”

“If you can repair then... we might have a shot reaching the opening in the clouds, can you do it in seven?”

It was a short deadline but weighing the ring in his hand he nodded.

“We’ll make seven hours work.”

Chapter Twelve

The Saints and Their Sacrifices

She sat in her quarters, entranced by the book Marcus's Journey to the Centre, written by Marcus's second in command. It was a curious piece to read. It detailed man's first search for alien life, so thorough and meticulous that it was disappointing that the expedition did not find a single civilized species. Every planet that Marcus reached showed no signs of previous civilizations or alien life. It was as Marcus's second in command wrote, "we were wandering the desolate space, searching for something that wasn't there. Many wanted to return home from this failed expedition but the captain's iron will kept us from returning to Terra." She closed her eyes and imagined the crew on the verge of rebelling, "we have wasted enough time, let us go back home." The captain refusing such blasphemy shoots those that rebelled. "There is only the captain's will that directs this ship; nothing else." The spirit of Marcus was with her. She felt powerful after reading the passage. Though, the explorer guild now a days did not condone such brutal actions as Marcus three centuries ago. The fact, however, that he ascended to sainthood proved the case that violence is sometimes necessary in life. Though his second in command described his captain as melancholic and mad at some points. Nevertheless, Marcus was guided by the spirit of God to search the dark empty void for the one that created the spark that had delivered life onto Terra. Origin of all life on Terra could be traced back to that single spark. The question, however, remained unanswered regarding who had created the spark? That question remained unanswered, no matter how many books she read the question eluded her. The created could never know how they were created. Sure, the question had been explored by priest, philosophers, mathematicians, but their answers never gave concrete evidence nor did they sound believable to Dawn. Those thoughts, she realizes were close to heresy. There was a knock on the door.

"Enter,"

The hydraulic door hissed open and Alisdair entered. He wore a t-shirt that revealed the scars and tattoos on his arms. A long serpent tattoo wrapped along his right arm; the yellow eyes of the snake looked at her from their position on the front of Alisdair's right hand. The door hissed shut behind him. She closed the book.

"Have a seat,"

Alisdair shook his head, "you know me better."

She did, for Alisdair was chiselled by his self-discipline, rejecting all comforts that blinded so many others. He had been bred for one purpose, to fight till he could fight no more.

The muscles on his arms and shoulders were carved out of decades of training. His creed was strong, and failure to follow it through meant that would mean that he had lost his appetite for war and did not deserve to hold up his own names.

“A habit,” she replied, “so what is it?”

“We’ve not received any signals from Pipit two for two days now. I want your permission to send another team down there.”

She shook her head.

“There is no need for that, colonel. We knew quite well that once the team landed that there would be radio silence on their half. We proceed according to plan, ninety-six hours from now we’ll send the next team down.”

“We don’t know if something has gone wrong the sooner we act the—”

“Ninety-six hours, Colonel.”

His lips contorted and twisted. The taste of following those orders was bitter for him.

“Are they expendable?”

That word, expendable. She remembered the Dafort incident. How many of her crew she had to cull for the rest of them to live. The oxygen farm had been sabotaged by a colonial saboteur. They would all have suffocated if they hadn’t reduced the population. Alisdair and his marines did the job, the survivors kept silent. They knew it had to be done. The guild kept it silent as well, burying the report deep in the archive. Still, the guild’s trust in her as captain had dwindled the past years. She was too old school for them, but now she got the chance to prove herself worthy of her title. There would be no mistakes, everything would follow the right procedure.

“No one is expendable, it’s just the fact we’re doing this by the books. And the rules of the guild decree that we wait.”

“I say we send in a recon team,”

“If there isn’t anything else, you are dismissed,” Dawn said.

Alisdair saluted. The door hissed. The thought of going against Alisdair’s gut was a disquieting thought for her. He had been loyal to her close to a decade now and his instinct has saved them throughout the years. She put that thought aside. A peep from her watch, she checked it. 8:27, her shift had started. Alisdair knew that every action she took was justifiable. It was all a question of survival.

Chapter Thirteen

The Journey East

The heavy truck drove along the tundra. Above the truck, the storm clouds raged on in fury. Lightning bolts streaked across the clouds, making their way east towards them. In the rear view mirror Marquito saw Lulu eye the great storm above them. Her blue eyes reflecting in the window. The old man next to her seemed too deep in his reading to let the noises around him bother him. Marquito turned his attention back to the raging storm. It was as if the storm above him had a sadistic craving to see to the team's demise.

"What are you thinking about?" Yin asked.

"Nothing," Marquito replied. He turned to see Yin in the back seat adjusting dials on the radio. To her right was Herman, still pouring over the pages.

"You're not a good liar, Marquito."

"Are you getting any signals?"

"No, the storm is still interfering," she said, "and that's also called changing the subject."

"I have a strange feeling, that's all."

He rotated the titanium ring hanging on the chain around his neck. Marquito placed his middle finger into it. It did not fit. It was of a size that he felt he could never fill. The ring was made for a different kind of finger. If the priests and historians back on earth would reach a decision on Quietus' sainthood. The ring would get the status of a saint's trinket and be taken away from him by the church alongside with the rest of Quietus' meagre possessions. They would take the reminder of Marquito's failure away from him. It would be both the cure and the poison for his throbbing mind.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Yin asked.

"No, I would rather not," Marquito said.

Yin turned quiet and focused back on the radio. Through the static she could hear a faint thump. It was unclear to her what it was. The noise reminded her of Terra. When she would rest her head on top of her father's chest and listen to the beating of his heart. She missed him.

Finnigan sighed, he had driven for two hours now. The barren tundra had remained unchanged only the mountains and the crash site grew ever so smaller with each kilometre driven. Marquito and Finnigan watched the sun shining through the clouds to the east.

"Has the sun changed position since yesterday?" Finnigan asked.

Marquito shook his head. Through the night, while he worked getting the explorer up and running, he did not see the sun change its position; it never wavered nor hid behind a cloud. It was as if the sun was stuck in place.

“The storm isn’t letting up,” Finnigan said. “The sky is still as thick with the clouds as it was when we left camp.”

“Stop,”

Finnigan pressed the brakes; the vehicle came down to a halt.

“What is it?”

“I’m not sure, just humour me for a minute.”

Marquito exited the vehicle. The thick brew of clouds hung over him. The sulfuric wind picked up and blew the horrible stench at him. The air tasted horrible, he could taste more sulphur here than back at the base. He looked around and as far as his eyes could see there was no break in the storm anywhere. Still, on the east horizon the sun shone, beckoning to them. Marquito raised the binocular. He was careful not to stare directly into the light but close to it. He saw rectangle shapes close to an obsidian pillar reach out towards the sun. The sky above the buildings was as thick as the other parts of the sky. He zoomed in onto one of the rectangles. They looked unnatural, handmade rather than created by the harsh winds of this planet. A sliver of awe slid down his spine. They had found what mankind had been searching for all this time.

“What is it?” Yin asked, exiting the explorer.

“Buildings, there are buildings over there.”

Herman stopped reading. Him and Lulu stepped outside.

“You got to be kidding me,” Yin said.

“And the sun?” Finnigan asked, joining them.

“Artificial, I think. It has not moved since we left the crash site. I think we are stumbling onto something big here. A proof that there was a civilization here before us.”

Herman and Lulu exited the vehicle and looked towards the static sun.

“Let me see.” Herman reached out and Marquito handed him the binoculars.

“A light like that though,” Yin said, “would require a tremendous amount of energy.”

“And for it to be working after all this time,” Marquito said.

It shocked Marquito. A civilization that could create an artificial sun was more technologically advanced than they were. A mix of curiosity and fear boiled inside him. He wanted to know how it worked, how someone or something could harvest so much energy in a place void of any resources.

Herman entered the explorer. The wind blew and flipped through the pages of Herman's book that he had left lying on the seat. Herman flipped through the pages of his books and rubbed his hands together to restore heat to his fingers while Lulu sat down into the seat next to him. She closed the door behind them.

"It appears that." Herman swallowed, "we've found remnants of an alien civilization. I request that we move in closer to the ruins."

"I'm not too keen about that, first off we don't know what resides there, second, contacting the Saint is more important than some archaeological expedition," Finnigan said.

"We know, but think about it. It's the discovery of the millennium. It would mean that after all the centuries searching for alien life we finally get the proof that we're not alone in this universe. We get one step closer to knowing the greater truth. Isn't that worth sacrificing a life for?" Lulu asked.

"Lulu!" Herman snarled, "I'm sorry for my young apprentice, the life of your man is important. I know, we leave it up to you to decide our next course of action."

Finnigan looked towards the horizon. All around them was the same grey veil. Yet, the clouds seemed thinner by the sun. A small drop hit the windshield, then another. It had begun to rain again. Thunder laughed above them.

"So, sergeant Finnigan, shall we continue?" Marquito asked.

"Let's see if we can't get a signal out." The bearded sergeant in the driver seat looked towards the sun. It was not the glory of being the first to discover an ancient ruin that made him accelerate towards the giant beacon of light. No, it was a human understanding of the suffering of others. Shazim's critical condition and the strain it put on Polo. He wanted it to end. Time was crucial. Onboard the ship the wounded could be treated. The light shone bright. And he hoped that they could get a signal out before it was too late.

They stood on top of an incline looking down into a small dale where three large monoliths stood in each corner surrounding an obsidian spire. Marquito could see the fourth one lying in the cold dark sands. The monoliths stood like giants withstanding repeated lightning strikes. Each time when a lightning struck, an azure brilliance played inside them and the light danced around the monoliths like cascade of water. Lightnings struck the monoliths with fury each creating a beautiful reaction in the large slab. The air surrounding the monolith danced with the beat of the thunderclaps. The buildings brought on the rage of the tempest. It was an awesome sight, but it was marred by the fact that no one could see a rift in the stormy clouds above. At that moment Finnigan knew that they were trapped on this planet without any hope of contacting the Saint.

“It’s hopeless then.” The growing frustration and the ever-increasing thump in the static had gotten the better of Yin’s patience, “there is no signal, no break, nothing.” Yin looked towards the brilliant azure towers and the artificial sun shining ever so brightly. At least she could die having seen something that no one else had. That was her only comfort in this dire situation. Marquito looked through the binoculars at the structure. Thunder boomed above and lightning bolts struck the tower. A jolt of electricity ran to the ground and threw the sand up into the air before tempering it into sharp glass. He could see the mist of heat swimming around the area surrounding the monoliths. The jagged glass that had been tempered for years, centuries? He did not know. The black glass around the bases of the monoliths looked foreboding.

“Keep trying, just pray and hope that something gets through.” Finnigan said, looking at the storm above.

Marquito scanned the base of the first monolith.

“No, if anything the interference has grown stronger the closer we’ve gotten to these ruins.”

“It might be the electricity from the towers,” Herman said, “write that down for me Lulu. The civilization was fuelled by nature’s violence.”

“Keep trying.” Finnigan said, lowering his binoculars.

Yin went back inside and picked up the head set and listened to the heavy thumping emanating from the radio.

“Do you think there is anything down there?” Lulu asked.

“Might be. Look at the towers for example. Someone built it, there must be more to this site than what meets the eyes. We can guess that the monoliths power the sun, but why? What is the purpose of the sun?” Herman said.

“A flame for the moths...” Finnigan whispered, he felt the cold dog tags that hung around his neck.

Marquito scanned the base of the obsidian spire. In the great sunlight he could spot a small dark opening in front of the spire leading down underground.

“A trap... could be... could be... Or just a longing for comfort on a desolate planet,” Herman said.

“Finnigan, there’s an entrance down there. You think we should go down... see what we can find?” Marquito asked.

“Let me see.” Herman grabbed Marquito’s binocular and looked through it.

“What if there’s a way to contact the saint down there?” Lulu said, “the aliens might have the technology required to pierce the storm?”

A lightning flung itself at the tower. Sparks flew into the ground, cooking the black rock.

“We better get back,” Finnigan said, “there will no good come from this.”

“Sergeant, Lulu is right,” Herman said, “think about it, there is a good possibility that the civilization that created these monuments must have colonized other planets. You cannot run an empire without communications. What if the spire acts like a beacon that we could use to contact the ship?”

“Listen, I know you are interested in going down there, but the risk is too much. What if there is an alien creature down there? What then?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. There is nothing here for an alien lifeform to sustain itself on.”

“We’re leaving.”

“We can’t leave,” Lulu said, “the guild forbids it. Every alien structure must be studied.”

“Quiet,” Yin said, turning the dial on the radio. The thumping began to dissipate, a faint voice whispered something. Its tongue weird and incomprehensible to her. Half complete words formed on the radio.

“Hello,” Yin said into the receiver, “this is Yin of—” The signal died. The static in the air overwhelmed the radio.

“What was it?”

She looked up from the radio.

“A voice...” Yin said.

“Must have been static. Can’t see any living being live here on this desolated rock,” Finnigan said.

“But I’m sure that I heard a message on the radio.”

“What did it say, Yin?” Marquito asked.

“I did not understand it. The transmission —.”

It came on again, this time a bit clearer. The voice on the radio, however, sounded inhuman.

“Could be feedback, thick electric clouds can bounce signals back and forth, it must have been your own voice.”

“No, you heard it. It’s alien.”

“I don’t want to hear it, we’re going back.”

“It’s worth the look, Sergeant.” Herman said, “they could be friendly. They could help us save lives.”

Finnigan scratched his beard. He nodded his head.

“An hour, tops. We drive as close as we can before walking the rest. I don’t want to try the tires on those god awful spikes down there.”

Finnigan got back into the explorer. Marquito was quick to follow suit, the sulfuric wind which blew in their direction grew cold and foreboding. Yin picked up the radio and before getting back inside she thought she saw movement in the clouds. A brief glimpse of silver scales reflecting the lightnings, flying towards them before disappearing into the thick haze of the cloud banks. She shook her head and entered the explorer.

The loud wind died down as they approached the obsidian spire that held up the sun. Five stone figures, whose alien features were chiselled out of black stone, stood by the stairway that led down into the thick darkness that awaited them below. Finnigan looked back, the truck watched them from a safe distance. A good few hundred meters away from the cooked glass and lightnings.

“Scared for the truck?” Yin asked.

“I prefer not to walk back to camp,” Finnigan said. He checked his rifle, making sure that there was a round in the chamber.

“Fascinating.” Herman stood by one of the statues, “the statues... they almost seem... human.”

Marquito examined one of the statues. The old man was wrong. They looked nothing like them. He wondered how he could even suggest that humans could look like such monsters that stood guard to the stairway leading down.

“Stay together,” Finnigan ordered.

One by one they turned on their torches. The darkness waiting for them at the bottom of the steps swallowed the light whole.

“It’s a long way down,” Finnigan said, “are you sure about this?”

“We might find something useful,” Herman said.

“Or we might find nothing at all,” Finnigan retorted.

“Either way.” Marquito said and began his slow descent into the unknown, while the rest of the group followed.

Chapter Fourteen

The Camp

His arms strained under the heavy weight of the crate which they bore. A little bit further and they would have managed to set up a basic defence structure. It was a task Polo considered mind numbing. Why, on a desolated star, devoid of any life would they need to shore up defences when there was no enemy to fight against. It gave him a break though from the wounded. It was starting to get him. Hopelessness crept into his soul. Mariana died this morning. Complications from her wounds had led to her death. There was nothing Polo could do except watch that woman perish and with her last breath cry out for a miracle to save her. It had been his fault that she died. A small detail, just the wrong twist of the tweezers had accidently severed an artery which led to her bleeding out.

“Are you doing all right?” Shawn asked, they were walking past a newly dug up earth. A makeshift cairn marked the grave. It was next to five other similar graves. The graves looked sad in the cold harsh shadow which the clouds cast over them. A veil of desolation that nothing could penetrate.

“I’m alright,” Polo said. Some of the wounded were starting to look better. By some sort of miracle, Shazim was beginning to pull through. Still, the shadow of death hung over him, watching his every move. Death yearned for him to make another mistake that would cost the team another life.

Shawn and Polo placed the box on top of another, they had the eastern front covered with makeshift barricades from the wreck. The place was beginning to look like a temporary base of operations. Polo sat down on top of the barricade. His arms tired. He clenched his hands to get the blood pumping back into them again.

“Give me a minute,”

Shawn nodded; he was in no hurry. The cool air blew across their faces.

“It’s nice, finally to feel a breeze touching your face after so. Don’t you think?”

“Being stuck inside that metal hulk for three years makes any change of scenery worth it.” Polo took out a canteen and drank some water. He handed the vessel to Shawn who bent down and took it from his hand. He took a good swig, closed it, then handed it back to Polo.

Polo looked towards the unmarked graves.

“Hey... you did what you could.” Shawn sat down next to him. Even sitting, the giant towered over him. The stench of sweat from Shawn assaulted Polo’s nose. For a moment he

was back on earth in a barracks filled with thirty other men. Standing at attention; sweat poured down their faces as the drill sergeant shouted orders at them.

“You think I did what I could? Did I do enough? I don’t think I did. If I did, she would still be alive...”

“It’s like war, Polo. People die, we have to get used to it. Let the dead be dead and not get bogged down too much in our own mind.”

Polo nodded; the words were nothing more than an utterance that he had heard so much that the meaning was lost. No matter what they said, he would still carry the burden of having cost a human being her life. No matter how they would word it. A string of words would never alleviate the sense of failure inside him. He looked up to the storm clouds above him. A tiny speck of white snow floated down and kissed his forehead. A small drop ran down his cheek.

“Strange, it’s beginning to snow,” Polo whispered.

Shawn extended his right hand and a tiny snowflake landed on his hand. It kept its form for a moment before melting. The beauty of the snowflakes falling around them stunned the two men.

“Let’s get the rest of the defences up before we freeze.” Shawn said, standing up.

“You think he’ll gives us more tedious tasks after we’re done?”

“One can only hope, boredom is a marine’s worst enemy.”

“Polo!” Herald ran out of the tent, shouting. There was a look of desperation and fright on his face that indicated that something was wrong.

“What is it?” Polo shouted.

“Shazim is going into shock.”

He did not say a word, instead he ran inside the tent. He would try his best to save Shazim, no mistakes. The man lay shaking in front of him. Polo took a deep breath; he would need a steady hand to operate.

Chapter Fifteen

A Guard Dog

Mendoza's fist hit him square in the nose; blood poured down onto his t-shirt. Alisdair's head refused to budge.

"You got to do better than this, Mendoza!" Alisdair said, he chuckled before throwing a wild punch and forcing the young marine to back away. His white t-shirt was stained black by sweat, red by blood. Alisdair heard his own breathing, the wild whistling that came when he tried inhaling with his nose. Mendoza approached. Alisdair saw a fist fly towards him and slipped, rolling under it, bringing up his left hook, but his opponent had backed away and avoided his punch.

"Floating, just like you taught me."

Alisdair knew that he could finish this fight in under ten seconds if he wanted to. His opponent had lasted that long, but he was fatigued and starting to make mistakes. His stance was flawed, it was his time to strike.

"Getting tired?" Mendoza asked.

Alisdair did not reply, instead he twisted his body and threw a jab. It connected. His opponent dazed. Alisdair saw the sudden shock on his opponent's face. It was of a man that was about to be defeated. Alisdair used that brief moment and followed up with a right hook. Mendoza spiralled down to the ground. He lay there for a while, looking at his superior in awe.

"Come." Alisdair took off his boxing gloves and extended his wrapped hand to him, "you did well. Less talking and you might have a shot at me."

Mendoza nodded, accepting the extended hand and got back up.

"Get cleaned up and hit the showers, put some ice on that jaw."

"Right away, sir."

He wiped the sweat of his face and took out his mouth guard. There were fourteen other men in the training hall, either sparring against each other or performing other physical exercises. He grimaced and snapped his nose back in place. Alisdair looked at the other men sparring in the gym. The echo of synthetic leather hitting the hardened human flesh brought him joy. In the three years they've flown through space he had managed to create a concrete killing team out of the new recruits. He looked over his team. Pride sparkled in his eyes over the unit he had created. Still, there was a thirst in the men's eyes for action. They could only drill for so long until the longing for action got the better of them. He could feel the itch too.

Alisdair needed to know if Pipit two had survived the storm. Or if he and his team were going to have to go down there and bury the bodies. He looked at the clock on the wall. He needed to speak with the captain.

The doors behind Alisdair closed. The captain stood on the observation deck, a solitary creature watching endless tides of clouds below.

“Captain.” Alisdair said, walking closer to her.

“Alisdair.” She said, her focus remained on the clouds below her. The thick wall of grey and white daring them to send another team down. The clouds looked like a formidable opponent. One that Alisdair thirsted to go up against. He wanted to know what had happened to his men who had been assigned to the mission: Finnigan, Polo, and Shawn. The sooner he could find out, the better.

“Look at this.” Her hand moved and gestured to the endless ocean of storm. “No matter how often we scan the troposphere there is no relenting in the dense sea of clouds. Not a single crack. It’s like a fortress. I’m beginning to think that there is no safe option in landing on that planet, that the planet was unconquerable.”

“The rescue team, who do we want to send down?” Alisdair asked.

She turned to face him, her eyes were calm and gazing. The pupil extended. She hid the side effects of the drugs well. He knew her too well to know what was going to happen next. The paranoia would soon be upon her.

“You’re not listening,” Dawn said, “if we send another team down there, it will end up just as the first one. Dead.”

“How do you know they’re dead?”

“Call it a hunch.”

“Permission to speak truthfully.”

“You never needed my permission to speak your mind.”

“You’re not thinking straight. When was the last time you slept?”

“My mind is lucid, colonel. Don’t you doubt that. The question remains however if we should send another expedition down there or not.”

“We can’t leave Pipit two down there. There might be survivors.”

“No. We’re not leaving, but the storm... that storm that swallows up ships like the kraken from the old myths. Whose hunger has already cost us one team.”

“Captain, A quick trip down there would put everyone’s mind at ease.”

“No, we’ll wait the storm out,” the captain said.

“That might be a long time, the team down doesn’t have an endless supply of food or water.”

“They’ll survive.”

“I say we try our luck and see if we can’t get them out,” Alisdair said.

“And lose another ship. No, I’m not taking any more chances. There will be no second mission sent until I give the orders. Do you understand?”

“You’re letting them die then?”

His words cut her deep. She took a deep breath, now was not the time to lose one’s head. Dawn Hart turned her gaze back to the storm.

“Your dismissed, Colonel.” She watched him in the reflection of the glass. It pained her to see him go like this, but she just could not risk it. A feeling inside her gut told her that the first away mission had failed. Alisdair stood in the doorway watching her. He finally turned around; she saw the hilts of the tattooed daggers on the nape of his neck. The door hissed and the locks of the door reengaged.

Captain Dawn Hart was alone.

Chapter Sixteen

The Ruins

The vacant hall received Marquito with an open arm of muggy heat. For the first time in his life Marquito felt his own smallness. He saw row after row of great obsidian pillars reach out into the darkness above them. The pillars were large fifty meters in diameter and their impressive height was hidden under the veil of black cloud that hung in the air of this great hall. Marquito shone his light up. Smoke streaks lingered in the air, fingers reaching down from the darkness above searched for the light that shone beneath it.

“It’s of no use,” Yin said.

“Strange how the darkness... swallows the light. Write it down Lulu,” Herman said.

“We should continue,” Finnigan said. He brought up the rear. His eyes constantly scanning the darkness for hidden threats.

The team continued deeper into the ruin. Marquito heard a sharp hiss coming from behind. He looked to see Finnigan lighting flares and dropping them down.

“In case we get lost,” Finnigan said, grabbing another flare from his chest pocket and throwing it towards the way they came.

Marquito watched the flare’s smoke stream upwards to the ceiling. Thin fingers of vapour from above floated down and pulled at the smoke from the flare.

“Marvellous, Lulu. The architecture, whoever made this must have been highly skilled in architecture. No barbarian could ever create, no, imitate this architecture.” Herman Cabot touched one of the pillars, he had to make sure that he wasn’t dreaming, that it was in fact happening. The discovery of the century.

The team went deeper and Marquito felt the muggy wall of heat cling to him. He wasn’t the only one; the jacket Yin wore was stained with her sweat. Marquito wiped the sweat off his brow. Another hiss from behind, Finnigan lit another flare. Marquito looked back to where the smoke from the flare was beginning to block out the light. He ignored it, poor ventilation in places like this. Of course, he could not ignore the lingering scent of burning oil which hung in the air, like a memory of times long past. Everything in the hall, from the great pillars holding the ceiling high up in the darkness to the large stone slabs on the floor told them that this had once been a place of immense importance. A key place for something, but for what? They continued deeper into the darkness. His mind tried to figure out the meaning of this place. Marquito’s flashlight penetrated the darkness to reveal to them an recess in the wall, it was a doorway leading deeper down.

“I’m not going down there, the heat is getting too much for me,” Yin said.

“I agree, we should get back...” Finnigan said.

Marquito approached the alcove and shone his flashlight down the staircase, but the light did not penetrate the darkness below. Along the edge of the staircase someone had etched away the corner of each step. A faint stench of burning oil and coolant emanated from the darkness below followed with... Marquito paused, he recognised that sound, it was the sound of the ship’s engine. The soft mechanical hum followed with a sharp thump; like that of a beating heart.

“Do you hear that?” Marquito beckoned them to come to the archway and listen.

“Down there. A thumping of sorts.”

“I can’t hear nothing,” Yin said.

“It’s all quiet,” Lulu said.

Finnigan looked at his watch, “we should be getting back.”

“Ten more minutes, sergeant. Who knows what we might find down there?” Herman said.

The beating reverberated in sync with his own heart, a strange power pulled Marquito down the stairs.

“Can you pass me a flare?”

Finnigan opened his pouch, his right hand searched for a few seconds before finding a flare and handing it to Marquito.

Marquito twisted the head off and threw it down the staircase. Red light illuminated to reveal where the stairs ended. It was not deep after all. Only thirty steps.

“We should check it out,” Marquito said.

“I’m staying up here, the smell. It’s too much,” Yin said.

“Fine, keep watch.” Finnigan handed Yin his pistol before he turned to Marquito “after you then.”

Marquito descended the staircase. Each step taken, the ticking grew louder, more audible, more real. A new odour also introduced itself to his senses: flesh, burning and melting flesh. Quietus stood in front of him, charred. His clenched fists reached out to touch him. The wounds were all there. Steam rose from the burnt flesh. Quietus’ eyes found his. He could not stand them, instead Marquito closed his eyes and awaited for the ghost to take his revenge on him. For the burnt fingers to grab his neck and throttle him.

“Something wrong?” Finnigan asked.

He opened his eyes. Quietus was gone, but the smell lingered. He quieted down his beating heart. “Yes, just the... heat.”

The room they entered was small. The loud tick reverberated in the room. Shaking their hearts. Thick miasma clung to the ceiling. Insidious odour hung in the air. It was a rotten smell that had been allowed to linger and fester for too long. Wispy smoke surrounded the flare. The smoke looked like thin spiderwebs blowing in the wind.

“It smells like an overcooked pig,” Finnigan said.

Marquito knelt and picked up the flare, the smoke around it retreated into the darkness. Above them on the ceiling the same black clouds hung over them. An open obsidian sarcophagus lay in the middle of the room. Marquito approached it, but before he could peak inside to see its contents Herman spoke.

“Here, bring the light here,” Herman said.

The red light revealed strange hieroglyphics before them that were chiselled on the obsidian wall. Strange symbols and pictures that both men had never seen before. For Marquito, most of them reminded him of math problems he had faced when he was younger, but others were too queer to fathom.

“Come closer with the light.” Herman pulled Marquito’s hand holding the flare closer to the wall to reveal more of it. They saw faint shapes of alien lifeforms screaming while smoke penetrated their bodies. Marquito followed the source of the smoke to a man standing tall on top of a pyramid. He held a sceptre from whence the smoke came out of. Above him, Marquito noticed a thin serpent float in the air above.

“They are all screaming.” Lulu pointed out, she stood in the furthest corner of the room, examining the same hieroglyphic with her torchlight.

Marquito looked at the wall surrounding them. Lulu was right, there were hundreds of them screaming as a black wave rolled up and swallowed them all. All around them the alien faces were contorted into a frozen scream.

“How long since someone has been down here do you think?” Lulu asked.

Herman dug his fingers into the hieroglyphics, “not long. Not long at all.”

“What do you mean?”

Marquito looked to Herman. It was as if the old man didn’t believe his own words.

The thump reverberated in the room.

“A century, maybe fifty years... it could be that the atmosphere here helps preserve the form of the hieroglyphics, but...” Herman examined the letters underneath the figures. The old man’s features changed, as colour drained from his face and he began to mumble.

Marquito followed the Herman's gaze to the letters underneath the hieroglyphics. They were strange alien letters, too wild to be tamed and studied. Each time he tried to make sense of them they moved. Their form changed in front of his eyes, the wild letters jumped around and played in his head. Somehow, Marquito was beginning to think they were not really there. The smell of burnt flesh, his past failures. Warm air flowing down his neck.

The hidden heart beat the tattoo.

Finnigan moved back suddenly, his rifle aimed at the sarcophagus.

"Did you hear that!"

That rapid motion was enough for Marquito to get out of his trans. His head swam around in his skull. Pain flared through his skull. He rubbed his face as if he were needed to make sure that it was still there. Lulu pulled the old man from the wall.

"It... it makes sense... why they did it but... but then that would mean..."

The torch underneath Finnigan's rifle barrel began to flicker.

"What happened to it? Is it still." Herman looked to Marquito, "do you see it as well, it..."

Wisps of smoke swirled around Herman's face. He inhaled it.

"We should go," Finnigan said.

"The noise, it's coming from there." Lulu said, pointing to the sarcophagus.

Herman froze. He could hear it too. The low beating. They all heard it.

Marquito approached the sarcophagus. Finnigan was right, the beating came from inside the sarcophagus. The deep throb reverberated louder, like a clock wrapped inside a thick cloth. His head swirled on its axis, the old man, had he said something. Marquito leaned over the open sarcophagus. He could see himself and the flare reflected in the thick black liquid. He heard the tick. Ripples appeared in the centre, small waves that pushed out to the edges before returning back to the centre, all to be repeated again when the tick resounded.

Herman approached as well, sweat beads ran down his face. The heat was cooking them alive.

"There's water, here?"

"Does not look like water to me," Marquito said.

Marquito could not escape the feeling that something was watching him from beneath the surface of the black tar. The heat was making him lethargic. The letters on the wall, something was here with them. A faint gust of air stroked his hair, the smell was getting worse. Quietus, lying on the floor in the engine room. It should have been him, not Quietus. A drop of sweat dripped down into the pool. He should have been the one to die. The ticking

stopped and all went silent. Large tremors shook the walls and ceiling. Small crops of dust fell. The sound of footsteps running down the staircase, Finnigan aimed his rifle towards the sound. It was Yin. Her face had turned pale, and her lips quivered.

“There’s something in the great hall,” Yin said, “I heard it move in the darkness.”

“Where?” Marquito asked.

“Must have been an earthquake.” Finnigan whispered, the torch underneath his barrel flickered.

“No, there’s something on the ceiling, something is coming down.”

“We’re getting out of here, then—” Finnigan hit the torch underneath his rifle. It stopped flickering. “You two get behind me—” Finnigan said.

“It’s moving, the water—” Herman gasped. The old man plunged into the dark liquid. Lulu and Marquito ran to the sarcophagus. The black liquid began to bubble. He could see Herman’s face gasping for air in the dark liquid. Lulu reached her hand down into the water. Smoke sizzled and she cried in pain. Marquito saw her right hand evaporate in the red light that came the flare. The black smoke pulled away her flesh and continuing up her arm.

“Get it off!” She backed away and fell. Herman’s features disappeared as he sunk.

Marquito backed away. Black liquid boiled over and spilled onto the obsidian floor. It moved with such speed that it was on top of Lulu.

Marquito reached his hand towards her, but Finnigan stopped him and pulled him towards the stairway.

“Don’t.” Finnigan said, dragging him off.

“We can save her.”

“No, we can’t, look.”

Marquito watched Lulu in terror while she squirmed. He looked at Lulu who squirmed on the floor; desperately trying to push the engulfing tar off her as it slowly engulfed her boots, hips, chest, face. She never stood a chance. The tar consumed her.

“Run!” Finnigan pushed the two up the stairs.

Lulu’s gasps for air echoed behind him. The desperate plea grew fainter with each step he ran. They had gotten to the main chamber. The red flares led the way out of the tomb.

The walls shook from the reverberations that came from above. The ground shook underneath them, trying its best to knock them down. Marquito followed the flares burning on the ground. He ignored the loud humming and moaning that came from the ceiling above. Tendrils of smoke reached down to touch them. He shook them off him. A gnarly hand

touched Yin's shoulder, as if it trying to lift her up. Finnigan pushed her forward, shattering the smoky hand.

"What was that!" Yin cried out, gasping for air as the thick miasma closed in on them.

"Keep running." Finnigan said, they were close to the entrance when they heard a loud thump come from the darkness behind them.

They turned to look. All went silent for a moment before they felt a hot rotted breath assault their senses. The soft beating of a heart slowly growing louder. Finnigan pushed the other two up the stairway. The scream from the darkness grew louder and more violent. Up the stairs, five, ten, fifteen steps, the cold sulfuric air greeted them. Twenty, in his rush Marquito fell. His left leg scraped against the black stone block. For moment he could see the outlines of the haunter chasing them. The black mist swept up and extinguished the lying flares one by one while it flew towards the retreating team. Large girthy tendrils slithered in the darkness. Finnigan pulled Marquito up before turning and firing off a single shot into the dark. Thirty, he saw the darkness disperse and the tentacles tense, licking the wound that the weapon had inflicted. It screamed. The noise deafened them. They were close to the end now; he could see the streak of lightnings roll around in the sky above. Thirty-five, the tentacles shot out towards them. It hit Yin, pushing her down. It missed Finnigan. Marquito turned back towards Yin. Black smoke clung to her back, etching away her skin. Another wild burst into the darkness. Marquito pulled her close to him and lifted her up before carrying her the final few steps up the stairway. Behind him, Finnigan's gun let off on full auto.

Marquito's heart pounded, Yin's limped figure lay in his arms. Her head bounced while he made his way towards the explorer with her. Lightnings threw themselves at the monoliths. The sun shone bright and in the harsh yellow light, Finnigan adjusted his sight and fired another burst. It seemed to Finnigan that the bullets had no effect on that alien. Finnigan glanced towards Marquito and Yin, who were now far enough away to warrant him to make his retreat. He fired off another burst before sprinting towards them.

Marquito opened the rear door to the explorer and dragged the body of Yin inside. He bent over her and felt her soft breath on his skin. It eased his mind knowing that she was alive. He patted her back and found black tar clinging to his fingertips. It sent a crackling sensation up his fingers and black smoke fluttered up into the air. He shook the liquid off and it fell to the floor. Finnigan came running up. He threw the driver's seat door open. He started the engine and floored it; climbing fast up the small incline. Marquito turned and looked back towards the tomb. The alien creature coming up the steps was enormous. It floated in the air, a

large black shadow whose essence dripped down onto the surface. Marquito felt its gaze on him. It pursued them, flying fast towards them in the sharp sunlight. It would stop for nothing.

“Here!” Finnigan said, throwing his rifle and a magazine back to him.

Marquito fumbled with the ejector before finally slamming in a fresh magazine.

“It’s after us.”

“Shit.” Finnigan took a deep breath, calming himself down, “okay... okay... how’s Yin?”

“She’s still breathing.”

“Good.” Finnigan picked up the radio transmitter. “This is sergeant Finnigan of the Saint calling on all frequencies, this is a distress call. Anyone out there please respond, over.” Finnigan’s cheeks were flushed. Marquito noticed the desperate plead in Finnigan’s voice. Finnigan waited, but only static was heard. Finnigan repeated his call again, ignoring the forlorn clouds hanging above them. Marquito looked at his fingers, they had begun to bleed.

Chapter Seventeen

And Let Slip the Dogs of War

He washed his bloodied hands with the last remaining water in his canteen, but still a trace of blood remained. In the faint light, Polo watched his hands shake. It was a little tremor, nothing that an outsider could see. Just the gentle quiver. Shazim lay on the ground, breathing short shallow breaths. It had worked. Somehow, but it would not matter. Time was running out for them. He was unsure that Shazim would survive another invasive operation. Polo eyed the other inhabitants of the tent. Mary lay completely still, her hands wrapped in a bandage. Griff and Riff lay asleep in their sleeping bags. A coffee pot shrieked from the gas heater. Herald stood over it, poured the content of the pot into two steel cups and came over to him.

“Here.” Herald handed him a cup before sitting down next to him. Polo took a sip. The coffee was bitter, the thick taste of burnt beans stung his tongue and made him more aware of the overwhelming smell of antiseptic and sweat that lingered in the air around him.

“How long until they send out another craft?” Polo placed his cup down next to him. The flap of the tent waved at him, revealing the white snow-covered ground outside.

“Two days from now. We just have to hold on a little while longer.”

There weren’t many wounded left now, just Shazim, and Mary. The dead had been buried.

“I’m not sure Mary and Shazim can hold out for another day.” He took another sip of the coffee. The heat had dissipated, it tasted like lukewarm tar. Thick and sluggish.

“It will be sooner if Finnigan and his team manage to establish radio contact with the Saint.”

“Do you think they managed to do that?”

Herald shook his head, “I’m not sure. We’ll learn for certain soon enough I reckon.”

Polo nodded his head. He finished the cup then handed it to Herald. A bloodied handprint stained the metallic cup.

“I’m going outside to help Shawn set up the defence.”

“Polo.”

“Yes sir?”

“You should get some rest. I’ll help Shawn.”

“I’m okay, sir.”

“You’ve been up for how many hours?”

“Not sure.”

“Either way you’ve done enough, lie down and rest.”

“Sir, the last thing I want is to be left alone with my own thoughts. When I close my eyes I...” Polo said.

Herald finished his cup of coffee and nodded.

“I understand.”

Herald spotted the bloodied hand of Polo. He reached into his pocket for a rag.

“Here, dry your hands first before going outside.” Herald handed him a clean rag. Polo wiped the rest of the blood off.

“Thank you, sir.” He handed the bloodied rag back to him.

A thick fog lay over the base. Tiny specks of snow danced around him; falling on the ground while some fell onto the large drone whose black profile countered those of the silver snow. The six legs dug into the ice. Next to it, set up on top of the black box the drone came in, was the flight controller. Shawn had managed to set up a rough defence during the time Polo had been operating on Shazim. Deeper in the fog Polo saw the outline of Shawn returning from the pipit. He carried a large steel box. The large man set it down next to the drone.

“Did the drone’s cells get damaged?” Polo asked.

Shawn opened the crate.

“No, this cell should be usable.”

“He lives, for now... Shazim that is.”

“That’s good to know.”

“I’m not sure how long though...”

Shawn picked up the fuel cell. The holy symbol of Rimus was inscribed onto the metal rims of the cell. The sacred power that fuels all machines and the spirits within them. It was an allusion to the first energy cell Rimus created and from where all other power cell designs came from. Shawn never bothered to learn the story about Rimus. For him, there was another saint to worship and pray to keep him safe.

“He’ll make it through. If not... then you did what you could. Open the power slot on the drone for me.”

Polo unscrewed a cap which revealed an empty socket.

“I guess you’re right... still, a part of me wonders.”

“Just don’t... don’t wonder. If things happen, they happen.” Shawn loaded the cell into the drone. “Here, is the focus on the camera correct?”

Polo sat down and examined the flight controller's screen. He could see the blurry outline of Shawn's face.

Polo input a command. Shawn heard the camera lens on the drone whirl. Polo could see Shawn's face clear as day.

"There it works... still I can't stop wondering. The man's life is in my hand."

"And he's still alive, isn't he?"

"For now... Didn't we bring two drones?"

Thunder roared in the distance and the frost fog around them sparkled as the snow crystals in the air reflected the brilliant light. Polo looked towards the brilliant display of light. Again, it shot up and illuminated the camp.

"It broke during the crash. We're going to have to be extra careful with this one."

"Then it looks ready to me." Polo patted the drone.

"You can go back inside and get some rest. I'll take the next watch."

"What about the snow?"

"It doesn't bother me that much. Plus, the sergeant should be back soon."

"If you don't mind, I'll rather stay out here with you," Polo said.

The big man nodded his head.

"You got the time?" Shawn asked.

Polo checked his watch.

"Four."

"The sergeant should have been here by now."

The thunder laughed in the distance. The two men stopped and watched the storm rage to the east. To them, the lightning was coming closer.

Chapter Eighteen

Under Fire

The explorer drove west. Marquito watched the endless tundra behind them. He could not see the monster anymore. They had outrun it. Marquito turned his attention to Yin who lay in the back seat. Her breathing was irregular and the black smoke oozed out of her and onto the floor; mixing in with drops of blood which did not stop. Marquito held her right hand in his. Finnigan pressed the accelerator down; the truck was going as fast as it could. For him each mile was the same as the one before. Everywhere Finnigan looked was the same endless nothing as far as the eye could see. Only the small speck of the crash site in the distance was growing bigger while the light with each mile grew fainter. Yin's grey eyes stared into the cabin's roof. Black fog crept in from the tear duct of her eyes and placed a black veil on top of it.

"Marquito..." she whispered.

"What?" Marquito answered.

"There's something on my back..."

"You're hurt, that's all. You'll be fine."

"You're not a good liar." Yin whispered, squeezing his hand.

They went quiet. The engine hum reverberated into the cabin. Marquito looked at Yin's pale face, her death was drawing closer. The faint drip of blood to the ground, the click from the cylinders and the rough gravel meeting the tires. The sound of death, he thought.

"She's not doing so good, Finnigan..."

"I know."

The engine roared before sputtering.

Marquito looked back. He had not shaken the feeling that there was an unseen predator following them. It could not be the creature they had encountered in the ruins. No, or could it blend so well into the scenery of the tundra. He looked up to the clouds. Lightning sparks tore through the clouds, parting the outer layer of the dense clouds. Through the parting clouds Marquito saw silver scales glisten. Each time a thunder echoed, and a lightning would shoot out among the crease of the clouds, the scales would become more visible. Yin's coughing brought his attention back to her. She gently placed her other hand into his and squeezed it.

The truck rose and fell as Finnigan drove it over a large boulder. On the horizon Finnigan saw the silhouette of the camp; they were getting close.

"We're almost there."

“You hear that, Yin.”

She had closed her eyes, her hands slipped out of his.

“Yin.” He leaned over her face but felt no breath. Yin’s blood continued to drip down.

Thunder roared up above. Marquito turned his attention to the sky. A thunderclap in the distance heralded in a change in nature. He could see them clearly; the silver scales glistening in the storm above. It had begun to snow. The white specks flung themselves at the windshield and blocked their view, only for a split second before the wipers whisked them away. The cloud ceiling above them lowered gently. The thick veil engulfed them until there was nothing to see except grey mist on all sides.

“Is the gun ready?” Finnigan asked

“Yes.”

“Good, we might need it.”

Another thunderclap and a lightning struck the ground to their right. The explorer shook. The energy from the thunderbolt sprayed superheated black sand over the bonnet of the explorer.

Another strike followed the first one; it screeched on its way to the ground. It did not sound natural. The scream had a mechanical feel to it. An unexplainable high pitch, one that reminded Finnigan of an artillery strike. The scream grew louder and louder. Bombs, that was what it sounded like. With haste, he turned the wheel left. A huge chunk of sand exploded into the air. It was radiated by a burst of blue light from above that froze the sand for a split second before throwing it all around. The right side of the explorer clanged. The side windows shattered and sprayed superheated sand and glass into the explorer’s interior. Marquito fell over Yin. His body covered her from the worst of the superheated rain that rained over them. Marquito lost his breath. Skin sizzled as it met the hot fragments of sand which buried deeper into his right side. Marquito felt blood drip down.

The explorer bounced up again. Another boulder. A flash of bright light bloomed up in front of them, too close to evade. They drove straight towards it. The rocks hit the windshield; large cracks formed where the rocks impacted the glass. Finnigan screamed in harmony with the shrill high-pitched scream that pierced through the dark fog and into the bonnet of the explorer. The last thing Marquito saw was the heavy radio set flying towards him.

Chapter Nineteen

A Plan

The colonel could not sleep. No matter how hard he turned in his bed the thought of his men down on the planet kept him awake. His men that he had trained had become like sons to him. He wanted them back and to have his team whole again. It was not that the team could not function without the whole, far from it. It was the order to hold, rather, that made him think that the captain was going to leave them down there. Alisdair tried to shake the feeling off, but it wrapped itself tighter to him, like a ball python squeezing itself tighter around his neck. He got up from his bed. Sleep wasn't going to come to him tonight; Alisdair was too stressed thinking about the precious hours that were slipping through his fingers. The inability to act made him long to move and spend the pent-up energy. Alisdair put on his t-shirt and made his way to the gym.

He attacked the heavy bag which swung back and forth; he let his fists fly into the synthetic lether. The frustration and energy bled into his punches. His mind became clearer, and a plan formed in his head. It was a risky one that might cost him his position onboard the ship and ruin his career. Then again, he was more of a fighter than a political figure. Men should fight with their hands not with their tongues. He swung his right fist and hit the oscillating bag. It rocked before coming to a halt. The plan would require him to become something he was not proud of becoming, a sneaking rogue playing the political game. Calling in favours and getting together a crew. Most of the men were loyal to him, but the fear some of them would turn him in forced him to be selective in his choosing of men. He took off the wrappings, his thick knuckles ached and his hand stiffened, the forty years of life spent fighting were beginning to catch up to him. He chuckled while he cracked his knuckles. The idea of getting old, a luxury some would say, a luxury he never thought he would get the taste off. At that moment he saw himself the way he thought the saints would see him, an old hound of war scheming for the first time. They would never accept him into their ranks. A good soldier was supposed to be loyal to his superior, no matter what the orders were. Even if he would get a team together he would still need to find a pilot. No, there had to be another way. Sneaking around wasn't him. Only weak willed people manipulated others into doing their bidding. He exited the gym and turned towards the bridge. Alisdair would make the captain realize the importance of rescuing them. If not, he would make her see.

To his amazement the bridge was filled with people from the research guild. Piles of data slates concerning the weather and its movement littered the bridge. The navigator was

silently working away in his chair. His thick digits digging into the plastic armrest. Alisdair turned his attention to the weather reports that were projected onto the hologram in the centre of the bridge. A pair from the research guild, a man and a woman named aptly Bakim and Jola debated loudly whether the storm was artificially created or if it was a natural occurrent.

“The storm seems to be stuck to this one region.” Jola pointed out, her finger circled the northern region. Bakim snorted and laughed before shaking his head. She was right, to an extent, storm clouds and lightnings struck according to the measurements only in the region of N12. The other regions of the planet, though clouded did not seem as hostile or dangerous. For Alisdair that meant a way in.

“You are a fool, the cloud is artificial, when it detects an alien lifeform approach the planet it activates and shoots it down. The clouds we see down there are nothing more than a shield for the planet. We do not know what is down there, it could be a rich civilization or lush jungles hiding away the discovery of the century,” Bazim said.

Jola looked flushed, but before Alisdair could hear the counter argument the door to the observation deck opened. There he saw the captain standing by the thick glass of the bridge and looking down towards the planet.

Dawn turned when she heard the heavy military boots march towards her.

“Alisdair, what are you doing here.” There were bags under her eyes Sleep had eluded her all this time. Perhaps she was not without a heart after all. Why else would she sink herself into so much work? To crack the secret of this planet and how to enter it safely.

“I’ve come to see you. I would like to repeat my request to send down a team to check on Pipit Two.”

“It’s not that simple, Alisdair.”

His name, she was appealing to him. A warmer sentiment than the word colonel.

“The research guild found something interesting,” she continued, “and have a reason to believe there is a defence mechanism to this planet that makes it impossible to access the planet’s surface without crashing.”

“What do you mean?”

“It means.” Maus interrupted, he had been pouring over the data as well, “they’ve spotted something in the storm.”

“It’s the storm, we land somewhere else then it will be alright, won’t it,” Alisdair said.

“The storm is a part of it, but...”

She rubbed her temple. Alisdair saw how white her skin was. The time Dawn had spent pouring over the books and essays on the subject of hypothetical alien races plus the stress of not knowing if the team down there was alive had taken its toll on her.

“There is something hiding in the clouds as Maus said, but we believe that the creature is the main cause for the storm. That it is controlling the planet’s atmosphere and keeping things veiled.”

“Nothing gets in, nothing gets out,” Maus said, “Captain, I beg of you please reconsider sending another team down there. What if that goes after us next. This ship is not armed for combat. Accept it, we should leave while we still can.”

“No one gets left behind.” Dawn said, she turned to Alisdair, “We’re afraid that Pipit two was shot down by the alien, but I want to make sure we do what we can for the team down there.” Dawn said.

Alien, that word sounded ridiculous to Alisdair. The chances of life existing on this planet was slim. He knew that most of the galaxy had already been explored and settled, and never in the history of space exploration had they ever found any signs of life. So why now?

"Was that the reason, Dawn?"

“For what?”

Alisdair looked her in the eyes. They held a certain animalistic sway over her.

“The journey across the dead space. You wanted to get here first, get the glory of finding the first alien race?”

Her bloodshot eyes broke his advance. He found himself lost in her eyes. Before her voice pulled him out of them.

“The ship’s presence here marks the planet as property of Terran. You knew there were other ships already in transit to this planet and would you want the find of the century to go to the lesser colonists, the one we’ve fought for twenty years?”

“You could have told me. You could have told Herald your reason.”

“He knew,” Dawn said.

“There’s a lot riding on this. If we don’t find anything, what do you think the guild will do to me, to you? I’m getting old and won’t have another chance to command an expedition. That’s the reason this will have to be our finest discovery and our finest moment.”

Dawn Hart gazed at the storm clouds pulsating below. The tiny speck of lightnings flared across the grey clouds.

He mulled the word over, our finest moment. A discovery of the millennium just outside their reach. They would be cemented into the annals of history. Their past brought up

to light and studied by scholars. His whole life put on platter for some scholar to study underneath a microscope. The horrors he had inflicted onto others. All revealed for the rest of mankind to see.

“And do you want that? All that comes with that territory?”

Dawn did not reply. Her eyes lost all sharpness as if she wasn't in the room anymore. She was deep in thought. Before she could give an honest answer, a man called to her.

“Captain.” A man came running towards them, with unnatural speed and sprightliness. Out of habit, Alisdair found a large knife in his hands pointed towards the man who stopped as soon as he saw the tip. He wore the blue robes of the research guild.

“Lower your weapon, Alisdair,” Dawn said, “what do you have?”

“Reports, captain. It appears that the drones spotted something before they were destroyed. Something going west while hidden away in the clouds. Over on sector N13, b 68. It was moving fast.”

“Get the pilots ready, Maus. Send them out onboard the mosquitos.”

"This isn't what we should be doing. Captain what if —"

“Do it.”

She turned to Alisdair who had holstered his dagger, “This is moving way too fast, but we might have a shot here. I want you to get a team ready. When the fighters have destroyed the creature, I want a fresh team down there with you leading the way.”

Alisdair nodded. “Will do.”

“The aliens have shown that they're hostile, give no quarters. We'll claim the territory in the name of Terra.”

Alisdair compiled a mental list of those he thought were a good fit for his group: Akhim, Oliver, Mendoza, Richard and Paul. Veterans most of them. Mendoza was the only fresh faces recruit, but he showed potential to be powerful addition to his team. He could sense in him a thirst for a blessing. A blessing for life. It was something Alisdair himself had sought from his mentor. A longing for a blessing that was stronger than any chain. He got going, he had to ready his team.

Chapter Twenty

In My Time of Dying

“Marquito,” A pair of black frozen eyes stared at him. The crimson blood dripping from her eyes onto his neck, her features becoming darker with each drop of blood wasted. Her weak breath on his exposed neck. He tried to move his legs but felt a sharp sting of pain stab his left foot when he tried to move. He touched her. She turned away; her thin frame moved off him. On her back where the monster had touched her a thick black sludge had latched onto her. It formed out of black coagulated liquid, the same black sludge Marquito had seen in the sarcophagus. It pulsed and approached him slowly. The blob extended its tendrils towards his eyes. He could only watch while the tendril got closer.

The door behind him flew open; a thick hand grabbed him. Sharp nails sunk into the collar of his suit. For a moment he lay on the ground, the heavy fog acted like a cold blanket lying on top of him; stealing away his warmth.

“Let’s go.”

Finnigan hoisted Marquito. The man underneath him grunted in pain with each step he took. The burning explorer shrunk as Finnigan carried Marquito further away from the wreck. Razor sharp glass reached out towards him as he bounced around on the man’s shoulders. The sulfuric winds blew fresh air into his face, a bitter taste of cold mixed with aroma of the sinister, a smell he was beginning to get used to. Marquito watched the black smoke bleed into the fog above. Black smoke met the dark grey fog.

“Here.” Finnigan said, propping Marquito up against a boulder, before sitting down.

“You’re hurt,”

“Don’t mind me,” Finnigan said, “I’ve been through worse.”

Marquito noticed Finnigan’s hands shaking as they tried to pull the black glass spike that was impaled in his side out. Each pull seemed to drain more of the man’s strength. Finnigan’s efforts were for naught. He only managed to pull a bit out before blood began to flow out from his wound, down the black glass spike and into the gravel below.

“Yin,” Marquito said.

“She was too far gone,”

“No she’s, there’s something.” Marquito got up, the sudden exertion made him fall. His sights grew dim.

“There’s something, I can get up and—”

“She’s dead.”

“No... you don’t understand I...” the words fumbled in his mouth and he could not say a word.

Finnigan was trying to stop the flow of blood coming from his wound. His hands shook while the blood poured through the gaps in his grip. The sergeant’s breath was shallow and blood flowed freely into the snow. Finnigan was dying.

“I can get help, the camp, it’s close by I...”

Finnigan shook his head. “No... we wait. I heard the noise of the drone; they should be here soon.”

“Let me—”

“Don’t, don’t touch it. I can handle this.”

The adrenaline was fading away. Finnigan felt the ebbing strength, the faithful fatigue come to him, an angel closing his eyes. He could see the faces of all those he had fought with and against standing around him on this desolate place. Colonists from the freedom wars. Men who had found themselves fighting for the same ideals as him. His battle brothers all stood and gathered around him. They seemed saddened by his passing, they stood and watched. Waiting for his final breath, so that he may join them at last.

“Finnigan,” Marquito’s voice said from far away.

He blinked, the spectres of the dead approached him and soon he found himself suffocating from the blood seeping into his lungs. He gave in and the pain disappeared. Marquito watched as Finnigan’s gaze turned serene, the worried look that had been on his face disappeared and the war weary warrior found himself at peace at last. Marquito noticed movement coming from the wreckage.

Shadows ran across her face and dripped down to the ground. Her features were hidden away, a blank empty look on her, void of any expression, a hungry husk without a soul. Black liquid dripped down from her sides and down her fingertips as she crawled her way towards him. Blood mingled with black smoke that evaporated the liquid.

Yin’s eyes, Marquito noticed, had opened and were obsidian black. Her face contorted into one of hunger and pain. She scared him and he wondered if the creature’s essence had transferred into her. Marquito looked for the rifle to defend himself with but it was nowhere in sight. Yin’s shadow drew closer towards him. She raised herself up from the ground. The wind played with her black hair. Small specks of snowflakes got tangled up in her hair. Shadows, snow and blood mingled in the ground below her. Her uniform torn and charred. She stopped and looked at him. For a moment he could see the old Yin standing before him.

He blinked. The woman in front of him turned into the old Yin he knew. She stood upright in the wind.

Marquito blinked. Yin sat down next to him and looked out towards the eastern horizon.

She leaned in close to his ear. He felt her faint breath on his neck. The stench of burning flesh coming from her mouth.

“It’s coming,” Yin whispered.

Marquito woke up with a splitting headache. He felt the alien from the tomb was close by. He turned to look for Yin, but she was gone. The thick fog engulfed the wrecked explorer. In his state he began to hear heavy thud of boots getting closer.

The fog closed in on him. Shapes formed in front of him. The wind moulded the clouds into terrible beasts and brought with it the stench of the monster hiding behind the veil. Marquito searched for a weapon. He noticed Finnigan’s pistol in the dead man’s holster. He reached out towards it. A feral shout came from the clouds, Marquito’s fingers found themselves wrapped around the grip of the pistol. He pulled and aimed at the fog. Safety off, his pointer finger squeezing the trigger. Smoke from the barrel. The smell of gunpowder. He heard an unnatural howl coming from afar. Was it a desperate plea or a mad dash towards him?

The heavy weight of the pistol pulled at his arm, and he fired another shot into the ground close to him. Nothing. He laid the pistol down next to him. Loud buzzing reverberated in his ears. A lightning struck in the distance. It grew fainter until it all but disappeared. He closed his eyes, he was finished. He felt the monster’s eyes upon him, the monster’s teeth only an inch away from his neck. This was how he would die. He heard voices behind him. Rapid footsteps running towards him, then pass him. Marquito reached out for the gun. The pistol shook in his right hand, the fatigue pulled it down again with the sound of his impending doom setting upon him.

“Stay back!” Marquito called out.

“Is that you, Marquito?” Two silhouettes appeared before him. Their features became more distinct the closer they came to him.

“Polo.” Marquito lowered the pistol. The men came closer.

“Finnigan?” Polo knelt next to the sergeant. He checked his pulse but finding no heartbeat he let out a deep sigh

“Shit,” Polo muttered. He turned to Marquito. “Where are the others?”

“Dead, They’re all dead.”

“What are you talking about?”

Marquito could see disbelief in Polo’s eyes, his right-hand hovering over Finnigan’s pistol. Polo gripped it. Marquito allowed him to take the gun away.

“Go check the truck for survivors, Shawn.”

Shawn nodded and ran to the explorer.

“In the ruins out east, you must believe me. It’s coming for us, that creature.”

Polo touched his temple. Marquito felt the cold blood pour down his face. He blinked, Shawn returned with the radio and Finnigan’s rifle.

“Only thing I could found.”

“And Yin?”

“Nowhere to be seen.”

Polo nodded, “we’ll send the drone east and see what it will find. I’ll see if I can’t patch him up.”

“What about the bodies shall we search for them or?” Shawn asked.

“We’ll give them proper rites later, for now let’s get Marquito back to camp.”

They picked him up, ignoring the black fog that crept in behind them. It waited.

Chapter Twenty-One

Eye in the Sky

The mosquitos were being dragged into the launching bay one by one. Xavier, the pilot, stood by the nose of Pipit One. His hands played with the black fastener on his helmet twisting it before straightening it out again. Xavier watched while an armoured man indicated to the others where to place weapon crates and a huge gauss rifle. Two men loaded a heavy gatling gun and placed it in the mouth of the pipit. It made no sense for Xavier, a simple rescue op did not require so many supplies. Often the cargo hold would be empty. It did not seem right, and his bird knew it too. Xavier sensed the increasing stress coming from his dropship. He patted Pipit One and leaned in and whispered to it.

“Be a good girl and I’ll bring you back home safely.” Xavier pressed his lips up against her, the taste of cold steel was a sign of good luck. Xavier made his way towards the open hold where a group of men were loading the rest of their equipment into craft. A man carrying a rocket launcher placed it next to the gatling gun which stood erect on a tripod in the hold before he went up the ladder.

“Well Xavier,” Alisdair said, “we’re ready when you are.”

“What’s all this?”

Xavier saw an explorer tied down in the cargo hold. Next to it were medical supplies, assortment of arms, and rations.

“Heavy armaments. We used to do it during the colonial war. Made the transport more useful in combat than it actually was.”

“We got the mosquitos covering us, we don’t need all of this.”

“This is my op; you do as I say. The weapons stay. Okay?”

Xavier squirmed under Alisdair’s gaze. He would take it up with the captain when he got back. The extra load of weapons was ridiculous. He sighed and went up the ladder. Alisdair closed the hatch of the Pipit,

“It’s clear on my end, initiate take-off.”

People congregated around the bridge. The gentle hum of the engine was drowned out by voices that shouted and relayed orders and status updates back and forth.

“Get the map up.” Dawn said and the blue holographic projector displayed a 3d map depicting the planet, the Saint, three red triangles, and one blue square flying towards the planet. She zoomed in towards the planet, the three triangles turned into a hologram of three

small fighter crafts. The mosquito's wings were bulky and carried inside them enough firepower to level a whole city. Underneath the mosquito's nose was a rotating railgun capable of firing projectiles at the speed of sound. She watched them pierce the atmosphere, the tips of their wings flaring up on the projector.

The navigator whimpered. Victor, one of the crew staff picked up what the navigator had spotted.

"Captain, the navigator senses something in sector H, section one traveling southwest."

"Good, mark that on the map."

A red blimp appeared on the map, approaching the three fighters. Dawn Hart gestured to the radio operator.

"Give me a direct line to red leader," Hart said.

The three crafts flew towards the upper stratosphere, she could see them approach the clouds below them. She watched them. She was impressed by how quickly they had gotten into position. Red team had corrected their trajectory and now flew above the thick clouds that waited for them to dive in.

"Line is established," a technician said.

"Red leader, this is mission control, what's your status, over."

"This is Red leader, we're descending the clouds now." The soft voice of red leader reverberated pleasantly in her ear, "any sign of the bogey."

"Affirmative, bogey is flying straight towards you."

"Don't worry captain, we'll give him a warm welcome."

She heard red leader say, "combat spread, boys," before the line of communication was broken by static. They were gone into the clouds.

"Alisdair,"

"Yes Captain." On the other end of the line was Alisdair. He was hanging back, waiting for the alien to take the bait.

"Phase two is a go, the mosquitos should keep the enemy busy long enough for you to get in without being harassed."

"Roger that, captain. We'll get them home safely," Alisdair said.

She turned and gestured to a technician.

"I want optical eyes on this!" Dawn Hart called out, and in an instance the holographic map was replaced by what the navigator saw. The navigator had his cameras focused on red leader and his wingmen. Clouds swallowed up the three fighters. Their ships flew through the

thick clouds towards the hidden assailant. Their titanium hull reflecting the lights from the sun. To the far south from the three mosquitos, Dawn saw the thick frame of Pipit one disappear below the sea of clouds.

“Contact” echoed through all open lines. Traces of railgun fire and large missiles soaring through the sky and exploding illuminated the nearby bank of clouds. A small glimpse of silver scales glistened in the sunlight before diving back into the clouds.

“Wh — issss tha — ng!” the words crackled in her ears. A ship’s camera noticed one of the mosquitos fleeing the cloudy banks.

“It got me, returning to base. Cover me.”

Dawn watched as one of the mosquitos shot up from the clouds. It was battered and damaged, its hull scorched by blue fire. It attempted to ascend, but the jet engine coughed; spitting out unburned fuel. For a split second the mosquito hung above the grey clouds below. The nose of the mosquito rose before it tumbled back. He wasn’t going to make it. But before he could fall a large viper flew up from the sea of clouds. It opened its maw as wide as it could, dislocating its jaws in the process, before a bright beam of electric blue light shot out from it and engulfed the craft. The scream on the radio sizzled out with the large blast of yellow explosion. Red flares illuminated behind this large viper; shots fired but failed to hit. The viper disappeared again into the clouds. Its attention turned towards the last mosquito.

Dawn held her breath. The grey clouds ran like waves of water. Underneath it yellow and red flashes of light exploded. She knew that the last of the fighters was gone now. Red team had been wiped out.

She fell into her chair. Hopelessness assaulted her, robbing her of any strength she had left. The sleepless nights working on a plan to rescue the downed team had all been for naught. Her chance of glory was also gone, but she felt like it did not matter anymore. Nothing mattered.

“Radio Alisdair, tell him we’re aborting the mission.”

“There’s no signal coming from him... the clouds... the creature is on the move again,” Maus said.

Captain Dawn Hart watched the last of the blips on the holomap disappear.

“Captain,” Maus whispered, “what are your orders?”

“They’re gone... all of them...” Dawn stumbled up from the chair.

“It’s going after Alisdair’s ship. What are your orders?” Maus repeated.

“There’s nothing we can do; all our ships have been deployed. Keep the ship anchored in orbit. I don’t want any of this to get out to the other crew. It would devastate the moral. If you spot anything let me know.”

“Where are you going?”

Dawn turned to Maus, she hoped he wouldn’t notice how hopeless she felt, “you’re in charge for the time being.”

The doors to the bridge hissed open, allowing the captain to retreat to her quarters.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Return

The sound of explosion echoed in the distant sky echoed through the empty tundra, shaking the frozen pebbles. Marquito could see the bulgy outlines of the downed ship and the red emergency light from the beacon; its red light shining in the foggy mist. A loud boom shook the skies above them. The bright light illuminating the darkening day. They stopped for a moment and looked at the lightshow above them.

"What is going on up there?" Shawn asked. On his back he hauled the radio still bloodied after the crash.

"Keep moving Shawn, we're almost there," Polo replied.

The stop dissipated the pain in his left leg before the three of them continued onwards. The medicine Polo had given him dulled his senses yet a fine needle of pain shot through his dampened senses. He no longer felt blood running down his right cheek. Polo had managed to remove all the large pieces of molten sand that had melted into his flesh.

"We're almost there," Polo said.

Another explosion boomed above them.

"Could it be the rescue expedition?" Shawn asked.

"Don't know, but whatever it is it does not sound good."

Marquito watched the light fade away. Off in the distance the same whistling as he had heard before the crash, echoed in the empty landscape; it was followed by a loud explosion. The cold seeped its way through the slits in his clothes. The drugs numbed his mind. The wind sounded like warning from the dead. Telling him that the alien hunter was after him. They had to get off this planet. His sight began to waver. The grey clouds turned dark.

Marquito opened his eyes. The frigid cold he had felt was replaced by the muggy warmth from the gas heater that purred away in the centre of the tent. Herald and Shawn stood by the black warmer and talked. Behind them, on a makeshift table was a computer which showed an eagle eye view of black sands. On another was the radio Shawn had carried from the crash site. It still worked, by some sort of miracle. Shazim lay next to him, asleep; colour was beginning to return to his face.

"It makes no sense," Herald said.

"It's as I said, the explorer was attacked."

"But there's nothing on this planet that —"

"What if we're wrong, sir. The explosions above us beg to differ."

Marquito's fingers tickled. He turned to see Polo wrapping his left leg in bandages. The dirty bandage lay next to him. Dark red blood clung to the once white cotton. Marquito did not know a man had so much blood to bleed.

"Polo," Herald turned to Polo who finished wrapping Marquito's leg and foot, "talk some sense into your partner."

"I agree with Shawn, sir. Something attacked them. We can examine the wreckage later with you, but for now I need —."

"Polo..." Marquito said, "what happened."

"He's awake, chief" Polo said before turning back to Marquito, "you fainted, I must have given you a too much morphine. Not enough to kill you, but you're going to feel like shit for a while."

Shawn and Herald looked at him. From the corner of his eyes, he could see Griff sitting by a box, looking at him, fear in his eyes. Marquito tried to stand, but the pain in his leg stopped him from standing up. He lay down again.

"You're back with us," Herald said, "what in the world happened back there? Where are Herman and Lulu?"

"They're dead."

Herald froze for a moment. He was studying him, thinking.

"What do you mean?"

"We found ruins in the east. A large obsidian tower that holds up the sun. Underneath it was a catacomb. We did not know it at the time, but we found something inside one of the rooms a.... creature. It got them both."

"What do you mean, a creature? Everything on this planet is dead. Nothing can survive out here."

"No, it was more like a shadow. Either way, we need to get out of here. Marquito tried to get up again, but Polo's hands gently pushed him back down.

"What do you think you're trying to do?" Polo asked.

"We need to repair the ship and get out while we still can."

"He's delirious—"

"No, she told me, Yin told me. It's coming for us. It's going to kill us all," Marquito said.

Herald faced Shawn.

"Yin, is she alive?"

"She was nowhere to be seen at the wreckage," Shawn said.

“Did Yin talk to you?”

“After the crash, she appeared in front of me... I swear.” Marquito began to realize how he sounded. He looked Herald in the eye and wondered if he believed him.

Herald realized that the situation wasn’t as it seemed to be. The planet was creeping up on him. Trying what it could to suffocate him, to kill him. The desolate landscape, the biting cold. Adding an alien to the list seemed an overkill to him, then again. He studied Marquito, he was either delirious or the pressure of their plight had gotten a hold on his mind. He could not listen to his madness anymore. The talk of ruins, aliens and ghosts was too much.

“He’s out of it.” Herald declared, walking away.

The flight controller that lay on the table emitted a sharp ping. Shawn bent down and looked at the screen.

“He’s telling the truth. Look, —” Shawn said.

Herald saw the spiral on the screen. It was made out of obsidian. Above it, suspended, floated the sun. Monoliths surrounded the place.

“So it does exist?”

Shawn nodded his head, “that’s right.”

Presence of a hostile lifeform on the planet changed the mission. It was as if Herald was playing chess with made up rules where the king could be captured by a stray hand, the pawns moved to the left, and the queen did nothing but watch from high above.

“Did it detect any lifeforms approaching us?”

“Couldn’t tell, the fog lay too close to the ground. There were no thermal signatures though so I doubt it.”

“It did not have a form. It was almost ethereal. Floating like a shadow, but somehow solidifying itself and attacking us when it got the chance.” Marquito said.

Herald knelt next to Marquito, “how can a lifeform exist without giving away heat or existing in the solid space. Everything obeys a natural law, everything.”

“I’m telling you the truth. It’s out there.”

Marquito’s story was beginning to sound more plausible with each passing second. If what Marquito said about the ruin was true, then the creature must exist as well. He turned his attention to Shawn who showed him a zoomed in picture of the entrance to the alien catacombs.

He had a tough time believing it. Still, the harder he tried to hold on to past learnings and lessons from the saints, the more they fell apart. Marquito’s tone was sincere. Herald

stroked his scruffy beard. Everything was dissolving around him. If there was an enemy out there without a form how would they fight it. The only option would be to run, but with Shazim's condition that would be impossible. Unless they were to leave him. He shook his head. There was no place to run. Eventually the supplies would run out and they would perish. They would die, and no one would come rescue them.

"Then it must be our flight boys getting caught in the storm above that caused the explosions above. That's the last of the dropships," Griff said.

"That should be impossible, the ships are protected from any storm. It would require significant amount of force to pierce the hull," Herald said.

"Have you seen the wreck outside?" Marquito said.

"What do you mean?" Herald asked.

"On the side of it are four gaping holes. It melted right through the hull."

"That can't be. That would mean..."

"That the enemy is airborne."

A glance around the tent revealed to Herald the low morale. The expedition whose quest for reaching the saint had been a failure. He had to do something to regain the moral. They would function better with a goal. No matter how farfetched, it would keep them occupied. The downed crafts, perhaps... Herald turned to Shawn.

"Call the drone back, let's see if it can't find the crash sites of the fallen ships."

"What are you thinking, sir?"

"Extra supplies, flight equipment. Marquito, do you think you can get the pipit into a flying condition?"

"With the right equipment, anything is possible."

"But your leg," Polo protested, "you need rest."

"Don't worry about it," Marquito said.

"Compile a list of what you'll need to get the ship in flying condition. Me, Shawn and Riff will then check the crash sites. Griff and Polo you stay back here and guard the base. You shoot on sight."

Herald was surprised by the tone of his voice. It was beginning to sound like that of a commander. Men began moving and prepping for their expedition. Shawn directed the drone to search for the downed ships. In the commotion, Marquito grabbed Herald's sleeve and pulled him down to him.

"Herald there is one other thing," Marquito said.

“What?”

He smelt the sweet scent coming from the gel that Polo had applied to Marquito’s face.

“In the ruin, I saw a hieroglyph detailing something, flying in the sky. It was slender like that of a worm. I wonder if that’s the cause of the downed crafts. What if we’re trapped here.”

“It couldn’t be, could it?” Herald said.

“I saw it...” Shazim said. The commotion had awoken him. “The worm attacked us during the descent. I saw it for a brief second before it disappeared into the clouds. A terrible beast. Why it hasn’t killed us, who knows. Maybe it knows we’re no longer a threat. Maybe it wants to see us suffer. Either way, if we fly off what stops it from attacking us again. Nothing”

“There must be a way out,” Herald said.

“It attacked the explorer,” Marquito said “maybe we can lure it away somehow? Give the ship then time to escape.”

“Someone would have to stay behind,” Herald said.

“A poor man on a dark star. That’s going to be a hard sell.”

“Either way, the team needs hope. I would appreciate it if the two of you did not speak a word about this discovery. Marquito.”

The young man was deep in thought, Herald repeated Marquito’s name, snapping him out of his thought.

“Marquito, would you still carry out the necessary repairs if I get you the materials you need?”

Marquito paused, then nodded.

“It’s settled then.

The radio blared to life.

“Mayday, Mayday, this is Pipit one. We’re going down, I repeat we’re going down. Location —”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Evacuation

Alisdair looked over his squad. Each one of them had his own little ritual. Akhim whispered silent prayers while he counted his rosaries. Oliver who sat across from him chewed his tobacco and watched the ceiling. Alisdair adjusted the strap on his helmet. The heavy armour Alisdair wore reminded him of his time in the colonial wars. The faint smell of copper grease and the heavy armour plating pressing up against his chest and back. For a moment he glimpsed all the devastation that he had unleashed wearing a similar power armour. It filled him with a mixture of pride and disgust. Broken bullets bouncing off his chest plate. The armour turned every weapon the opposition had into a pee shooter. When Alisdair returned fire the enemy realized that they never stood a chance. They could only lay down and die while hellfire rained over them. Then, why did Terra lose the war? That was a question he could never get an answer to.

“I’m picking up a distress signal coming from the southeast, sir.” The voice in his headpiece said.

“How close is it?”

“Close,” the pilot said. “At this speed we should get there in thirty minutes.”

“Any signs of the bogey?”

“Negative. Looks like we’ve lost him.”

“Don’t assume anything, Xavier. The last thing I want is to get stuck on this planet, do you copy.”

“Roger that.”

Alisdair turned his attention to his men.

“Alright, I want this to be as clean as it gets. We drop in, secure the perimeter, escort all living personnel into the pit and blast off. Fifteen minutes top.”

“Yes sir!” His marines chanted.

“Good, now ready up. E.T.A thirty minutes.”

As Alisdair said these words a loud shriek from the outside pierced his ears. The pit shook violently. The men in the hold went silent. Alisdair noticed few faint tremors in his hands. His heartbeat echoed in his ears.

“Xavier, what was that?”

The emergency lights inside the cabin turned on. Alisdair saw the worried look on Mendoza’s face, Oliver chewed his tobacco fast.

“Enemy contact! It got the right engine,” The voice on the other end said.

It was just like he had anticipated. The creature in the sky would not let them land. It would shoot them out of the sky before allowing them to land peacefully.

Alisdair unbuckled his harness, he stumbled out of his seat.

“Mendoza, Akhim with me!” Alisdair said.

The three men made their way down the ladder, the ship shook and pulled them left and right as Xavier tried his best to shake the pursuer. Alisdair heard the sizzle of the decoy flare being deployed.

“Akhim, take the gatling gun, Mendoza you’re on the gauss rifle.” Alisdair bent over a weapon case and took out a rocket launcher. He hoisted the beast onto his shoulder.

“Open us up, Mendoza.”

The young man ran to the side of the door and pressed a button. The air inside depressurised, the planet sucked the air out and pulled them towards the cloudy sky. What Alisdair saw outside the door was the grey mist of fog clinging to the pipit.

“Where’s the bastard, Xavier?” Alisdair, said.

“On the stern!” the voice from the radio said.

“Fire the tracers, Akhim.”

The grizzled brown eyed man pulled the trigger. Yellow tracers shot out from the side and disappeared into the clouds. Alisdair watched; his finger waited patiently by the trigger. A brilliant flash of light erupted behind one of the clouds. The pipit shook and lunged down. The sudden shift of direction threw Alisdair off balance.

“Mayday, Mayday, this is Pipit one. We’re going down, I repeat we’re going down,” The voice from his headset yelled.

The pipit pulled up, allowing Alisdair to steady himself. From the cover of the clouds emerged a maw whose teeth were large and sharp. He could see the sleek dragon diving down after them. It had emerged from the cover of the clouds, confident that it could finish off its prey. Alisdair saw the charred scales from the previous skirmish and bulbous face gleaming with pride and overconfidence. An overconfidence that Alisdair would make the creature pay for. The colonel aimed the rocket launcher at the flying foe. It opened its mouth, blue energy gathered in its mouth. Alisdair squeezed the trigger. The backdraft from the rocket launcher knocked him down. Mendoza watched the rocket swirl in the air. Their pursuer turned to its left, but it was too late. The rocket hit its neck and exploded in a radiant blue light. The wrangled form of the dragon fell. Alisdair watched with pride the results of his handywork. His victory was short lived. From his earpiece he heard Xavier’s voice cry out,

“Brace yourselves for impact!”

Chapter Twenty-Four

What Is and What Should Never Be

Through the thick snowfall Herald could see smoke slithering up towards the sky. The monotone crackling of snow and gravel underneath his boots dulled his senses. Herald felt like he was in a dream where seconds, minutes, hours all floated into each other. It was a dream where he could review every little detail. Of the four crashed spaceships the drone had spotted only two that were in any salvageable condition. A Mosquito and a pipit. The other two were too far out with not enough salvageable parts to make an expedition worthwhile. However, what made Herald go for the pipit rather than the mosquito was the heat signatures that the drone had picked up from the crash site. The radio signal they had received five minutes later confirmed that there were survivors. He was glad that someone had survived.

They continued onwards. The thick fog begun to disperse as the three men came to a small incline. Herald's feet were killing him, but the exercise had done him good. His cheeks were red and his nose running. For the first time in three years, he felt alive. He ordered the men to halt.

"A quick break?" Riff asked.

Herald took up his binoculars, "We should be close to the wreckage."

"It is directly north from here." Shawn pointed north, off to their right they could see the sun float above the obsidian spiral, "we left Finnigan's corpse next to the boulder." Herald fixed his attention towards the overturned explorer. Snow had fallen and covered the wreckage. He scanned the site, but he did not see Finnigan's corpse. Herald scanned the wreckage but saw no signs of small humps lying close to the boulder.

"I can't see them."

"It's the boulder on the right, sir."

"Is something wrong?" Riff asked, he sat in the snow and rubbed his hands together. Herald felt the freezing wind nip at his nose. It brought with it the smell of sulphur and a tang of chemical burning.

"I can see that, but there aren't any bodies. The snow must have covered them up by now." Herald handed Shawn the binoculars, "take a look."

Shawn carefully studied the site of the wreckage.

"He's not there."

"Could it be that one of Alisdair's men had found and buried him?" Riff asked, he stood back up and dusted the clinging snow off him.

“Not likely, they said they would stay put at the crash site. Alisdair had to confirm something. Hand me the binoculars, Shawn.”

The large man handed him the binoculars. Herald looked to the east he saw smoke coming from the crash site. Yet, a weird pull tugged at him to examine the wreckage that lay in front of him.

“Keep that rifle at the ready, private. Let’s see if we can’t find poor Finnigan’s body.”

Smoke escaped from the engine room of the explorer. The toxic mixture of coolant and acid mixed underneath the wreckage and emitted a strong sour smell that the wind wafted towards the three approaching men.

“We left him lying here, by this rock.” Shawn showed him where Finnigan’s body had been. It was apparent to them that someone had laid there before being dragged away. Herald noticed a trail in the snow leading to the wrecked explorer.

“Shawn.”

The giant nodded. Herald reached into his holster for his revolver. Shawn crept forwards. It impressed Herald how quiet the big man was. Herald followed him. He pulled the hammer of the gun back; the cylinder rotated.

“You stay back, Riff.”

Black drops of blood were scattered along the trail. The two men continued, following the drops of blood before the trail ended by the explorer’s open door. In the darkness of the interior something stirred. Herald searched his pouch for a flashlight before he found it, turned it on and illuminated the interior. He saw two figures holding each other. Their limbs were black as obsidian, their skin cracked and falling off.

“This can’t be...” Herald saw who the people were. It was Yin and Finnigan.

“What in saint’s name is this?” Shawn said.

Their faces were twisted into a scream. Yin’s jaw hung open. It was as if something had forced its way out of her and tried to get into Finnigan’s corpse. Yet, before it could happen a black veil had enfolded the corpses into a black cocoon.

“I’m not sure, but it looks dead.”

“I guess the frost took care of it?” Herald said.

“Is it safe?” Riff called from the back.

“I think so.” Herald said, uncocking the hammer and placing the pistol back into the holster.

“What is this?” Riff asked when he saw the huddled corpses.

“I’m not sure...”

“May I?” Riff asked.

Herald handed him the flashlight.

Riff knelt and shone the light at the two corpses.

“Don’t get too close to it.”

“No worries.” Riff examined the corpses.

“Interesting, mind passing me a knife?”

Shawn looked at Herald.

“Humour him,” Herald said.

Shawn nodded and handed Riff his knife.

Riff pushed the knife into the cocoon but it would not pierce the frozen skin. It was frozen stiff Riff noted. Instead, Riff ran the knife down along the cocoon, trying to pierce the skin.

Riff exited the explorer.

“Did you learn anything?”

“It seems that Finnigan’s and Yin’s corpse had somehow melted together. It is a strange hypothesis, but what if whatever that creature tried to do, it could not finish its process. The frost got to it before it could finish what it had started.” Riff said, wiping the knife in the snow, just in case, before handing it back to Shawn, “I think it’s dead now.”

“You think?”

Before Riff could answer Shawn’s question a loud report echoed from the east.

“Sounds like gunfire.” Shawn said, readying his rifle.

Herald looked at the frozen carcass in the back of the explorer. A wall of fright immobilized him. So, this is what happens if the creature gets you. He wanted to run. To get as far away as he could. Yet, that would let his people down. Riff and Shawn looked at him. They waited for his command. He could not let them down. Far from it, he would make sure that they would escape this planet. Herald took a deep breath.

“Let’s move.”

The alien lay motionless in the crater. Freshly fallen snow decorated the worm’s silver scales. Slowly the snow worked on covering the worm; as if it were hiding it away from curious eyes. It was much larger than Alisdair had thought. The slender body lay zigzag for over hundred meters. Blue blood leaked from the bullet holes that decorated the carcass. Its mouth lay open in a pool of blue blood. Teeth lay scattered around the crater, reflecting the

artificial sun. The dragon's lower jaw lay thirty meters to its right. Teeth were missing from there as well. The giant tongue, coated with black silver, lay motionless in the pool of blood. Alisdair felt the cold blood cling to his boots and force its way up his legs while he waded through the blood towards the head of the dragon. The dead face looked so agitated, as if it could not accept its own demise. It showed the spirit's longing to continue the fight while the body lay wasting on the ground. Alisdair held his rifle in his right hand; finger on the trigger while his left hand reached out and touched the snout of the beast. It was cold to the touch. The sweet scent of flowers hung in the air around him. It was a strange smell for a man who associated the smell of death with gunpowder, sweat and faeces.

"Mendoza, do you see any movement from up there?"

"Negative,"

Whatever the creature in front of him was, he was certain that it was dead. No living thing could survive such grievous wounds. He moved to the left flank of the beast and saw its bulbous eye. Alisdair's reflection stared at him from inside the dead dragon's silver iris. He looked old and out of place. An old man chasing the glory of a young man's dream. The same dream he had been chasing all his life. It all led him to this moment. A moment he could not comprehend.

The dead beast quivered. Alisdair backed off and fired a round into the eye; it burst open. Blue blood squirted out from in and covered him. Small arms fire pelted the dead dragon before a loud thunder smote the dead beast. The impact from the gauss rifle tore through the dragon's head.

"Cease fire!" Alisdair shouted.

The thunderclap from the gauss rifle echoed in the silent land.

"Is it dead?" Mendoza's asked.

"It's dead." Alisdair turned to look at the desecrated corpse.

He could no longer see his own reflection. The scent that had been so sweet began to turn sour.

Alisdair turned and begun to ascend the slope of the crater. They had confirmed the kill.

A group of four men worked getting the supplies out of the pipit. They laid the caches by the gaslit fire outside. They had been lucky. No one got killed even though the crash landing had been rough. The worst wound was a bruised limb that a young private by the name of Emir got. He stood watch while his comrades moved the equipment out of the hold.

Emir scanned the horizon for movement. He was one of the new recruits that Alisdair had chosen for the mission. The cold nipped at his naked nose. He turned back towards the pipit. The pilot, Xavier, exited the hold mumbling to himself. He ticked something off in his pad before stopping in front of the blown left wing, then walking around the downed pipit, before stopping again in front of the large wound in the bird's side, ticking another box. Xavier spotted Emir and walked up to him.

"Is the colonel back?"

"No, is something wrong?"

"His orders, I can't go through with them."

"To remove all salvageable parts? Why can't you follow that through?"

Xavier studied the grievous wounds on the pipit's cadaver. A pang of guilt over his part in what had happened to the majestic vehicle that had flown them to the planet.

"Because a part of me wants to fix her somehow. Magically wave a wand and return her to her original state."

"Then why don't you do that then," Emir said.

"Because it won't happen."

Emir felt bad for the eccentric pilot next to him. It was apparent that the destruction of the pipit weighed heavy on the pilot's conscience.

"I will need help to rip the heart out of that poor bird," Xavier whispered.

"You mean?"

"The engine's spark house and the pipit's mainframe. The heart and the brain of the craft. And I need a bloody welder to remove the case housing of the spark house to get it."

"So..."

Xavier looked at him. "I need an extra hand to help me remove it, Oliver told me to talk to you. Do you think you can help me with it?"

"My dad was an engineer, most of the time I spent with him involved some usage of tools and other bits and bobs. I could —"

Gunshots echoed in the distance. The men carrying out the supplies stopped what they were doing, dropped the caches and grabbed their weapons. His headpiece came online. It was sergeant Oliver's voice on the other line.

"Nothing to be afraid of, the colonel has just confirmed the kill."

"Well." Xavier said, turning back to Emir "are you going to help me out or not."

The snow kept falling. Through the falling snow, Herald could see the downed pipit. A crashed bird whose tail looked up to the sky. Yet, there was no one to be seen. The air was still. Snowflakes floated to the ground. Shawn stopped.

“What’s the matter?”

Shawn raised his rifle.

“Identify yourselves!” A voice called out.

“It’s us,” Herald said.

A figure rose from the snow. His white camouflage armour had hidden him. He was a short man with rounded red cheeks. His nose bent and battered; blue circles lay siege around his eyes. His cheeks were swollen. He lowered his weapon.

“Sergeant Oliver at your service, sir.” He saluted, “Good to see you, Shawn. Where’s old man Finnigan?”

“He’s dead,” Shawn said.

Sergeant Oliver nodded processing the information. Herald could not see the man’s expression change too much. His face was too swollen to show any emotion. “The colonel wants to speak to you; he should be here soon.”

The newcomers followed Oliver to the downed pipit.

“Xavier and Emir are getting the parts ready for you.”

“Where’s the colonel?”

The heat from the fire warmed them. Herald felt his fingers thaw and come back to life. Riff was quick to extend his hands out towards the fire and warm them up.

“He’s making sure that the creature in the sky is dead.” Oliver opened a canteen and handed it to Herald who took a swig. “By the look of it, we think it might be the same creature that shot you down.”

It was the first good news he had heard in a while. If there was nothing in the clouds to stop them from leaving they still had a chance to escape this planet alive. Now it was only a matter of the shadow creature Marquito had spoken of and what its next move was. He hoped that it would not come to a confrontation with it. That the frigid air would kill the shadow beast before it could find them. He had to tell the colonel about it. “Will the colonel be back soon?” Herald asked.

“Hopefully he’s back in one hour, if not our orders are to leave without him.”

Herald nodded; he unzipped his jacket. The weather was getting warmer.

After thirty minutes of waiting, the system computer and the engine’s sparkhouse, a large rectangle with different sort of pipes leading out of it, lay underneath a white tarpaulin.

Herald saw an explorer drive into the makeshift base. The colonel jumped out from the driver's seat. His men began loading the explorer with the materials Marquito had requested. Riff oversaw the process. At last, with the flames dancing in the circle, the men ate their MRA and spoke of what had happened. It was decided that after a short rest they would make their way back to Pipit Two.

In the lifting fog however, a shadow stirred towards the site of the dead dragon. The stench of souring blood made it ignore the smell of sweat and smoke. There was a grander price to be won than that of short-term satiation. With the consumption of the dead jailor the shadow's freedom would be secured. Its hunger pulled it towards the fresh cadaver.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Phoenix

There was a lot on captain Dawn's mind while she sat behind her desk. The light in her cabin flickered. She lit another cigarette before crushing it down into the ash tray. The setbacks on this expedition were too much for her. So many dead due to the mission. Still, the planet's stratosphere was beginning to clear up and for the first time they could see parts of the planet below. It was not the vibrant green planet they had thought it to be. Rather, it was white and void of life. The projections that the explorer's guild had made were wrong and her crew had suffered for the guild's mistake. The hanger was empty. There weren't any crafts left to mount another rescue operation. All her hopes and ambitions for sainthood were gone. Dawn poured herself a drink; the best she could do now was drink herself to death. When the guild would learn of her failure, even the alcohol could not dampen the fear she had for when that would happen. She poured herself another drink. The burning alcohol hit the back of her throat, she coughed. There was no escape for Dawn. It was only a matter of time before the guild would strip her of her rank and ship. They would not accept their part of this blunder. Someone would have to take the responsibility of the expedition's failure and she knew that it was going to be her.

Dawn sunk deeper into the leather chair. She refilled her glass with more whiskey, spilling a few drops. Her free hand opened up one of the desk drawers. She felt the heavy handle of the revolver. Dawn laid the gun onto the table. Taking another sip, the burning in her throat became duller, the taste of each sip weaker than the one previous. A plan arose. Dawn would wait until they were in transit back to earth before locking the door to her quarters and pressing the cold barrel up to her heart. She would then pull the trigger. The shame was becoming unbearable. The crew's moral had sunk. She swirled the glass of whiskey, the ice clanged against the sides. Dawn drank it to the last drop. The fire tickled down her throat and sent pleasant firecrackers up to her brain. The men she sent down there were all dead; that was the lie she had to tell herself. Of course, the team would starve first. She had read a first-hand accounts of a crew that had survived being stranded on a barren planet. She remembered how the author described how the starving survivors would end up eating each other when the hunger pangs became too much to bear and all of the supplies were depleted. For the away team, hell awaited them. A hell that she was willingly putting on her crew. Dawn played with the revolver; felt the weight of it. Hefty. The cold barrel pressed up against her temple. She did not have to wait, let Maus deal with the guilt of leaving the

survivors, if there were any that is. They would die a slow painful death. She closed her eyes. Dawn could see her father dressed in a ragged captain's coat. The cloth ripped where the old medals used to hang. His beard unkempt and his face dirty. He stood alongside two other men, all of whom were deemed traitors by Fleet command. They had dared to revolt against the crown and leak information to the colonies. She was in the crowd watching him. A famed explorer fighting for the wrong side in the colonial wars. His eyes scanned the crowd glancing from one face to the next, searching for her. Dawn could see her father's eyes approach hers. Their eyes about to meet. A second longer and they would, but the executioner pulled the lever. The three bodies swung in the soft spring breeze.

A faint knock brought her back from her reverie.

Dawn placed the revolver back onto the table.

"Come in."

The door to her cabin hissed open. A young man entered, dressed in white. It was Gest, one of the ensigns. His clean-shaven face and warm smile hid his real age.

"Captain," Gest said, "your intercom was not working so—"

"I did not want to be disturbed."

"I'm sorry, captain. It won't happen again." The ensign bowed.

The captain sipped on her whiskey before slamming the empty glass down and glaring at Gest.

"What is the reason you're here?" Dawn asked.

The sight of his captain disturbed him. The liquor stench hung in the air, and he could touch the fine mist with his fingertips.

"The radar—"

Gest's eyes wandered to the revolver on the table. The hammer was pulled back. The more he looked at Dawn the more it seemed to him that she was a step away from plunging herself off the precipice and into the dark forbidden abyss.

"What about it?"

"It's.... I..." he composed himself, taking a deep breath before continuing.

"Something is approaching us from the planet, captain." Gest said, taking a step closer, trying his best to ignore the heavy smell of sweat and whiskey.

"Maus... he." Gest looked into Dawn's eyes and handed her the report he had brought with him.

Her mind was still processing the words the man was speaking. She glanced over the report. It could be the away mission coming back.

“Is it them?” Her heart fluttered. The whiskey fog that had surrounded her brain cleared up a bit. She hated the fact that she was so drunk.

“We’re not certain, the shape... it’s still too far out.”

“How long until we know what it is?”

“Twenty minutes, it’s not moving fast... Maus however has ordered us to leave.”

“Are there any hails from the ship?”

“Negative, though it could be that their communication relay has been damaged. I’m just not sure about it. Maus is certain though that the signal is hostile.”

“Could be, or that it is Alisdair returning.”

Captain Dawn Hart thought for a moment.

“Return to the bridge, Gest. I’ll be there shortly.

“Right away, captain.”

The door to her cabin hissed before closing once more. Dawn took a deep breath, allowing the slow waves of intoxication to wash over her. She lit another cigar and the puff of nicotine pushed out the ephemeral dream of the alcohol. The translucent veil of drunkenness faded as the sharp reality returned. Dawn noticed the minute details in the room. The smell of cigar and whiskey. She took another puff before standing up. Wobbling a bit. She picked up her revolver and headed towards the bridge.

Maus sat in the captain’s chair. Orders flowed out of his mouth. The bridge was bustling with life. The thought of his wife and family back on Terra urged him to depart from orbit and return home. Alisdair and his team no longer mattered. If the beast was coming for them then that meant that the away team was dead. Maus’ action was justified. The greater good exceeded the needs of the few. Still, a bad taste lingered in his mouth. Maus tried to ignore it the best he could. For him to lessen his guilt, he envisioned the away team dead. They were dead as soon as they disappeared into the clouds. He had seen it, the explosions, the electric storm, everything. No one could escape the planet. No one except the killer in the sky, the beast that had swallowed up their small sorties of space crafts and was now finishing what it had started.

“Is the engine ready for transit?” he said.

“Ten minutes, we’re finishing up some minor repairs.” Theo’s voice on the other end of the intercom said.

He relaxed into the captain’s chair. Maus could see his future. He would be awarded a ship of his own after this disastrous expedition. Sure, Maus knew that he was defying the captain’s orders, but someone had to take the reins of the expedition and save what could be

saved. It would be hard for Dawn to recover her reputation after losing all onboard shuttles as well as two away teams. She would be condemned and he would be deemed a hero.

“Continue as you were then.” Maus chuckled with delight. Captain Maus sounded so much better than third mate Maus. He was too enraptured within his own thoughts he did not hear the door to the bridge hiss open.

Dawn saw that they had plugged the second navigator into the chair. a neurolink ran from his brain and into the ship’s computer. The holomap had the course set for earth with a stop at New Sydney for resupply.

“What is the meaning of this?” Dawn asked.

Maus turned to look at her.

“Captain... I...”

“What have you done?”

“I’ve initiated our return trip back. We’re returning home.” Maus swallowed. He took a deep breath before continuing. “This expedition has been a catastrophe. Therefore, I’ve taken the burden of leadership away from you.” He said, leaning further into the chair. Maus shrunk with each word he spoke.

“So, it’s like that...” Dawn turned to the ensigns, “what about the ship that is approaching?” Dawn asked, “are you willing to let them die?”

“You saw the carnage,” Maus interjected, “there is no way that the blip on the radar is them. If that alien creature could destroy four crafts think what it can do to this ship. I had to do this for our own safety.”

“You are willing to let the men we sent away die?”

“You know as well as I do that they are nothing more than retired war criminals. Relics from the past. I —”

Captain Dawn Hart pulled out her revolver and aimed it at him. Blood rushed into Maus’s cheeks, turning them red and flustered. He stammered, gasping for words.

“You are mistaken if you think I will allow this ship to leave without those men.”

“Dawn, think about the rest of the crew. What if it isn’t them?”

“Get out of the chair.”

“No...I, get her—”

She pulled the hammer of the revolver back.

“Last chance, Maus.”

“You wouldn’t fire, You’re too —”

Smoke rose from the barrel of the gun. Maus fell out of the chair. His wail echoed through the bridge.

Captain Dawn Hart stepped over the lying man and sat down on her chair.

“Get him to the infirmary and have him patched up. I want to speak to him about the consequences of treason.” She turned to another ensign,

“I want you to delay the travel orders, we leave no man behind. Prepare the hangar for emergency service; I want medics there on standby.”

And just like that, the bridge was alive yet again with the sound of order flying about.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Flyboys

The frigid wind blew across the tundra and slammed into the men mending the wounded pipit. Riff and Griff worked on welding a large metal plate to an ugly wound that the pipit had sustained on its descent. The craft looked like a monster resurrected from the dead, pieced together from different parts of whatever material was available. Marquito appeared from inside the pipit. His face was black with soot and grime while his coveralls smelled of oil and sweat. Marquito saw the colonel approach him. Behind Alisdair, Oliver and Emir dragged pieces of metal and ripped hull along while Herald and the two pilots accompanied the colonel.

“Get the pieces to Riff and Griff,” Marquito said. The colonel looked calm, but his eyes told a different story. They jumped from one thing to another; never staying still.

“You think it will fly?” Alisdair asked him.

“With the hull scraps pulled from the wrecks and the sparkhouse from Pipit One. Yes, it will fly.”

“It looks like it had seen better days,” wheezed Shazim. He clutched his chest tightly. Red veins crept from the corners of his eyes and shot outwards towards the iris. His face resembled that of a porous porcelain mask. Sweat slid down his neck. Next to Shazim was Xavier, supporting the wounded pilot.

“But Marquito did a decent job of it.” Xavier said. The pilot shivered in his jacket, unlike Shazim who looked unbothered by the cold gust.

“Had there been any sighting of the ghost?” Marquito asked, he looked east towards the barren tundra.

“I had my men search the area yesterday, they did not find anything.” Alisdair said.

“That thing must be out there. You must keep looking colonel. That thing does not kill, it destroys.”

“We can’t send out endless expeditions,” Herald said.

“Don’t worry. We’ll watch the base.” Alisdair said, “you have a full team of marines watching your back, Marquito.

“I’m not sure even a whole platoon would be able to kill it.”

Alisdair nodded, “let it try, we’ll give it everything we’ve got.”

“Either way,” Herald said, “our main priority is to get out of here and get back to the Saint. Not to search for a fight.” Alisdair turned towards Herald. The tall heavy warrior towered over the first mate. “Have you been able to contact the ship yet?”

“Though the clouds have cleared I’ve not been able to reach them,” Herald replied.

“Perhaps they’ve left already, thought that there were no one left to save down here,” Shazim said.

Alisdair was quiet. Herald could not say a word. Only Xavier raised his voice in protest.

“They would have waited for us. You know the captain wouldn’t leave us, right Alisdair?” Xavier said.

“The captain will wait for as long as she can. We have to realize, however, that the need of the many outweighs the need of the few,” Alisdair said.

“See Shazim, we’ll be fine,” Xavier said.

“That’s not what he’s saying,” Shazim said.

“It does not matter, what matters is the fact that we get off this planet as soon as possible,” Herald said. Reiterating his point from earlier.

Alisdair’s earpiece buzzed. The colonel nodded.

“We should let the engineer continue with his work. Herald with me.”

They walked past the tent and out towards the great tundra where the vast emptiness opened up to them.

“This isn’t over yet,” Alisdair said.

“You’re thinking about the creature?”

“If what Marquito says is true than we are going up against a dangerous enemy. One that not even bullets can stop. So, tell me, if it could so easily slaughter us why hasn’t it attacked us yet?”

“Perhaps there is a bigger fish it wants to focus on.”

“I don’t know, but from a tactical standpoint it should have attacked already.”

“Perhaps its waiting for us to drop our guard.”

“Perhaps... I’ll post more men on watch.”

“I trust your judgment, Alisdair.” Herald said.

“Good, let’s load up the rest of the equipment and get out of here.”

The ground trembled as the thrusters lifted the heavy bird up. The hot backdraft from the jet turbines blew the snow away. Onboard, the men whispered a silent prayer. Marquito

watched the walls of Pipit 2, seeing if any of the seams he had welded together were giving way.

“It’s looking good!” Polo shouted.

They sat in the red light. Marquito closed his eyes, the faint sound of dripping, the intestine on the floor.

“Are you doing alright?” Shawn asked him.

“Yeah, I’m just looking forward to the comfort of my old bunk, that’s all.”

“We’re punching through the stratosphere now,” Shazim’s voice echoed through the ship’s speaker, “this is the part everything can go to shit.”

They held their breath. The walls vibrated. All Marquito could do was hold his breath and hope that he had done a good enough work patching the bird back together. Otherwise, the cold vacuum of space awaited them.

Inside the cockpit Shazim and Xavier adjusted the thrust.

“Looks like everything is in the green.” Xavier said, sinking deeper into his seat. He looked out through the dirty windshield. There was no sign of the Saint anywhere near the planet’s orbit where it had been in orbit. Shazim picked up the radio transmitter.

“This is Pipit two calling the Saint, do you copy over?”

He waited, there came no reply.

Xavier turned to look at Shazim, the pale face and bloodshot eyes made him look like a ghost in the faint starlight that illuminated the dark cockpit.

“The Saint is nowhere in sight,” Xavier whispered.

“Turn on the radar,” Shazim said.

Xavier flicked a switch and the broken screen of the radar came to life. He studied it for a moment. It picked up faint shapes of asteroids and the large planet below. He caught his eye on a larger target moving away from them.

“Head 43° degrees.”

Shazim complied, the left thruster roared and the ship turned towards the dark void.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Their Hails Were Met with Silence.

Pipit Two pierced the cold vacuum on its way towards the mothership. Shazim checked the fuel gauge. They were losing fuel too fast. Xavier seemed to notice as well for he reduced the thrust of the ship.

“What are you doing?” Shazim asked.

“We need to conserve the fuel,” Xavier replied.

“If we slow down now, we won’t be able to catch up with them.” Shazim accelerated, pumping the last precious fuel into the engine. The hull shrieked as the force from the small wings propelled them further.

“Have they returned any of our hails?” Xavier asked.

“No, they should however be able to see us on radar. It’s strange.”

“Strange, indeed,” Xavier said.

The fuel level dropped rapidly. The Saint grew bigger, from a small black speck to a large frigate. The ship was engulfed in darkness. Shazim sucked in air, needles of pain shot into his chest with each breath. They had done their best to hail the ship, but it was of no use. Their hails were met with silence.

“Move towards the hangar door, Xavier.” Shazim looked out the window. There were holes and dents in various places on the starboard side of the ship. They flew over the ship to reach the hanger. Below them, Shazim noticed how the outer hull of the ship was breached. Shazim examined the scene searching for the perpetrator. All in all, it looked as if something had been trying to get inside the Saint.

“Colonel there seems —”

“Look!” Xavier jolted in his seat. Shazim saw where he pointed to. A large obsidian serpent had embedded himself into the front side of the ship. It had woven its tail three times around the front of the saint before lunging forwards and cracking the gall in the observation deck. Few floating chunks of the creature’s scales tapped the pipit’s windshield while Shazim flew the ship alongside the Saint. The door to the cockpit opened and Alisdair and Herald entered.

“What is that thing?”

“This can’t be...” Alisdair examined the limp corpse floating in the vacuum of space. Most of the silver scales Alisdair had seen when he was eye to eye to the large beast still

dazzled him. Yet there was a queer aura surrounding the dead beast. The skin underneath looked decayed and rotting. Small specks of frozen flesh and scales slowly slid out of the decaying carcass and faded into the void.

“The creature was dead, we shot down. It can’t be the same one.”

“It seems to be dead now,” Xavier said.

The ship continued onwards towards the saint. A red light from the dashboard blinked. Shazim turned it off, they were running on fumes.

“What do you want us to do?”

Alisdair looked to Herald. The first mate was silent.

“This does not seem right.” Herald said, “are we receiving any signals from aboard the ship?”

“Negative,” Xavier said.

“Is the hull breached?” Herald asked.

Xavier ticked a command into the computer. It blinked for a few seconds before the light turned green. Xavier could see the status of the ship.

“Emergency protocols were activated twelve hours ago inside the ship. The breaches are contained,” Xavier said.

“It could be waiting for us,” Herald said.

“We have to make up our mind, Herald,” Alisdair said.

“I say we return back planet side, wait it out... God knows what’s waiting for us inside the hull.”

“Damn it what about rations and supplies, you’ll be dooming us all.”

“It’s the better option, we must assume that the ship is lost.”

“The ship is lost when we stop fighting for it.”

“Going back to the planet gives us a better chance than going up against an unknown enemy. Xavier, Shazim, turn this ship around. We’re going back to the planet.”

Xavier looked to Shazim. The wounded pilot shook his head.

“That’s a negative on that,” Xavier said, “we’re out of fuel for the return trip. Most of it was burnt up trying to reach the Saint.”

Colour escaped from Herald’s face. He looked towards the hulking mass of steel and iron in front of him. The shadows crept along the starboard hull of the ship. It was clear to him. There was no way out of this one, they had to board the Saint.

Herald turned his attention to Shazim, “how long would it take to refuel the ship thirty, forty minutes?”

“One hour to get to the planet, two if we fill it up,” Shazim said.

“What are you thinking?”

“Get in, fill the ship with all that it can carry then head back to the planet.”

“Are you willing to abandon the Saint?”

“It’s about having a contingency plan if something goes wrong. If we can I would like to secure the ship and get the engines operational. If that fails... we might have to destroy it or at least scuttle the ship.”

“He has a point, sir,” Shazim said, “better to have an escape route rather than get stuck in a corner.”

Alisdair scratched his neck.

“Shazim, Xavier, dock the ship.”

Shazim nodded. “Glide her in gently, Xavier. I’ll open the hangar port for us.”

Alisdair turned his attention from the decaying dragon to the first mate. Herald had changed for small parts; he exhibited the stoicism of a man ready to get struck down but still have the strength necessary to stand up again and take the next punch. It was strange to think this was the same man he had seen scurrying around the bridge for the past couple of years.

“I’ll get my men ready.” Alisdair said before leaving the cockpit.

Herald followed, leaving the two pilots watching the hanger door open in front of them. Red lights blinked from inside the hold. It was clear to Shazim’s seasoned eyes that the ship was running on emergency power.

“I do not like the look of this,” Xavier whispered.

“Neither do I... but the fact remains that we have no other option.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Homecoming

The faint light from inside the pipit leaked out into the dark hanger. Boots hit the metal floor and the panting of men echoed in the hanger. Their breath froze in the chilling air. Light illuminated under the barrel of their weapons, revealing the queer emptiness of the ship. Alisdair tasted a faint hint of gunpowder and sour sulphur on the tip of his tongue. The unnatural stillness; it felt like the soul of the ship had been stripped away. The rest of the team followed him. Mendoza on his right, Polo on his left, the rest of the marines were behind him. Alisdair and his men fanned out from the pipit towards the large door which served as the entrance to the rest of the ship. A soft clink emitted from underneath his right foot. Alisdair stopped. Mendoza shone his flashlight down to the ground. Hundreds of empty bullet casings and five guns lay by his feet. Mendoza picked up one of the guns. Alisdair saw in the brilliant light the shine of blood on the side of the weapon.

“Looks like they’ve made contact,” Mendoza whispered.

“If so, where are the bodies?”

Alisdair listened to the faint creaking coming from the hull and the low scraping of the void trying to force its way into the ship.

“Shawn, Emir, Mendoza secure the entrance.” Alisdair changed the frequency on his radio, “Herald the hanger is secure. You’re clear to start fuelling the bird up.”

“Roger that, we’re coming out,” Herald said.

Alisdair looked back towards the pipit to see Herald, Marquito and Xavier exit the bird. Marquito limped as he made his way down the ramp of the pipit. He would be the one to restore power to the engine. The mission was simple. Secure the ship, restore power then return to the nearest guild outpost.

Riff and Griff connected a fuel hose into the pipit. Riff looked to the first mate and shook his head.

“It’s no use, the power is out,” Riff’s voice said over the headpiece.

“Fuck,” Herald said, “Alisdair, we need power back on to refuel the bird.”

Alisdair nodded, he gestured for Polo to come.

“Polo, take Marquito and Akhim to the engine room and see if you can’t get the ship’s power back on.”

“Colonel.” Marquito came up to him, “that thing we’re dealing with, if it is onboard this ship, it’s unkillable. A... liquid smoke of sorts. We better get out rather than risk staying here.”

“You know as well as I do that the fuel pumps require power to fuel the pipit and we can’t fuel the pipit until the power comes back on. You see the dilemma?”

“We’re starting a fight we can’t possibly win, that’s what I’m trying to say.”

“Let’s put that hypothesis to the test, shall we.”

Alisdair took the safety off, a strange sense of doubt crept up his spine. What if the engineer was telling the truth? He could not condemn his men to a plan that had no escape hatch open for them, yet they were being forced to act.

“Emir, Shawn,” Alisdair said, “I want you to guard Herald and his men, make sure nothing gets into the hanger. Herald, I trust you and your team will go and resupply the ship with food, seeds, anything edible. When the power comes online we can refuel the bird and get out of here. If all goes to hell... well, it’s been nice knowing you.” Alisdair checked the chamber of his rifle. A round was loaded in ready to go. He turned to the face the rest of his men.

“Mendoza and Oliver you’re coming with me to the bridge.”

Alisdair and his team left the hanger, leaving the rest to resupply the ship in the unsettling stench of sulphur. In the back where no one was looking, the shadows danced in the dark, encroaching on the unsuspected men.

Damp reek of gunpowder, sweat and sulphur assaulted Marquito’s nose. It felt like *Déjà vu* and that he was back inside the tomb. It all felt eerily familiar. His flashlight removed the veil of darkness that hung over the empty passageway. Walls were shot up on both sides surrounding them. Behind him Marquito heard Alisdair’s team move up towards the bridge. That sense of being watched from the shadows. He turned his flashlight up towards the ceiling; more bullet holes and shattered lights. There was no hidden shadow lurking in the corner to be seen.

“It stinks in here,” Akhim whispered.

Marquito limped after the two soldiers who had stopped by a half-closed door. A pile of shell casings lay next to an automatic gun and a dried-up blood stain.

“What a mess,” Polo whispered. He knelt and picked up the gun. He ejected the magazine. It was empty, “poor bastard must have fought to the bitter end.”

“Well, where is his corpse?”

“Consumed. I guess.” Marquito replied, coming up from behind.

Akhim shook his head, “it’s fucked up.”

Akhim passed through the door and into the next passageway. Polo loaded one of his clips into the empty rifle.

“Here, take this, it has more firepower than the pistol you got.” Polo handed Marquito the rifle, “keep the pistol, I’ve got plenty of firepower right here.” He patted his gun. The two men followed Akhim into the next passage.

“What in the world...” Akhim said from around the corner. Marquito and Polo hurried to join him.

Akhim stood fascinated by a large stain of coagulated blood outside the mess hall. The corridor was the same as the one before. A pile of shell casings on the floor, the walls dented by gunshots, a pool of blood on the floor and double action revolver lying on the ground. What interested Akhim however was the fact that the stain of blood that clung to the wall appeared to be pulsating. Polo and Marquito passed him. They carefully treaded around the pulsating pool.

“We should go.” Marquito said, tugging at Akhim’s green shirt.

“Look at it,” Akhim said, “it looks like it’s moving.”

Akhim moved closer to the puddle lying outside the mess hall. He was taken back by the pulsating ripples and the faint fingers of smoke that emanated from the liquid. He got closer to the bloodstain. There, trapped by the thin layer of skin, he saw people. They floated around, swimming in the pool of blood. The ripples danced back and forth. They were without a face, without any discerning personality yet he thought they all looked familiar. a swimming figure noticed him and swam towards him.

"Akhim, let’s go.” Polo said, grabbing him and pulling him away from the puddle. “We got to get the power back on.”

“I... I thought I saw someone in the puddle.”

“It’s the darkness playing tricks on you.”

“Yeah, I guess so...” Akhim shook his head. They continued deeper into the darkness. Leaving behind the puddle of pulsating blood.

It was after a five minute walk down the hallway that they stopped. In front of them was a cracked blast door. They saw thick shards and pieces of hydraulics from the thirty inch door lying on the other side of it. While on their side, what was left standing of the door was

covered in thick black liquid. Neither Akhim nor Polo said a word. Marquito noticed that Akhim's right hand was beginning to tremble while Polo's eyes started to blink rapidly. It looked familiar. Cautious, Marquito hobbled forward, he took out a utility knife from his pouch and pierced the liquid. Thick slug leaked onto his knife, faint vapours from the liquid evaporated into the air. The smoke from it danced.

It was the same substance that he had found in the tomb. Yet for a strange reason it did not react to his prodding.

"What's the matter?" Akhim whispered.

"This liquid. It is the same as what I saw down in the tomb, yet it does not react to being prodded." Marquito wiped his knife on the steel floor and put it away.

"Maybe it's dead?" Polo asked.

"Could be," Marquito replied.

Akhim shook his head. "I saw faces in the puddle," he whispered.

Polo looked at him. The small soldier turned his attention to the soaked door. His stare lasted for a moment before he pulled back. Akhim was right, something stirred inside the liquid. A miniscule twitch.

"Let's go." Marquito said, "and get the electricity back on and get out of here." Marquito jumped through the door's open wound. The rest followed. Polo stepped and slid in black blood, he managed to catch his balance before going through the hole in the wall. The engine room waited for them.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Thirty Minutes

Riff, Griff and Xavier carried crates of food into the hanger and loaded it inside the pipit. Through the dim open space they walked past Herald, who stood still by the pipit and watched them.

“Load them in with the rest of the supplies, Shazim will tell you where,” Herald said.

The first mate looked at his timepiece. Thirty minutes. Eight crates loaded in thirty minutes. The loading was going too slow. Herald looked at the darkness which danced in the empty space. For Herald, the shadows hid dangers. There were black arms reaching out towards him from the darkness. Black eyes veiled by the darkness watched him and waited for him to drop his guards. That would be the time the shadows would strike. The walls of the ship were creeping in on him; the whole ship seemed to shrink with each moment. Herald felt the unknown edging towards him. It was a malleable shape that disappeared each time he shone his flashlight into it and then would reappear when he focused his light elsewhere. Herald took a deep breath. He spotted Shawn by the hanger door. Loneliness crept in, he needed to talk to someone. It was a way to rebel against the encroaching darkness and repel it. The large man had his back to him. A whiff of sulphur swam past Herald. He made his way to Shawn. Herald noticed that the large man had his rifle aimed down the right corridor which led to the bridge.

“Anything to report?” Herald asked.

Shawn lowered his rifle.

“Emir, thought he heard something by the storeroom. He checked it out and found nothing. It’s as if there’s nothing alive onboard this ship. No enemy, no friendlies nothing. Yet, I have this overwhelming feeling of being watched.”

“Must be our nerves then,” Herald said, “I swear, this silence is getting to me.”

“You’re not the only one,” Shawn said

Herald nodded; his fears were alleviated for a moment. There was a certain warmth to the big man. Herald could not place it, but it was there.

“Do you think there’s anything onboard the ship?” Shawn asked, breaking Herald’s train of thought.

“Might be,” Herald replied, “it’s strange to come home to an empty house.”

Down the corridor something creaked. Was it space trying to force its way in? Or a malleable shadow slithering in the darkness and forming in front of their eyes? Shawn’s rifle

was again raised towards the darkness. Herald found that he had his pistol in his right hand, aimed and ready. A glance at Shawn told him that he wasn't the only one hearing something moving in the veiled darkness.

"Alisdair, what's your status?"

"We're entering the bridge now."

"Roger," Herald turned to Shawn, "it's not them."

Shawn nodded.

They waited. Waited for something to make itself known. A creature to come charging towards them. Nothing. There was nothing. They lowered their weapons.

Riff, Griff and Xavier passed them. Sweat dripped down their faces and covered their coveralls black with sweat. It did not feel like they had accomplished much. Herald looked at his timepiece again, thirty-five minutes. Only twenty percent of the pipit's hold had been filled. With minimum rations the food could last them five months. At this rate they would finish loading the pipit in two and a half hours.

"Shawn..." Emir's voice came over the radio, "it's that noise again. I can hear it now. From the darkness."

Herald stopped the three men before they could pass him by. Xavier shone his light down the dark hallway. It was as if a thick fog had emerged and swallowed the light.

"This does not feel right," Xavier whispered.

One by one the lights came on. The dark hallway was flooded with light. Herald's eyes needed time to adjust to the bright led lights. The light revealed the stains of blood clinging to the ship's walls. The hum of the engine began to reverberate through the ship again. A moment, then ripples appeared in the centre of the bloodstains, small waves that pushed out to the edges of the puddle before returning to the centre.

"This isn't right." Riff said.

"Emir?" Shawn called through the radio.

"Xavier, get the ship fuelled up."

There came no reply from Emir. Xavier moved back into the hanger.

"Emir what is your status, over," Herald said.

"I can hear them slither all around me," Emir's voice whispered into Herald's ear.

"I'm —" The radio signal was cut.

"Emir!" Shawn looked at Herald.

"Check up on him before —"

Sound of gunfire erupted from down the hallway. Herald cocked the hammer of his pistol back. Another burst of gunfire and then came the sudden stillness. The hum of the ship reverberated in the hull.

“Get back into the hanger.” Herald’s attention turned to the stain on the wall. He was unsure if it was pulsating or not.

“Shawn with me.” Herald said, ignoring the stains that surrounded them on all sides. They moved down the hallway towards the storage room and where the sound of gunfire had originated from.

Chapter Thirty

Reignition

The smaller hydraulic door to engineering waited in front of them. It was a large blast door made out of plasteel and reinforced by titanium. In case of a hull breach or a hostile takeover the engineering would be a haven for a moment before the survivors would initiate self-destruction sequence that would overcharge the engine and unleash a devastating magnetic pull that would create a small black hole. Killing the ship and anything else in 3,7 light seconds radius.

“It looks intact,” Polo said.

Marquito slung his rifle and went up to the door control and typed in his password. The door hissed as the hydraulic pumps pushed the door open. Marquito shone his torch into the dark control room. It was clean. Not a spill of blood lay inside.

“Hello!” Marquito called out.

“Stay here,” Akhim said. He and Polo entered the room.

Marquito unslung then cocked his rifle. A moment passed; he could hear his heartbeat.

“All clear,” Polo called out.

Marquito entered. The control room was void of life. Unlike the corridors there was a lack of viscera. Only a faint scent of sulphur hung in the air. So faint that one could almost forget it was there. Marquito looked out the pierced safety glass. The large splint from the shield was still lodged in it. Marquito illuminated the lodged metal spike. It looked wet on the other side of the glass.

“Have you checked the engine bay?”

“No,” Polo said.

“Check it for me, while I restart the system.”

“Sure, Akhim watch the door.” Polo went to the door to engine bay but stopped, “you’re not turning that thing on while I’m down there are you?”

Marquito shook his head.

“I’m just prepping it.”

“Good.” Polo slammed his hand on the door-pad. The door hissed open. Polo disappeared into the darkness below.

Marquito was left alone. He leaned the rifle up against the control panel and sat down in his old mentor’s chair. Marquito started up the rebooting process. By rediverting the emergency power left in the auxiliary battery to the engine he could start the shield rotation

and therefore kickstart the EM drive that powered the ship. Marquito typed in the command. Looking out the pierced window at the large magnets that were moving to their places.

“Have you cleared the engine room, Polo?”

His earpiece crackled before coming back on.

“Not quite, but there’s a lot of moisture and coolant in here, but I can’t see anyone alive down here.”

“It could be that one of the coolant pipes leaked. Get back inside, Polo. I’m about to start the engine.”

“Will do.”

Marquito rotated the other magnets so that two magnets covered at least one shield. It would be needed to jerk the magnetic field inside the shields back to life. The magnetic drive would then pick up the energy and come back online. Feeding itself for the journey back.

The door to the engine compartment opened. Polo entered; blue coolant clung to his boots.

“Is everything ready?” Polo asked.

“Everything is good to go. Let’s just hope this works.”

Marquito undid the chain and examined Quietus’ ring. The weight of it did not feel heavy anymore. He typed into the control panel `start_allmagnets`. The emergency lights turned off. One by one the lights turned on; white light expunged the darkness from the room. Marquito listened to the hum of the engine. In between the gentle hum the sound of sea waves began to intrude. He stood up. An obsidian figure stood still in front of the engine. It turned to look at Marquito.

“Polo there’s a man down there.”

“I see him,” Polo replied, “how did he get inside the engine bay?”

Gunfire came from the hallway.

“Akhim?” Polo said turning to the hallway.

“We’ve got contact! Akhim yelled.

“Grab your rifle, we’ll deal with the person later.” Polo ran to join Akhim.

Marquito looked at the obsidian figure; it did not look like anyone he had ever seen. It stood taller than an average man, tall and lanky while tentacles protruded out from its face. Sparks from the engine flew at him. Yet it stood unperturbed.

Another burst of gunfire came from the hallway. Marquito grabbed his rifle and ran.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ship of the Holy

It was unnatural to see the bridge so empty. The eerie emptiness and lack of movement and noise was made stranger by the strong smell of rot and sulphur which hung in the air like a bad memory.

“Do you see anything, sir?”

He shook his head. Alisdair shone his light over the room. There was nothing. Only the blood stains on the floor and the chairs. Yet, there were no signs of any human cadavers. A cold breeze from the nearest air duct scratched his neck.

“Oliver, see if you can’t find us a footage of what happened, Mendoza search the room for bodies.”

“Right away.” Mendoza disappeared into the darkness.

Alisdair waited. He hoped that Marquito could get the power back on. There was a mystery to be solved. After a bit of waiting the lights turned on. All around him Alisdair could see the source of the sulphuric stench. The radiant light displayed the revolting sight of blood and viscera that covered the room. What interested Alisdair the most was the large pool of blood that lay in the middle of the room, right on top of the smooth holographic projector. Bullet casing, shells and guns lay in the pool of blood. One of them being an ivory handled revolver. Alisdair noticed small riptides streaking along the puddles surface. Mendoza re-joined him.

“No bodies to report, sir. There’s nothing”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. Only a sign of a massive firefight, that’s all.”

Warm air began to circulate again. It cooked the stench, making it worse.

“Sir. I’ve found the latest recording.” Oliver said, sitting by one of ensign’s console.

“Play it for me.”

“Right away, sir.”

The holographic projector came to life. The red blood coloured the hologram red. Alisdair looked in horror at the images that played before him. Mendoza froze. Alisdair felt the creeping fear of death crawl up his back. It was a fear that he hadn’t felt for twenty years and now it appeared and whispered into his ear, “your next.”

Alisdair’s eyes were fixed on the images playing in front of him. Black liquid poured the observation’s deck sealed door. Even though it had shattered the glass the alien creature

showed great tenacity of surviving in the empty void of space. It pulled the corpses down to the ground and fed on them. The creature's body pulsed as it fed while the other part slid through the blast doors. It was unbelievable how quick the alien managed to pour into the bridge. That was when the chaos erupted. Muzzle fire dancing in the bridge, people running away and falling before getting consumed by the creature. Those that fell screamed as the tide of death engulfed them and left nothing behind.

"Can you locate the captain's last whereabouts?" Alisdair asked.

"I'm tracking it now."

The footage in front of him sped up. Different camera angles revealed different people disintegrating before his eyes, leaving behind nothing more than a black pool of blood.

"Wait stop."

The holoprojector stopped. He could see the captain make her last stand along with two others at the base of the holographic projector. Behind her ten people cowered and watched as their defenders, frozen in time, stood and tried to protect them. Oliver resumed the video. The thick mist engulfed the defenders and the people behind them. Obsidian claws dragged them to the floor, drowning them in black liquid. The alien left nothing but pools of blood behind as it exited the bridge and floated towards its next victim. A group of marines had armed themselves and made a line in an effort to stop the creature from getting to the others. Hail of bullets zipped through the creature. It retaliated by shooting out black spikes that impaled and killed most of the unlucky souls. That group of marines were slaughtered. Alisdair felt sick to his stomach watching his men die like that. He should have been there with them. He watched in silence as the creature moved through the ship. No door could stop it as the creature bloodthirsty rose while it tore its way through the doors towards the rest of the crew. No matter where they were hiding or making their last stand the shadow managed to creep in and consumed them. Alisdair watched in disbelief as the shadow overpowered them one after the other. A makeshift bunch of engineers and marines made a last stand outside engineering. The creature's mass had become so massive that it slammed itself into the men and crashed through the door.

"The recording stops here," Oliver said.

"That can't be... it should. Oliver, rewind it."

Oliver rewound the recording. The shadow stood in front of engineering before the recording stops. The large beast that had engulfed so many took a form of a solitary creature. It stood bipedal, the head smooth and limbs thick, tentacles slithered from its face. The creature pulsed.

Alisdair took a deep breath. Herald had been right. There was nothing to salvage here. No captain, no hope. They should scuttle the ship.

“Herald, do you read me?”

Static, before Herald replied.

“I’m here, there might be enemy presence still aboard the ship, Emir does not respond. We’re...” Herald stopped talking.

“Herald?”

In his earpiece Alisdair heard gunfire erupt. His ear piece crackled before it became silent once more.

Marquito and Oliver looked at the Colonel.

“Herald, what’s your status?” Alisdair asked.

There came no response. He turned to his men.

“Ready your weapons.” Alisdair adjusted the frequency of his radio, “Marquito, do you hear me, over?”

No one replied. The stench of sulphur began to intensify.

Something unseen slithered about the bridge.

The headpiece came abruptly to life. Alisdair heard gunfire and screams on the other end. It was Xavier.

“We’ve got contact. They’re in the hanger!” the voice on the other end shouted. Raps of gunfire echoed in the background followed by a call for help. Then silence. Alisdair waited. He looked at Oliver. The man’s face was calm and determined.

“They need help at the hanger,” Mendoza said, “colonel, we must move out and help them, we—”

“It’s too late for them... For all we know they are dead. And soon... the creature will turn its attention to us.” Alisdair walked to the captain’s chair. He sat down and punched in coordinates.

“What are you doing?” Mendoza asked.

“Returning the creature to whence it came.”

“You mean.”

“Scuttling the Saint on the planet.” Alisdair looked at his men. They knew it had to be done. Alisdair stood up.

“Let’s go.”

Behind him Alisdair heard a splash. With a quick motion he aimed his rifle towards the sound. It came from the young recruit. His right foot had burst a coagulated blob of blood.

“Sorry sir, I did not—”

The blood began to pulsate and bubble around them. Mendoza took a step back. Forms appeared in the coagulated liquid. Hands reached out, followed by faces relieved to be able to climb out from the underworld. All around them Alisdair heard the burping sound of boiling water. Strong whiff of sulphur and death assailed his senses. Figures draped in obsidian veil began to take shape and crawl out from out of the shadows and the pools of blood. They were sleek figures whose outreached hands sought out the human warmth it had felt for a mere moment. Faint appendages floated in the air towards them. Smoke from the blood puddles began to fill the room. Forms took shape in the veiled fume. They looked like shadows of the dead. They had cornered them off. There was no escape.

Alisdair opened fire.

The veiled figures formed. Each time a bullet pierced and deformed their body, the wound would fill up with more black substance. The three men made a stand by the captain's chair. Alisdair's rifle kicked him repeatedly in the shoulder like a desperate mule trying to escape its death while the barrel spat out full metal rounds that pierced the veil of the creatures. Their assailants bled. Alisdair could see the black blood leaking out of them. They would fall to the floor only to materialize back. They encroached upon them. Slowly, as to taunt them. He had seen the clip. The creature could move fast if it wanted to.

“This is hopeless!” Mendoza cried out.

A spiked appendage shot out from the stomach of a shadow close by and pierced his shoulder. It pinned Oliver down and a black veil was draped over his chest.

“Mendoza, get him!”

The young man slung his rifle, grabbed a knife and cut the appendage that pinned Oliver down. Black liquid poured from the creature's open wound while the creature squealed. The remains of the appendage fell and covered Oliver. His skin sizzled and dissolved, smoke from his wound wafted through the air. A mix of iron and sulphur. Oliver turned; a mouth desperate to scream. The black liquid seeped down his mouth. The man could not breath. Mendoza was overwhelmed. Tears streamed down his cheeks. He could not be there, could he. He needed to run and get away. He felt a tap on his shoulder.

“It's alright.” Mendoza looked to his mentor and saw that his face was not filled with fury but with serenity. The old man turned his rifle and fired at an incoming appendage; forcing it down.

Mendoza complied, taking up his rifle he fired at the incoming mass.

Alisdair knew this was it for him. The death he had waited for. He would stand his ground. He would stand and shoot until his rifle ran out, then he would use his pistol, then his knife, then his bare fists. He would make them pay dearly for his life. He reloaded his rifle. The shadows approached.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Burning Comet

Marquito heard Akhim scream behind him. A quick glance told Marquito everything he needed to know. Obsidian shadows poured and engulfed Akhim in black. It was horrible to hear him suffocate while the black sludge made its way down his windpipe. Marquito stopped by the door leading to engineering. He was out of breath and felt that his left leg would soon give out from all the strain. A sharp sting penetrated the thick hazy fog that the painkillers had created. They had been too late to retreat. Marquito and his team had tried to get back to Pipit Two when all hell broke loose. He heard the click when Polo slammed another clip into the rifle, pulled the hammer of the rifle back and resumed fire. Approaching them was a hoard of glossy bodies, so packed together that they looked like an approaching tide that was ready to swallow them. Marquito fired. The bullet whizzed into the writhing mass, pushing it back with no permanent damage being apparent. As soon as a shadow was shot down another rose in its place. Marquito saw the floating faces writhe and gasp at the veil that held them. They were like drowning sailors each pushing the other down for the faint hope of catching a lungful of air. The nine-millimetre gap that the bullet created sprayed three drops of black liquid. The thin veil surrounding the shadow's veil regrew and trapped the dead back inside. The rifles were useless. Still, Polo and Marquito continued to fire at the creeping ooze which ignored all their attempts to subdue it. Marquito emptied the last of his clip before he turned to the door pad. He entered the code.

Polo fired another burst at them. The gun coughed. The empty clip hit the ground. The smell of sulphur overwhelmed him, tears streaked down his cheeks. Marquito turned to see a tentacle shot out from the stomach of one the shades. Black smoke clung to it as it sailed through the corridor towards them.

Polo fired.

"It's open, let's go!" Marquito ran inside.

Polo turned and ran.

Marquito heard a thud behind him.

Polo was down.

"Marquito..." Polo groaned.

Marquito turned back and saw Polo lying on the floor. Three appendages grabbed hold of Polo's legs and dragged him towards the writhing mass. Marquito grabbed Polo's hands and pulled. The obsidian shades approached him. Marquito felt a surge of energy pulse

through him and with a jolt dragged Polo inside. He punched the door controls to close. The slow doors began closing. Marquito watched the writhing mass squeal as a lone shadow rushed towards them. He got out his pistol and fired the last of his clip at the charging assailant. The 10mm pistol bullets hampered the alien's approach. He shot the knees out, making it fall. Shades behind it screamed in anger. Its prey so close to them and cornered off. Yet it could not reach them. The loud scream was followed by three more shot out tentacles from the fallen shade. Black smoke was left in its wake. Marquito's pistol was dry. He fumbled with unloading the clip. He looked towards the door. It was shut and the outreached appendages writhed in pain on the floor. He put in his last clip and fired off three rounds. The dismembered appendages wriggled on the floor before a bullet went through them and laid them to rest.

"Marquito..." Polo whispered.

"Wait," Marquito said.

He watched the smoke vapours flow up from the pieces of tendrils. Marquito smelt the sulphur and burnt pork emitting from the disintegrating blobs of flesh. There was nothing left of them now but a puddle of coagulated liquid.

Polo coughed.

Marquito turned his attention to Polo, who had propped himself up to a wall. He saw how bad Polo's condition was. From his chest black discharge spat out onto the floor. His face was pale, his once brown eyes turned red and bloodshot. The pupil dilated.

"Polo." Marquito knelt, he was about to bring his hands to the wound to try and stop the bleeding. Polo stopped him.

"Don't, it's too late... it feeds on the flesh." He extended his right hand, revealing the dripping flesh which slid with ease from his hand to the floor. It was a death sentence to touch it.

"No, I can save you, if we —"

"Don't... don't give me hope when there is none. Listen. It's okay."

Polo gasped for air. The black goo had spread itself towards his groin and chest. With each second it was devouring him and spitting out more black liquid.

Marquito sat down next to him.

"Looks like we're not going to get out of here after all," Marquito said.

"Marquito." Polo coughed, spitting out black bile. "We all die."

"What do you mean?"

Polo did not answer. Marquito looked at the man sitting next to him. The rest of his chest crumbled like a burnt ruin collapsing in on itself after a fire had ravaged it. He watched the black bile work away the features of his face and disintegrating him. Polo was dead.

“May the saints guide you.”

Marquito got up. A faint buzzing came from his headset.

“Does anyone read me, over?” It was Alisdair’s voice on the other end. Marquito could discern the sounds of gunfire around Alisdair.

“Colonel, this is Marquito.”

“Listen... the Saint is lost. We are dealing with an overwhelming force. We’ll come and get you, hold fast, rescue is—” a sharp cry for help, the colonel screaming out “Mendoza” only one rifles sounded now in the background before it was filled with a scream.

“Colonel?” Marquito asked, “Colonel, do you read me over?” He looked towards the blast door. He could hear loud banging coming from the other side of the door. He could picture the bodies slamming up against the blast door.

“Colonel, Herald, does anyone read me?”

Static.

“Listen!” The colonel growled, “destroy... it.”

Static filled the radio waves once again. Marquito took off his earpiece. He was all alone. He took out the clip in his pistol. There were four rounds left in it.

Marquito looked towards the doors. Each bang bent the door inwards.

Marquito walked towards the window. He saw the great electric shields rotating slowly. The shade stood before the E.M drive and watched it rotate. The obsidian shade stood on top of the large pipes which led into the heart of the machine. The ship was lost. With haste he moved to Quietus’ control panel. Marquito had a plan. Overwork the engine and cause a meltdown which would lead to the creation of a black hole. It would kill them all, himself included. He knew that and proceeded with typing his order on the computer. Loud bangs echoed behind him. Marquito looked at the heat gauge. Something wasn’t right. The engine ran cool, a bit warmer but not enough. Intake pipes twenty-two, twenty-three and thirty were pumping coolant into the heart of the engine. Theos hadn’t replaced the remote-control module in those pipes. If he wanted to do this he would have to manually disable the pipes. That meant violently beating them down until they stopped working. In the corner of his eye Marquito spotted the fire axe and toolbox. It were the same charred tools that Quietus had used. The blast doors buckled; it was only a matter of minutes now. He could not allow this thing to live. Drops of black liquid began to pour in through the open dents in the door. He

turned to the control desk and increased the magnetic pull. Hoping that the increased friction would heat the engine. The last bit he needed to do was to destroy the coolant pipes. The ones that Quietus had fixed. Marquito gazed at the engine. The shields surrounding the sphere began picking up speed. The shade below became agitated. It turned towards the glass. Marquito put on the fire-retardant suit. He grabbed the axe and opened the door to the enginebay. A strong whiff of sulphur blew past him. Behind him he heard the five-ton blast door struggle to hold the horde at bay. With an axe in his left and pistol in his right, Marquito descended the steps. He braced himself, for the obsidian shade that watched him carefully. Unlike the others it did not move in to attack. Marquito aimed the pistol at the obsidian shadow. Black liquid dripped down from its tentacles. A black smoke, reeking of the horrid odour, ran down the shades back and surrounded it like a cloak. Marquito could see the face clearly. Behind the tentacles was a face whose feature reminded him of nothing he had seen before. It was smooth like sanded down rock while its three eyes had the same intensity as that of a starving wolf watching its prey. Marquito took a step towards the rotating shields. His steps were heavy. Marquito glanced down. The engine floor was covered in black liquid. Vapours ran past his feet and towards the engine. Marquito's tungsten toed boots began to sizzle. The shade with a hungry look in its eyes watched him. The shade raised its hands. Tendrils sprung from the ground. Marquito fired his pistol at the shade who in return sunk into the floor. Dry click came from the pistol, there was no more ammo. He released his grip on the gun, allowing it to go flying away. He readied the heavy axe and swung it at the incoming appendages that rushed him from the ground. The tendrils flew at him one by one, and each fell back into the obsidian sludge as Marquito swung the axe down on them; cutting them down. With each swing Marquito backed away towards the heart of the ship. The hum of the engine grew louder and so did the intensity and speed of each tendril trying to grab him. The onslaught kept going. An obsidian hand from below the sludge grabbed his ankle. The sludge seeped into his right boot and Marquito felt burning coldness eat away his foot. A quick chop dismembered the hand. A lull came in the alien's assaults. The sludge underneath him pulsed. Cold wet liquid ran up his right leg. The shields were turning with an increased pace. Marquito heard a slither; something underneath the sludge moved towards him. Marquito turned, the gap in the shield was getting closer. A loud clank from the control room was followed by the sound of rushing footsteps. Then it came, a gap in the shield. Marquito jumped through the gap and into the heart of the engine.

He made his way in the hot mist. The pipes were numbered. He passed eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Marquito raised his axe. Twenty-one. On the next one, Marquito swung the

axe down into the pipe. A fine cut appeared. The cold in his right leg turned to warmth. His right foot had begun to smoke. Sharp needles penetrated into his fibula. There was no pain, only warmth. Another swing and the coolant begun to spray out from the pipe like a burst artery. The E.M drive begun to howl. The noise deafened him. From underneath the ground a hand rushed towards him. It came too fast for Marquito to react. It gripped his left leg. The cold touch turned warm in an instant. It felt like his left leg was enduring a mixture of frozen heat. Cold mouths ate away his legs, the heat from their breath burned him as they consumed and digested his essence. Marquito swung the axe. The obsidian hand fell into the sludge.

Marquito hurried. He took a step toward the next pipe. He raised the axe and with the last of his might brought it down. It was lodged into the pipe. The heat and cold from his feet slithered upwards towards his groin. A hungry beast whose appetite could never be satisfied. Marquito gripped the handle of the axe and brought it up. Liquid sprayed all over him. The E.M drive screamed louder. One more, one more pipe to destroy. That was all that was left for him to do before dooming them all. His steps were wobbly. His legs shook. Twenty four... the black liquid passed his knee caps. Twenty five... twenty six... Marquito swung the axe while a tendril shot out towards him. Twenty seven... Another tendril dragged him down into the sludge. He pushed it away swinging the axe wildly. Marquito got up. His hands covered in a mixture of obsidian liquid and coolant. Marquito took a deep breath. His gloves smoked. His abdomen was covered in black. He could not allow the creature to escape death. This was the only way. Twenty-eight... The obsidian shade appeared before him. Its tendrils quivering. Marquito raised the axe for the last time. Twenty-nine... Liquid dripped from his ears. His hands shook. The shade flew towards him. Its face warped with an uncontrollable appetite and fear. A thousand faces formed on the alien's body. They hungered. They knew what he was doing. They could not let him go through with it. Marquito felt the cold hand of death wrap itself around his heart. For a moment Quietus' face flashed in front of him. His gentle eyes spurring him onwards. A smile crept upon his lips. Marquito took the last step. Thirty... Darkness consumed them.

On Writing *Star of Darkness*

By Sigfús H. Sigfússon

Exposition: Writing

Introduction

The first draft of a story is always rough, and it would be best to describe it as the author's outpouring of emotions onto the page. In the first draft, the writer is moving the building blocks onto the white canvas before he irons out the imperfections. This part of the thesis will focus on the writing and rewriting process involved in the creation of *Star of Darkness*. What the writer learned while drafting the story, and what were the writer's failures and pitfalls along the way.

The writer discusses how the lectures of Brandon Sanderson, a renowned science fiction and fantasy author, helped him create his own world. Now, let us delve into the world building aspect that is in *Star of Darkness*.

World Building

Robert Heinlein, the author of *Starship Troopers*, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, etc. creates engrossing worlds in his writing. Each setting plays a key part in his novels and presents a “what if” scenario which helps build an enrapturing story. In *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, for example, all of the story elements revolve around the setting. The novel explores themes of colonization, freedom, revolutions and politics. Heinlein meticulously crafts all of the political elements of the story and then moulds them into the setting. Of course, there are science fiction elements to *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, such as an advance supercomputer, spaceships, laser, orbital bombardment, (Heinlein, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*). But Heinlein focuses his lens on the setting rather than the characters (259). The same can be said about *Starship Troopers*. The science fiction element is in *Starship Troopers*, but the focus of his writing is deliberating on a new type of world government where only veterans are allowed to vote. Overall, Heinlein’s stories feel like a platform for Heinlein to debate and examine political issues and to try come up with a solution for them. An example of that would be the following passage from *Starship Troopers* where he brings up an argument for allowing only military veterans to vote:

Suddenly he pointed his stump at me. “You. What is the moral difference, if any, between the soldier and the civilian?”

The difference,” I answered carefully, “lies in the field of civic virtue. A soldier accepts personal responsibility for the safety of the body politic of which he is a member, defending it, if need be, with his life. The civilian does not.”

“The exact words of the book,” he said scornfully. “But do you understand it? Do you believe it?” “Uh, I don’t know, sir.” “Of course you don’t! I doubt if any of you here would recognize ‘civic virtue’ if it came up and barked in your face!” (Heinlein 27-28)

Heinlein creates captivating worlds which explore political ideas, but he also ensures that it does not come off as an exposition dump. This type of world that Heinlein created was what the writer of this thesis was trying to emulate in his own writing. The story explores how a futuristic society would function if theology and technology were the pillars of society. To help me with the world building I watched the lectures of Brandon Sanderson.

It was during one of Sanderson's lectures that the ideas of religion and sainthood in the future appeared to the writer. The key point that Sanderson puts forth in his lecture is "World Building in service of story. What are you trying to do with the story and how does your story enhance it" (Sanderson Lecture #5: Worldbuilding Part One — Brandon Sanderson on Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy). This helped give the characters of the story a motive. The captain's longing to become a saint is one of the reasons she goes on this dangerous mission. On Terra, the church worships the saints and for Dawn to ascend to sainthood corresponds to her living forever. Sainthood in this regard becomes Dawn's Immortality Project, a term Ernest Becker discusses in his book *Denial of Death*. She becomes a medium for me to explore the fear of dying without being remembered. She goes on a perilous journey towards an unobtainable planet. Dawn's journey to Tyr 23 becomes a way for her to be remembered. Another reason for Dawn going on this mission is the fact that it would also clear her family name since her father sided with the colonists during the colony wars. This resulted in the family name being tarnished and Dawn's longing to belong and prove to the Explorer's Guild and herself that she is in fact a worthy person and that the sin of her father does not apply to her. It is ironic then that the one that sacrifices himself and becomes a saint is Quietus, the protagonist's mentor. It is worth noting that Quietus exhibits guilt over past deeds. He is a tortured soul who sees a way out and takes it. Quietus' atheist view of the world is a contrast to Marquito's religious view and forces the latter to question the system and the aspect of sainthood. Questions such as, would God control an atheist? The

story raises the question of whether an outside force controls great people or if individuals have an innate ability to rise to the occasion when the situation looks the direst. My own opinion on that matter shows through in the text, but that is another aspect of the writer/reader relationship. It becomes a meeting of minds. It is important however that there are key building blocks that have to be included in a story for it to work. Without them, the writer would be publishing a lesser work.

Brandon Sanderson's lecture impacted the writing in numerous ways. He reminded the writer about aspects of writing that had been forgotten and had to be relearned. The points he made during the lecture helped the writer construct the story and focus on the details. For instance, one of those details is the tone of the story and the writer's promise to the reader that he will keep the tone consistent throughout the story. (Sanderson Lecture #1: Introduction — Brandon Sanderson on Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy). Sanderson is not speaking out of the void here. In fact, the *Creative Writer's Handbook* supports his definition. It is important that the tone should be consistent throughout the story. The effects of switching tone would give the reader whiplash and pull them out of the story. To respect the reader, therefore, the writer ought to be consistent with his tone. It would be fair to say that tone creates the mood of the story. A grim detective story is not likely to have many cheerful scenes while a comedy would have an abundant of those. Atmosphere that is created in the story is an important part in maintaining the reader's immersion. Therefore, consistency is required in order for the writer to keep the reader under his spell. One wrong move and the reader could be snapped out of his reading experience. In *Star of Darkness* a grim dark tone permeates the story. The writer chose the first lines of the story specifically to establish the mood, "Many look up towards the stars and are content with only seeing them. While others reach their hands up towards the stars and try in vain to catch them." This sets the tone of the story. With these words the writer promises an adventure where characters try to fulfil their

life goals only for them to never actually realize them. The writer was cautious when writing some of the scenes since a sudden jolt of action might overfill the cup of suspense and flip it so that it would come across as funny. That is the problem with trying to write suspense fiction. If there is no release valve the whole story could come crashing down due to it being depicted as overdramatic. That is why promises in stories are important since they create trust between the reader and the writer. If there is no trust between the two, the relationship crumbles. So, to increase the trust and craft an outstanding story, the writer relied on Sanderson's three rules of magic.

Brandon Sanderson talks about three laws that come up when a person is world building. It is important to note that this world building revolves more around fantasy fiction rather than science fiction, but the same laws can be applied to science fiction. Sanderson's first law is, "An author's ability to solve conflict with magic [science] is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic [science]" (Sanderson, Sanderson's First Law). In the work *Star of Darkness*, the writer keeps the science of how the ship traverses through space to a minimum. One of the reasons he does that is it would jeopardize the text if the writer were to try and explain something that he did not understand. The reader, therefore, only learns in the earlier chapters that the ship's engine has the power of a living star and that there would be dire consequences if something were to happen to the coolant pipes leading into the heart of the engine. In short, if the engine overheats the engine core will turn into a black hole and suck the ship into it. Since the reader knows that if something happens to the engines it will cause a cataclysmic event to happen, the author does not go on into further detail in order to explain how the engine works. Having done this, the writer has now foreshadowed the ending when Marquito overheats the engine and sacrifices himself in order to destroy the alien creature that has captured the ship. Of course, the engine is not the only part of the story that the writer does not fully explain.

There are other elements of the fiction that the writer does not explain, such as the alien creature. Fear of the unknown is the crucial part to crafting a horrible creature and not everything has to be described or explained. In H.P Lovecraft's short story, "The Music of Erich Zann" Lovecraft focuses more on the fright the creature creates rather than describing the monsters in the story, "I could almost see shadowy satyrs and Bacchanals dancing and whirling insanely through seething abysses of clouds and smoke and lightning" (Lovecraft "The Music of Erich Zann"). The protagonist almost sees it but does not. This helps elevate the mystery and allows the reader's mind to imagine the shadowy satyrs. It is the writer's opinion that the reader does a better job of imagining something horrible rather than reading a long description of the monster. The writer, therefore, kept the alien's backstory and description to a minimum. It is a shadow that has no form, yet it can materialize. There is an ambiguity to what the alien can and cannot do. This was in part an attempt to create terror for the reader. The alien always evolves and surprises you. It adapts to its surroundings and surprises the survivors when they reach the "Saint" in the latter chapters. If I were to tell the reader what it can and cannot do then I am afraid the terror of not knowing what could happen next would be lost. In chapter sixteen, however, I touch upon the backstory of the alien. In that chapter Marquito and the researchers examine hieroglyphics inside a tomb that gives them a glimpse of what happened, but it is up to the reader to decipher the code. The alien, in fact, is an incomprehensible creature whose motive and action throughout the story is never explained. Only a short paragraph at the end of chapter twenty-four allows the reader to peek into the alien's mind. At first glance the alien follows no rule, but that small glimpse into its mind establishes that the alien longs for freedom. This is a remnant of an earlier draft that explored the alien's backstory in more detail and how one of the kings of Tyr 23 is forced to unleash a weapon so potent that it consumes every living being that inhabits the planet. A problem arose with having a prologue dedicated to the creature's backstory, that is that it

splits the narrative. Instead of having the focus on the “Saint’s” crew and their plight the narrative adds another character’s perspective which would only serve as an exposition dump rather than revolving around meaningful action. Also, if that scene had been included the mystery of the creature would have faded. To quote H.P. Lovecraft, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (Lovecraft). It is important, therefore for the writer not to explain everything and to keep the reader guessing.

The second law that Brendon Sanderson brings forth is “Limitations are more important than abilities” (Sanderson, Sanderson's Second law). The writer did not use this rule too much when crafting the characters. There are no physical limitation that hinder the characters in the work. Most of the main characters are able-bodied. Finnigan is technically blind, but his weakness is overcome by the power of augmentations. His eyes give him the sight he needs. The only limitations in the story are psychological and being confined on Tyr 23. The characters tend to drag themselves down with their own thoughts. Marquito, for example, is hampered by survivor guilt over Quietus’ death. Quietus, on the other hand was suicidal. Max is a pill addict. Not all of the characters manage to overcome their inner demons. Max dies during the crash landing of Pipit Two and Quietus sacrifices himself at the start of the novel. Marquito is the only one that grows as a character. He manages to overcome his flaw. Instead of being afraid of death he grows to accept it. By sacrificing himself, he finds the redemption that he was searching for. It is not a random choice that the writer decided that the story should end on board the Saint. It gives the novel a nice bookend. The story ends where it begins, only this time, Marquito willingly goes into the engine bay and sacrifices himself for mankind. This shows a change in character and throughout the story Marquito grows into the role of the hero. The change is most eminent when the reader looks

at Marquito in his first scene, where he refuses to enter the engine bay, to the last scene, where he goes in and saves the universe from the alien.

The third law Sanderson puts forth is the law of expanding on what you already have instead of adding something new (Sanderson). This advice helps narrow down the story and have it focus on a couple of key elements instead of examining too much at a shallow level. As Sanderson stated in his lecture “Most readers will latch onto one idea done really well [*sic*] as better than they would latch on to hundred ideas just barely touched on,” (Sanderson Lecture #5: Worldbuilding Part One — Brandon Sanderson on Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy). This advice is the reason why the author only touches upon the colonial war, sainthood, and trauma. These elements help flesh out the world and drive the characters forward in the story. Dawn, for example, wants to become a saint to absolve the sins of her father, who betrayed the Terra Government and fought for the colonies’ independence. Quietus bears trauma from the war after leaving his brother to die on Portekus. Marquito has survivor’s guilt over Quietus demise. The focus of the story is on how the events that took place effect the characters in the story. Politics have a minor part to play but the reader never learns about what type of government runs Terra, only that it was once a great empire, but has lost some of its colonies in a war that lasted for years and that the Explorer’s Guild is funding the mission to Tyr 23. There are body augmentations, which show that this is a futuristic society which can mend broken bodies. Life on Terra is never shown in the novel. The reader only catches a brief glimpse of Terra when the “Saint” is preparing for launch. Still, there were backstory elements that the writer had to explore in order to explain minor details. Those were details such as: exploration, war, technology, and religion. The writer implemented them through the usage of flashbacks which can be difficult to implement, and horrible to read if done wrong.

Flashbacks achieve two objectives: they establish the character's motive, and they reveal something about the world in which the story occurs in. Sol Stein talks about the dos and don'ts in writing a flashback scene. His key takeaway is that the flashback scene ought to be gripping and cannot pull the reader out of the experience (Stein 144). For the flashback to work, it must be dressed up as an immediate scene. For the writer, the best way to implement the flashback was to have it come at the end of a life. The thought behind that being, what would it look and feel like to have your life flash in front of you? What kind of memories would you remember? Would they be delightful or horrifying? In chapter three of *Star of Darkness*, Quietus' life flashes in front of his eyes. The chapter starts with him falling into an abyss and blood blinding him. Each time he wipes the blood away the dream forces him into another memory. For the reader, this chapter acts like a dynamic dream sequence that pulls Quietus through one memory to another. The chapter is engaging, but underneath it all the chapter is a series of flashbacks. There are two reasons why this chapter works as a series of flashbacks. For one, the character is with the reader. Quietus is experiencing these memories all over again. He is actively doing something in the scenes. He is not a ghost watching his past mistakes happen in front of him. No, he is reliving them. This creates an engaging scene even if a handbook states "You should get in and out of a flashback as quickly and directly as possible" (Jason and Lefcowitz, 21). The writer thinks that a writer can always facilitate a slight change to the rule, as long as he knows he is breaking the rule in the first place. Another key aspect to consider and the reason the author dedicates a whole chapter to a series of flashbacks is the circumstance of the flashbacks. As the author stated before, Quietus' life is passing him by and this grants the author liberty to delve into the memories of the dying while not pulling the reader out of the story. In summary, rules are there but if a person can find a creative way to break them then he or she should not let dogma draft the story for them.

Inspiration

Aliens in Bruges. That was the pitch the writer had when he was finding out what to write. Aliens in Bruges is an interesting concept and the question arose what kind of story would an author create if he were to mix together the two films *Aliens* and *In Bruges*? The answer is *Star of Darkness*. These are two of the writer's favourite films. The character drama *In Bruges* is superb and deals with themes such as "eschatology, sin, suicide, war, the nature of suffering and 'the capacity of men to "long" for something different," (O'Brien, 2). Ray, the protagonist in *In Bruges*, grows in the film. The change is apparent. He goes from being burdened by his past action and trying to escape it by attempting suicide, to be willing to carry his burden and live. As Ray says at the end of the film, "I really really hoped I wouldn't die" (McDonagh et al.). In fact, Ray is searching for redemption. In *Star of Darkness* there are several characters on a similar journey as Ray. Marquito's guilt of letting Quietus down in his time of need weighs heavily on him, while Polo is burdened with the fact that people have died under his care. Quietus himself is also a person burdened with his past and he is willing to sacrifice himself in order to save the ship and save himself. His death brings him redemption. The theme of guilt and the search for redemption permeates the characters in *Star of Darkness* which originated from the film *In Bruges*. *Aliens* on the other hand played a vital part in the first draft, but since I moved away from it in the later drafts and decided to focus more on a different theme, the inspiration from *Aliens* were, however, prominent in the earlier draft.

The movie *Aliens* influenced the original draft of *Star of Darkness*. The key aspect that the writer used from *Aliens* revolved around the company culture and the profit seeking shareholders. In the background of the novel there was supposed to be a company that backed the expedition that had its own insidious motivation for the "Saint" to reach Tyr 23. That insidious motivation being that the company wanted to prepare the planet for exploitation and

mining. This tied in with the theme of corporate greed that was also present in *Aliens*, as Ripley states in the film, “You know, Burke, I don't know which species is worse. You don't see them fucking each other over for a goddamn percentage” (Cameron). Of course, the zeitgeist has changed a bit from the creation of *Aliens* and the creation of *Star of Darkness*, though it was appealing to the writer to examine the commercial aspect of *Star of Darkness*, that aspect of the story did not connect to the main theme of trauma. The commercial greed subplot, therefore, was one of the fluffs that was cut for the story to work more efficiently. This goes back to the third law of Brandon Sandersons, that it is better to expand on what you already have instead of adding more to the story (Sanderson Lecture #5: Worldbuilding Part One — Brandon Sanderson on Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy). Another reason for cutting the corporate greed subplot was that the story needed to be trimmed down and overall, that subplot did not improve the story, therefore the author scrapped it. This leads to the next subject of this exposition: the inspiration for the alien and the world ending device that it originates from.

There is one major issue that touches every human being living in the 21st century and that is the existence of nuclear weapons. The world has come close to nuclear annihilation. The most notable is the stand-off between the United States and Russia during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 (History.com Editors). It is sobering to think how close the world was to ending right there and then. Nuclear weapons are the most devastating weapons mankind has ever created and when it detonates it decimates the entire ecosystem and its effects are still felt to this day (Carlin). It is a weapon that can destroy all life. So what if the weapon could think for itself. If a nuclear bomb would be able to feel and come alive. How would it look like and how would it go destroying worlds and extinguishing lives? The movie *Aliens* has an impact on the creation of the alien in *Star of Darkness* since both share the same characteristic of being a perfect killing machine, but the way they look and function is different. The

perfect killing machine in my story is crafted by one of the rulers of Tyr 23 and he uses it to devastate his enemies only for it to devastate the entire planet. The first draft of the story gave the reader the origin of the alien creature and how it was created. I, however, decided against letting the reader know too much about the planet and how it turned from a green paradise to a grey lifeless rock. For me, less is more, and allowing the reader to create his own backstory to the planet involves him with the story creating process. My view is also that the story is more interesting to the reader if he knows only as much as the characters of the novel. The only time I made an exception to that rule was when I wrote a small paragraph at the end of chapter twenty-four that showed the alien's perspective and explained its motivation. Other than that, the point of view was always with the explorers. It is worth mentioning that the alien monster is a metaphor for weapons of mass destruction. The green jewel that a great deal of people covet became a dead planet due to war between the natives. This plotline plays into the aspect of the great filter, a term which tries to address the question why mankind has not contacted other life forms. That is what some scientists think, that alien civilizations have already nuked themselves or as Bostrom states, "it might be that any sufficiently advanced civilization discovers some technology—perhaps some very powerful weapons technology—that causes its extinction" (Bostrom). The team that landed on Tyr 23 are the first ones to witness the aftermath of a great filter event. The alien is the great filter, and when it escapes its prison it threatens to cause a universal extinction event.

Issues While Rewriting

There was another issue with the story that required attention. That issue revolved around Marquito's character arc. During my reading of *Save the Cat* by Blake Snyder I realized that Marquito's arc was unfulfilled. He did not change in the story since he was ready to sacrifice himself in the beginning of the story. In a sense, Marquito was already a saint. This made for an unfulfilling reading experience since there was no emotional growth or change happening to the protagonist in the story. If there is no character growth in the story, then the central question of the piece is not fully explored. The writer's idea regarding the human condition is that through trials of fire the true selfless nature of humanity becomes apparent. Then, how can Marquito become so selfless from the beginning of the novel? If he is the selfless hero from the beginning, then the main theme of the story would be that some men are in fact made by the gods. But this creates other dilemmas and ruptures in the story. For example, earlier in the story when the engine was about to overheat, why didn't Marquito insist on going into the reactor and sacrificing himself and saving Quietus' life? Marquito's psyche was reworked to bring out the theme that demanding times create great people. This is one of the changes that was necessary to elevate the story. Another problem with Marquito was how passive he was in the story. According to Blake Snyder "*The hero must be proactive. It's The Law. If he's not, he's not a hero*" (145). In the third draft the hero acquires a more active role in the story and pushes it along. He suggests to Finnigan that he can fix the damaged explorer and he is more in the foreground rather than in the background.

Another aspect that should be addressed was the number of grammatical errors in the text. There are numerous sentences that sound wrong when read out loud. So, the third draft was a further refinement of the text. The writer used *Elements of Style* by William Strunk while reviewing his third draft. In the 2nd draft the writer relied too much on letting a text software

edit the whole work. A lazy writer will let the computer review the text without exerting himself mentally, and that leads to a lazy story. A diligent writer on the other hand, will read the text out loud and scrutinize every sentence that he wrote. The writer burnt himself on allowing the computer to do all the work, since when I sent it out to couple of test readers, one of whom felt that the text was a horrible mercury inducing piece of fiction, in short, he did not like it and did not read it through. Even though that beta reader did not continue reading the story he still brought out a reality-shattering. From all the positive reviews the writer received from the other beta readers this one reality shattering criticism plunged the writer into revisiting the text and reviewing it for a third time. Addressing issues such as, character, wording, and grammar. The book *The Elements of Style* helped the author review the sentence structure in addition to clarifying the sentences. For example, the author methodically purged the definite and restrictive “which” from the text and replaced it with “that.” This has to do with the what Strunk and White state “Careful writers, watchful for small conveniences, go *which*-hunting, remove the defining *whiches*, and by doing so improve their work (59). Going *which*-hunting cleared up the text and made it clearer.

The toxic mixture of coolant and acid mixed underneath the wreckage and emitted a strong sour smell which the wind wafted towards the three approaching men.

The toxic mixture of coolant and acid mixed underneath the wreckage and emitted a strong sour smell that the wind wafted towards the three approaching men.

The change of “which” to “that” made the scene and description more concrete. It was an error of the writer to use “which” as a defining pronoun when the right word was “that”.

Therefore, the writer recommends other writers use the book *The Elements of Style* when they are reviewing the text. This leads to another issue that a person might have when rewriting a story.

There is a reason why Stephen King thinks that you should let your first draft rest for at least six weeks (King 211). The final draft will be flawed if the text is not allowed to breathe and rest. Take for example, Marquito's character growth. The writer was blind to the fact that in the earlier drafts that Marquito's character was stilted. This had a lot to do with the fact that he was born as a secondary character and a support actor for Quietus. Therefore, it took me by surprise that when Quietus died I was left with only a handful of secondary characters that I could use to finish up the story. It was then through the rewriting of the story that Marquito as a character was changed from a secondary character to the main character. He became a driving force rather than being the one that everyone else was dragging around. This also brings such satisfaction to the reader seeing Marquito failing to go into the engine room earlier only for him to return and enter at the end of the novel. The Marquito of the past would not have been able to enter the engine room and tried to put an end to the monster. This return to the roots helps visualize the growth Marquito has gone through in the story. He has gone through his crucible, the same way Ray, in *In Bruges* finds himself wanting to live after spending time in Bruges. After finishing rewriting Marquito and adjusting his relationship with other characters I could focus on the other characters and the minor tweaks they needed. Thankfully, some of the other characters did not need a reworking. Herald had a satisfying character arc through all the redrafts, he is the doubtful second in command that is first doubtful about his ability to lead but the planet brings out his inner commander and he grows into his role as a leader. His arc was great, but the writer had to change some of the other characters. The captain went from being a scheming shadow archetype that was a political villain who caused the accident that resulted in Quietus death. That changed in the later draft since one of the main themes was man versus nature. The story became bloated with a political sub plot that did not add anything to the story. The main problem with it was that it promised something that the writer could not fulfil. Having Dawn be a corrupted captain

whose action resulted in Quietus' death meant that the writer was promising the reader that Dawn would have her comeuppance in the end. That never happened in the first draft. Marquito never gets to seek revenge for Quietus, Dawn dies before that could happen. Again, the writer made a promise in the beginning but could not keep it, therefore it was better to remove it than to break the trust the reader had in him.

The overall plot did not change though small aspects of the story did. There are two reasons for that decision. The first reason is that the main theme of man versus nature was strong enough in the story that the plot itself did not warrant such a drastic change in text. The crew's plight against the elements and the alien creatures are strong enough to carry the story. There are chapters, however in the book that focus more on character development rather than actual plot development. I must, however, state that each chapter, even if it focuses more on character development always moves the story forward. The second reason for not changing the story is that changing a sizable part of it would result in more time dedicated to what would in the end be a muddled piece fiction. It is better to scrap a story when it does not resonate through itself and start fresh all over again. In the end, it is better to think of writing like this, "the worst writing you write is better than the best writing you didn't write." In short, practice makes perfect.

Aspects to Consider When Writing a Novel

Another important aspect to consider when writing a story is the time the writer plans on taking in writing the story. Stephen King states in *On Writing* that a draft should only take three months to finish (King 154). For the writer it took him three months to complete the first draft and two months in total for rewriting. However, due to the sporadic nature of his writing, the writer lost sight of the story. Characters became muddled and details and key items were displaced and forgotten. I scrapped whole chapters in order to force the story in the right direction. This is the consequence of failing to stick to a deadline and work every day on the story. If there is any lesson to be learned from me it is that self-discipline is the key to a successful story. Failure to maintain discipline will result in a lesser work. That is one of the reasons why the following drafts were dedicated so much to minor tweaks since forgotten items and their purpose in the story were rediscovered by me. These are some of the pitfalls that the writer fell into when drafting the first draft. Another equally dangerous pitfall was the lack of self-discipline. This is a pitfall that everyone should avoid. No matter what was tried, putting down time on the calendar or allocating time to write, there was always the problem of sitting down to write. Stephen King wrote about the importance of always writing for an hour per day, but that did not come to fruition. The longest that the writer wrote in one sitting was 1500 words. For me that was a very productive day of writing. Otherwise, the story came out in slow five hundred word bursts. The days spent writing *Star of Darkness* were sporadic. In fact, it would be best to describe me as a lazy marathon runner that sprints a few meters, stops and rests, before sprinting once again. This however brings the author's attention to how to improve the writing process of the next work.

I wrote in a way that allowed each word to be explorers of a new continent. Each word I wrote on the paper explored the story and did not following any set course. With this method the story came naturally rather than artificially. That's how I see it. Each time I tried to write

something which I had planned out I found myself always losing my interest. They were actors following a script rather than real people dealing with life-or-death situation. Stephen King talks about writers uncovering fossils from the past while they are discovery writing (King 163). The problem with this approach to writing is that it takes long for the story to materialize, and the writer is often left with rewriting more than if he had planned the story beforehand (Sanderson Lecture #2: Plot Part 1 — Brandon Sanderson on Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy). While outlining, the author plans out every minute detail and preemptively deals with plot holes and inconsistencies that arise in the story. This might be a benefit for some, but for the writer, problems arise since the story is forced to follow a set path rather than come to life organically. The problem with a set path is that the story becomes stale, and the act of writing becomes boring for the writer. It is therefore safe to say that discovery writing requires more self-control due to the writer having to run more without knowing where he is going. While the writer that outlines the story has already charted the course and knows where he is going, therefore he does not expend unnecessary energy in discovering the plot. An example from the writer regarding spending more time rewriting is one item that plays a minor part in the story, that is Quietus' ring. In the earlier drafts of the story the ring disappears after Marquito takes it. It was not until the 2nd draft that the ring was rediscovered, and the writer put it back in the story in a way that the ring serves its purpose. So, there were minor changes made in some scenes where Marquito checks on the ring and checks that it is there with him. The ring reminds Marquito of his failure and the death of his mentor. It also reminds him of a past he wishes he could change. Another item that was modified and changed was a gatling gun that Shawn and Polo were putting together. It was a Chekhov's gun that was never fired, which defeats the purpose of having a Chekhov's gun (Masterclass.). So the gatling gun scene, which revolved around Polo opening up to Shawn

about his fear of failing became a drone scene where the two of them were readying a drone for flight rather than a gun that in the end was never used.

So how do you measure the quality of writing? One way to look at it is to examine the number of copies sold and if the book becomes a bestseller or not. Is it then successful? That's one way to look at it, especially if you are competitive. Success is measured in money and how much you can earn from your writing. It is a capitalistic way of looking at it and people like Charles Dickens made a fortune writing and reading his stories. For other writers, such as Murakami, writing is a personal journey. As he states in his book, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*

In the novelist's profession, as far as I'm concerned, there's no such thing as winning or losing. Maybe numbers of copies sold, awards won, and critics' praise serve as outward standards for accomplishment in literature, but none of them really matter. What's crucial is whether your writing attains the standards you've set for yourself... In this sense, writing novels and running full marathons are very much alike. Basically a writer has a quiet, inner motivation, and doesn't seek validation in the outwardly visible (Murakami, 8)

Murakami brings up a valid point regarding success. If we compare writing to running a marathon. It is then up to the writer to determine if his work is successful or not. As long as the writer finishes his work and is up to his standards then the battle is won. That is not to say that the writer of this thesis did just throw together a story and left it after a first draft. No, rather the writer learned that he must aspire to a greater standard for him to be satisfied with his work. That was one of the reasons why he performed a last-minute rewrite, he was unsatisfied with his work and it did not hold up to his standard.

Conclusion

Overall, a story can change throughout the drafting process. It is natural for the writer to add on or remove some elements of his writing to strengthen the story. A writer should also be unafraid to borrow from literature and films that he or she likes. The idea behind *Star of Darkness* was born out of the writer asking himself what kind of story would come to life if he would mix *Aliens* and *In Bruges* together and craft that into a story. Though, through the redrafting process the element of *Aliens* was removed and the writer was left with a space exploration story surrounding a search for a higher being while also examining a planet after a great filter event. There are also countless aspects to consider when writing a novel. If the writer likes to discovery write he or she can do so but must accept the fact that the rewrite process is going to take longer than if they had written an outline. The main reason for it is that an outline provides the writer with a better overview of plot, items, and characters that he wrote into the story. For the discovery writer, these key components have to be rediscovered during the rewrite phase of the writing. Brandon Sanderson's laws helped the writer to keep the story concise and focused while also giving him more tools to work with. Though sometimes it is fine to break the rules, as was seen in chapter three, since the flashback scene worked due to the character's state of mind. Guilt and search for redemption are themes that the writer borrowed from *In Bruges* though the corporate greed angle from *Aliens* was removed in a latter draft. The writer uses the alien creature as a metaphor for a living weapon, a what if atomic weapons had thought. In the end, writing is a personal journey, and it is up to the writer of each work to determine if his work holds to his standard.

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