

**The Stellar Glory**  
**By Scot Noel**



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# The Stellar Glory

## Chapter Five

### Preface:

Pursued by Governor Quindelau and the forces of S'Blood, Christopher and the Intrepid follow the war god Tir as he dives headlong into a mysterious gravity well. Soon the ship is trapped in a world of mists and clouds, and Christopher leads a landing party out to meet the aliens.

But their captors are nowhere to be found. The landing party chances upon the playground of the war god Tir and nearby a great temple filled with the statuary of millennia past. But no matter what they do, their questions go unanswered until they begin to disappear, one after the other.

## The Stellar Glory

### Chapter Five – Captured

"I can never apologize enough for that, my lady," said Christopher. On any other day his tears would have seemed to him terrible, a display of weakness, but not today. Today they left behind something he did not altogether recognize, something which, after consideration, seemed stronger than before.

"You needn't call me that, not 'my lady'," Bethede responded. "My fellows in The Society are obligated to such correctness. I will not hold my captain to it."

"My lady suits you." Christopher settled himself in one of the chairs, easing back. "I owe you a great deal. My life. My ship. My crew."

"Enough. Start your payments with honesty then," said Bethede. "Are you strong enough to carry this through? One way or another we must encounter the aliens, contact sane, responsible members of another race."

"Assuming such exist. Yes, my lady, I can finish the mission, but neither you nor I may guarantee its success. Only Chesschantra in His heaven can do that."

In response, Bethede offered no more than a sardonic smile.

For a few moments more they sat in silence. Their eyes sought something in the gaze of the other. Neither seemed willing to break the spell, each sensing something healing about the presence next to them, their time together fostering what Christopher could only have described as a secret understanding.

"Have you any other questions requiring my honest response?" Christopher asked, breaking the spell.

"Yes, Captain." Bethede's words grew stern, the tenderness that had been between them now a vanished reality. "You and I, we've sentenced a crewman to death; I understand that. But tell me, how does it. . ." She turned away. "How does it take place?"

"Fair enough," Christopher said softly. "Studer will make a recorded statement. After that, the ship's surgeon will introduce a vapor into Studer's cell. The effect is to cause sleep.

"Once the prisoner loses consciousness, a fast acting poison is used, pumped into the cell as was the vapor. Afterward, the code 'Passing into Night' is broadcast throughout the ship."

Bethede considered the words for several minutes, then spoke as if amazed. "So gentle a death, and from the same culture that produced Quindelau. But for all its seeming gentleness, it's an execution nonetheless, and one without trial."

Pulling back his sleeve, Christopher rubbed at a plastic-smooth patch above his wrist. It itched. His whole body seemed to ache and itch on some dull, unconscious level, as if he were emerging from the sluggish reality of a dream and into the cold assault of true morning.

"Thank you, My Lady, for all you've. . . done."

Christopher rose and headed for the bridge. "But. . . You must know that on Balecentros these aliens you seek will be taken as demons, as proof of the Way and its doctrine, not a repudiation at all. It might have worked had they displayed another nature, if they had shown themselves to be wise, or at least civil."

"I've thought of that," said Bethede. "If our mission cannot be used to discredit His Majesty's authority, then I'll use it to destroy The Way. What could Tir and his kind not accomplish with an entire civilization to play their games?"

"You can't be serious!" said Christopher, astonished.

Bethede paused before answering, blocking the door for the briefest of moments. Her eyes met Christopher's. "I will prevail. If it means destroying everything I know and rebuilding it from a handful of dust, then that is exactly what I will do.

###

The moment Christopher entered the bridge, his first officer provided a status report.

"Nuclear bursts are taking place across the entire inhabited surface of Adhara," said Rand. "The whole world is being sterilized."

"Has Quindelau seen us?" asked Christopher. He tried to ignore the news about Adhara.

"Yes," Rand answered. His right foot tapped nervously at the deck, while his face seemed a study in tension, his whole appearance so absorbed by seriousness that Christopher found himself resisting the urge to reach out and grasp Rand's hand, comfortingly, in his own.

"One of the Governor's ships is attempting to overtake us," Rand said. "We, in turn, are about to overtake Tir."

An idea occurred to Christopher. He cupped his chin in his hand, considering it. "Try to contact Tir. Perhaps he'd be interested in joining forces with us."

"An excellent idea," said Kartian, who had approached Christopher as he conversed with Rand. "Even our Lady might appreciate such bold irony. You have my permission to try."

"I wasn't aware I needed your permission," said Christopher. "But I will note your agreement."

"Too late, and damn us all for fools!" It was Rand; he pounded a fist into the monitor. "Hard to port! Full power. Pilot, do you see it?"

"I'm on it," replied Seig Cassutt. If possible, Cassutt appeared to push himself deeper into the cybernetic sheath before him, his shoulder's disappearing into its dark edges until only the braids of his hair remained visible as he looked out into a world of three dimensional spaces, of curving glyphs and moving light.

Christopher went to Rand's side and watched as the first officer worked with the pilot against their immediate danger. A steep asymptotic curve pulsed in bright colors along a graph. Beneath it numbers moved at high speed, their rate of change causing them to blur.

"It must be a point gravity well," said Christopher, reading the chart. He held his breath. "Turn the cameras toward it."

A glance to the screens at the nose of the bridge revealed a crescent of fire building along their starboard side. There it lay, a star arisen out of darkness, a light where none should be and none had existed but a moment before.

"Its mass is almost enough to stop light from escaping," said Rand. "A little more and it would be a black hole. Tir is plowing straight for it. He shows no decrease in velocity, no altered energy patterns."

"Where did it come from?" asked Christopher.

"Right out of prespace, Captain." Rand checked several screens, comparing Tir's power output both before and after they came upon the phenomenon.

"The alien isn't caught by it;" said Rand. "He's flying straight toward it." An alert pulsed through the ship, and though the first officer silenced it with a touch to the panel, its meaning was clear: they could not pull away now without shearing the hull in two.

"We're locked into it," said Rand. "I'm putting the ship tail first to avoid a hull breach."

Looking to the face of his old friend, Christopher watched the sweat beading on Rand's cheeks, while to his own countenance, strangely, he felt the emergence of a smile. To be at the controls when danger came, this was where they belonged, the both of them, standing before a new threat as it rushed upon them. How many times had they reenacted the same scene, minutes or seconds from possible disaster?

Seig Cassut turned away from his instruments and looked back toward Christopher. "Captain," he said, "the radiant signature of that body is familiar."

"Spit it out, Mister. What do you see?"

"It's the star, sir," Cassut continued. "The dwarf white star from the system where we found the artifacts. It has to be."

"That's impossible," said Rand.

"The signature is almost exact," Cassutt insisted. "But this is no star. It. . . it's maneuvering."

Christopher squared his shoulders and pulled his tunic straight. He looked to the screen and gave the order. "Turn us into the star."

"Sir?"

"You heard me, Mr. Rand. Follow the alien." Even when facing the demons and later Tir, not until this moment did Christopher realize how much he had missed his command.

Rand relayed the order and held tight to the edge of the monitor. Christopher braced himself at Rand's side as the deck plates shuddered in the turn.

Death may be death and no remedy for it, but Christopher knew if he could cheat the devil of anything it would be fear. His crew would not panic, and in this moment they would live or die by his word alone.

"Is our bow straight on to the gravity source, Mr. Cassutt?"

"Aye, sir."

"Captain," Rand said, his voice almost pleading. "Shall I prepare the shuttles for launch? We might be able to transfer enough momentum for them to break free."

"No, Mr. Rand," Christopher interrupted. He reached out, hesitating only briefly before putting his hand firmly across Rand's shoulder. "Accelerate on a direct course after Tir."

Though he felt resistance from Rand, saw his friend pale and then all but draw away, Christopher kept his hand firm.

"Mr Cassutt," said Rand. "Steady up. Follow the alien."

Together, Christopher and Rand watched as the Intrepid dove straight down the throat of the gravity well. Stress markers moved into the red.

Time stood still, or seemed to, while on the screen they could barely make out Tir as his great, winged form, stretched out by the pull of gravity, flashed into the semblance of a white thread and disappeared.

A second later, it was their turn.

The viewer went blank. Intrepid's instruments failed.

Backups for emergency power kicked in, and the bridge lights came on low, yet no voices raised themselves in panic. For a moment soft words passed back and forth between stations, and then, in the ensuing silence, in that moment of anticipation when all on the bridge awaited the sounding of emergency klaxons and the crushing of the hull, an unexpected voice filtered over the ship's com.

It was Surgeon Jones, and her words brought home an event all but forgotten in the chaos of the moment.

There were but three words.

"Passing into night."

###

All the alerts sounded at once.

It began at the bow of the Intrepid, lighting up the nose of the ship like St. Elmo's fire. There were oranges and yellows, waves of light which began to shift away from the ship and spread out like shock waves, taking up patterns of agitation in the dark. Writhing and twisting, the patterns grew until everything about the Intrepid was alight, on fire, and of such intensity that every sensor and camera rotated away. They went into hiding automatically, so as not to be damaged by the growing flares.

"A barrier of some sort?" asked Christopher. "A shield wall, perhaps."

"Whatever it is," said Rand, "it is definitely not the photosphere of a star."

The ship flew on, but no crushing gravities twisted her hull.

"Turn those damned alarms off," Christopher ordered. He passed a hand back across his tonsured scalp, wiping away the sweat. Absently, he fingered the four short captain's braids at the back of his neck.

No shearing forces tore Christopher's ship wing from wing. She held to course and pushed on through.

"By His Blood, where are we now?" Christopher asked.

Light and wind washed across the hull. Daylight greeted the bowed wings and dark green surfaces of the ship.

The Intrepid bucked and yawed, starting to roll. The sudden advent of atmosphere threatened to do more damage than the barrier through which she had passed.

"Configuring for atmospheric flight," said the pilot.

"Good, Mr. Cassutt." Christopher stumbled as the deck jolted him toward the command chair, where he caught himself and took his seat, once again at the center of the bridge.

The view screen returned to operation, and the captain's attention focused there. Had it been a world beneath them, Christopher would have judged the ship's altitude in mere hundreds of meters. But what lay below seemed unlike any world known to man. Mist hung low above a crystal plain, a world whose landscape curved off gently toward a horizon of white fire, toward reflections from sun-filled, icy cliffs.

Indeed, all light seemed to emanate from the horizon. It was as if a ring of brilliance lay about them like some strange, all encircling sun.

Slowly, sensors began to rotate clear of their protecting sheaths, turning their lenses to face the outer world. Yet what they revealed held little in the way of useful information.

"Hold altitude," Christopher ordered

The muffled voice of the pilot responded, "Sorry, sir, I'm afraid we can't."

"Mr. Rand?"

"Captain, we should be in stable flight, but we're not. Something has us."

The Intrepid headed in. No lawful order to land passed her command and control review. No adjustments had been made to stabilizing fins, to jets, to vertical thrust. She merely began to settle, drawn inexorably toward the crystal plain below. The same unidentified force slowed her forward momentum. It targeted her course for a specific area on the bleached landscape below.

"Well then," Christopher relented, "rig to repel boarders. I want all navigational charts downloaded to the security box, under my personal code. My code only. Even if we are outcasts, I'll not betray The Way to that psychotic alien, Tir."

"Captain," asked Seig Cassutt, "your code only? By naval regs, I must remind you. That is not procedure."

"Be damned to procedure now, Mr. Cassutt."

"Sir?" Cassutt's hesitation was momentary. "Aye, Sir. It's done."

"Explain?" asked Kartian. With no answer forthcoming from Christopher, Kartian turned to Ken Rand. "What has he done?"

Rand squirmed, looking to Christopher before answering. "When the ship is in danger, it's standard procedure to empty the computers of information which might help the enemy: classified data, navigational charts. It all goes into a box and can't be retrieved without several coded authorizations."

And on this ship," said Christopher, "I now have the only useful code." He looked to Kartian but did not smile. "Keep me alive and in command, Mister Kartian."

"I have every intention of doing so," Kartian answered, not at all pleased. He crossed his arms and turned away from Christopher.

As Intrepid drew closer to her fate, objects became discernible below the mist.

By aiming short bursts downward from her jets, the ship cleared a great swath through the roiling white, revealing in quick succession a variety of vehicles on the plain below.

Space fighters with missiles locked in their stubby wings, land fighters, tanks, mobile rocket launchers, and ships from the sea, they all waited in scattered ranks on the plain below.

At first the Intrepid's computers received orders to train anti-missile cannon on the collection. They tracked and they watched, but the pieces revealed out of the mist remained as still as ice and no new orders came.

By the time a bare spot in the plain revealed itself and the ship touched down, Intrepid's computers had something else to occupy their cycles: assembling a detailed catalog of their surroundings. It was a database the computers passed on to the crew, a description Christopher, Bethede, and Kartian took turns in reviewing before they met once again in the airlock just forward of the port engine.

It was time to venture outside.

###

"Have you seen the like of it?" asked Christopher, reaching forward to touch with gloved hands the side of a battle tank whose sloping, angled armor and menacing cannon rivaled anything in the armory of humankind.

Once again Christopher wore battle armor and beside him stood Bethede, now outfitted in a similar style. With them stood five others. Hayes Kartian was with the group, and Freyshel Shain had joined them, while taking up the flanks and rear were three Assault Force members. Christopher recognized one as Raisa Hambly, a hardened

female veteran from years past. All wore side arms and moved forward with small cylinders in their hands, recorders transmitting data directly to the Intrepid's computers. They strolled and stopped and wondered amid an amazing collection of war machines.

"Yes," said Bethede. "I've seen something like it. Not personally, but in history texts. Two hundred years ago, a member of The Society named Rahner managed to ingratiate himself to the court of the Great Kahn of Ichigyo-Zammai. Among the treasures he found there were a collection of weapons and war machines. Swords hung in display alongside grenade launchers, lasers were stored next to horse drawn carts. War was a passion for the Kahn and he demonstrated great pride in his eclectic collections."

"What was Rahner's conclusion?" asked Christopher.

"His head on a pike outside the Kahn's walls," Bethede answered. "But our brother's journal survived. In it he tells of the Kahn's fascination with battle, not merely with weapons, but with the movement of armies, with tactics, and with the psychology of fighting men. Within the palace of Ichigyo-Zammai stood great tables on whose surfaces he displayed engagements from the past, modeled out with miniature representations of men and machines, some done in fine jewels or cast in gold."

"The Kahn devoted a close and solemn attention to this knowledge," Kartian interjected. "He filled his memory with details as arcane as the proper lubrication points for a certain type of vehicle, or the angle of impact by which one type of missile might penetrate a certain shield."

Bethede paused, kneeling to examine what appeared to be a laser burn on the tracks of another tank. "Ichigyo-Zammai fought no actual wars during this period," she added. "We are talking about a collector's passion. Oh, there were battles and deaths,

but each was no more than a game for the Kahn. He had no expansionist desires. His psychology, though complex, was that of a collector whose wealth exceeded his good sense."

"And since Tir appeared alone," said Freyshel Shain, "you think we may be dealing with a similar entity." She coughed and turned away, her lips moving slightly as if making some comment too insulting to say aloud. Freyshel reached for a handhold on the nearest alien vehicle and pulled herself up, struggling across the angled metal toward what appeared to be an open hatch.

Christopher watched as Bethede moved up behind the ensign, the armor trappings she had been forced to wear causing her to move clumsily. He listened to the two of them, exchanging jibes over their suit-coms.

"You don't like us, do you, ensign?" Bethede asked. "I saw you smile when you heard the report of the dissolution of The Society, of your own excommunication."

"That's not what amuses me, My Lady. It's just that you assume too much," Freyshel answered. "We don't know if any of this belongs to Tir or his kind, or that it is under his control at all."

With one hand Freyshel unclipped what appeared to be a half-moon coin from the pack and passed it over the surface of the vehicle. After tapping several small contact points, she paused to consider the results from the sensor.

"We in the navy may have to bear your pronouncements on what days are holy and what days are not," said Freyshel, "but there is an order beyond The Way. I know that."

"Your report, ensign!" Christopher called up after her. "I'd say it's a battle tank with retractable cannon and treads, similar to old navy turtles."

"The evidence agrees, captain," said Freyshel. "This armor is layered, a composite design meant to interact with and stop shape forming charges. You don't do that unless you intend to send this deep into harm's way. But. . ."

"Yes?" Christopher prodded.

"Well, captain, it's about as battle ready as a corpse. The last lubrication for this turret ring occurred in historical times, and that's about the best I'll say for it. . . though she has seen battle."

Freyshel stepped toward the sharply angled nose of the tank. Her hand followed the blackened contour of a direct hit.

"My readings show a clear polymer shield over this burn," Freyshel said.

"Actually, it's over the entire surface of the vehicle."

"It's been preserved," Bethede offered. She turned to Freyshel. "Does that assumption meet with your approval, ensign?"

"I'll think about it, my lady," said Freyshel.

In another time, not long past, such challenges as Freyshel presented might meet with a discipline both swift and severe. Within its sphere of influence The Society tolerated little criticism. But times had changed, and how swiftly! The Society had fallen, and even an ensign recently liberated from prison felt secure enough to throw jibes at a priestess.

"Well," said Freyshel, drawing the word out. "I'll have to admit, Captain, the evidence agrees with our lady's assessment."

"These weapons appear to sit in groups of five, according to basic classifications," Christopher observed. Ensign Shain, stay here and collect more data on the tanks. Kartian and I are heading for those aircraft to port."

###

"Here," Freyshel said to Bethede, handing the priestess a small tool. "Make yourself useful, cut a few samples off that flange behind you."

Bethede accepted the tool and turned it in her hand. It appeared simple enough, a black cylinder with crystal facets at one end and a clear chamber below- a laser sampler. "Do you believe this tank is human-made?" she asked Freyshel.

"I'm not certain anything here is human made," Freyshel answered. "Form follows function. These things would be recognizable in anyone's armory. But if they're all like this, they're very, very old. Not at all usable. Are you going to get that sample for me?"

Bethede turned, thumbed the hand tool into action and said, "You hate The Society that greatly?" For a moment there was silence, then Freyshel responded.

"I don't know what to feel," Freyshel said. "I don't like seeing you as some sort of co-captain. And I don't know what strings are attached to this mission, to our freedom. I can't believe you've turned against The Way, not any of you."

"Nor can I," Bethede answered. She watched as a sample of preservative and hull material spiraled into a small chamber on the sampler. "In our history we have been expelled from a hundred worlds for supporting The Way. We've connived and intrigued and cheated to expand the interests of The Way- these things I will admit. But we've also taught the generations, encouraged science and critical thinking, developed new industries and lines of trade. We have been heroes."

"Terrorists, more likely," Freyshel answered with disgust.

"There is no form of torture that members of our order have not suffered to advance the cause of Chesschantra. From our first century alone we have seven

ordained saints and twenty revered ones, martyrs all. But, ensign, if I can defend my kind with any statement, it would be that we acted as the right hand of the Great Sovereign, as the voice which brought the doctrine of The Way to man."

"Yes, your kind built The Empire," Freyshel said. "You are the boot on the neck of a thousand worlds. Where is Chesschantra in your--"

"Enough!" Bethede insisted. "We know what we have become. And many of us have no stomach for it. Our mission now is between Chesschantra and mankind, and as long as The Way remains an Empire and our Sovereign its Emperor, then, Chesschantra help us, we must defy our Father on Balecentros."

There was a true sorrow in Bethede's voice and Freyshel backed off. With one hand the ensign pulled the sampler from Bethede's grasp, and with the other she pulled herself back toward the top of the tank and the open hatch.

Using a hand lamp she looked down into the dark interior. Much equipment lay askew, some of it torn in ways suggesting that a small explosive had been dropped inside. Yet even these jagged pieces glittered with a covering of preservative, all except one, tiny sphere: a ball of wires and camouflage tucked into shadows near the roof of the vehicle.

"Trap!" Freyshel shouted.

"What is it?" Bethede asked, freezing where she stood.

"No, we're all right," Freyshel answered. "I saw it first."

She hit the broadcast button on her suit. "Captain, do you read me? These vehicles are wired with what looks like--"

An orange flash lit up the sky from a hundred meters away. Its light played across the hull of the tank, followed in a heartbeat by the sound of the explosion and a

gust of wind, a wave of power which dispelled the mist immediately about the tank and allowed a clear view toward the aircraft arrayed to port.

Both Freyshel and Bethede cleared the tank and began a sprint toward the site of the explosion.

They passed armored personnel carriers and mobile artillery, weaving past decaying wheels two meters high, moving at a run through the shadows of ancient, inscrutable machines. A new wave of mist rushed in to cover their boots. Behind it flowed a wall of white and gray, like some local storm conjured into action by the explosion of a moment before. It enveloped them from behind, twisting about, coating their visors in sparkling droplets, as easy to brush away as rain.

###

When Bethede reached the site, Christopher was helping Hayes Kartian to his feet. Neither seemed injured. Two guards stood to the side, their weapons held at the ready.

"Any injuries?" asked Bethede.

"One man, Brother Mueller. . . was killed," said Christopher. "Sergeant Hambly has a suit tear." He turned to the sergeant. "Are you bleeding?"

"No, Sir," the sergeant replied. "I'm fit."

A moment later, Christopher reached with an outstretched hand toward the collapsed hull of an atmospheric jet. Wings and landing gear still smoldered, the canopy itself a shattered memory of once smooth surfaces. A careful look and he could make out a few pieces of navy armor, but nothing else was left of the unfortunate Mueller.

"Freyshel's warning came an instant too late," said Christopher. "Lucky we all weren't on that same jet."

"And that no fuel or weapons pods went up with the bloody thing," Kartian answered.

"We have to find the aliens," Bethede said. She breathed hard from her run. "We can't just wander around this, this sargasso of . . . of lost weapons."

"True," said Christopher. "But we've learned something. Not all these things are atrophied. These jets may be obsolete, but they're maintained. Ready to go, not like the tanks." He looked around. "Where is ensign Shain?"

Though her name was repeated any number of times and Christopher thumbed his communication line through every open frequency, no answer came from the mists. No confident stride came across the crystal plain to greet them.

"She was right beside me," Bethede offered. "We were running." But though Christopher had them retrace their path back to the first of the tanks they had encountered, the Intrepid's electronic warfare specialist was nowhere to be found.

"We should leave this place," said sergeant Hambly.

Then it came, a beam of blue light falling as if from the roof of the world, from the bright clouds overhead, falling no more than a dozen meters from the party. They recognized its target instantly, watching as it caught in its crystal brilliance the standing figure of Freyshel Shain.

The ensign raised her hands into the beam, and screamed. Helplessly, she writhed and fell to her knees, her cries unstopping.

They ran toward her illuminated form, watching as a stream of crystals rose from her body to dance in the light, her form subsumed, bit by bit, into the stream, until at last the whole of her was gone, whisked up into the beam as if by a whirlwind. When

Christopher reached the position of the beam, the light vanished and Freyshel along with it. Those with him looked skyward, waiting for the next lethal bolt to fall.

"We're heading back to the ship," Christopher ordered.

Walking in silence, the guards at their flanks and alert for action, the landing party soon realized that finding the Intrepid was not as easy as turning around. The ground itself felt different beneath their feet.

Kartian spoke first. "We'd best get a homing beacon from the ship. The geography of this place is confusing."

Ignoring the commander, Christopher knelt and used his gloved hand to clear away moisture from a circular area on the ground, his hand lamp illuminating the glassy surface. He had had a feeling, or perhaps he had first seen it from the corner of his eye.

"I see it," Christopher said, "but I don't want to believe it. Gentlemen, get down on your knees."

Carefully, they looked into the surface beneath them, as might the explorers of a glacier peer into a flow of ice, knowing the past of many centuries lies frozen below, while some dark, foreboding shape draws all attention. But what lay here, in this surreal space, locked in the light bending crystals of some alien material, were row upon row of warriors- the demons they had fought on Adhara.

"How far does it go?" asked Bethede.

"Forever," Hayes Kartian answered, stepping away to wipe at other areas with the tip of his boot. "I can feel it in my bones. This goes beneath the entire plain." Six ranks, twenty strong, standing frozen no more than two meters down, this was the number they counted before giving up.

"I see two different types," Christopher said. "Some are wearing rifles and grenade launchers. It looks like an infantry force. The others may be adapted to run the war machines we've seen."

They stood for a moment in silence, looking about as if the thousands and tens of thousands beneath their feet might soon rise. How would it happen? Would they hear the demons stirring, would some tunnel open, hidden by the mist, while death poured out to engulf them? Or would the crystal at their boots crack and splinter, giving a cold rebirth to the warriors below?

"The battalions of a maniac," said one of Kartian's men. "An all powerful maniac. My lady, are you certain this is not unholy ground?"

"No," said Bethede. "No, I believe this is mortal space, and Tir a mortal creature."

"Yes," Kartian agreed.

What happened next, none of them might have imagined. A voice called to them from the void, from within the still air hanging above, words from a dead comrade whose corpse they had seen dissolve before their own eyes.

"Captain, I can see you. All of you. Can you hear me? Please! Can you see me?"

The voice brought a chill to their spines. It was Freyshel Shain. She was with them again, around them, above, and to every side. Her voice came at them again, seemingly from everywhere at once. "Can you see me!"

Christopher turned, trying to glance within the helmets of those about him. The reactions he saw struck him as wide-eyed terror. But after the first disembodied words from Freyshel, there was nothing more that might surprise him. What kind of land they

had entered, he could not say, and for a moment the world of his imprisonment, of the old dungeon with its safe and understandable torture, held brief appeal.

"Ensign Shain, can you hear me?" Christopher asked.

"Yes, captain," said Freyshel. I wish I could tell you where I am. But I don't know."

"We can't see you, ensign, but we can hear you," Christopher assured her. "And I doubt we're any safer than you by a damn sight. But you may be able to help. What are you experiencing?"

"I. . . I seem to be somewhere else now," Freyshel answered. "Captain, it was like a giant hand came down to sweep me into wherever this is. It's not a place. It's like a dream, but some of the dream is coming from beyond me. I know that doesn't make sense."

"Maybe it does," Bethede said. "Ensign Shain, can you see us?"

"Yes, I see all of you." The voice paused. When Freyshel began again, she seemed startled. "I see you from all sides. I'm looking down on you too, from about a dozen meters directly above."

As one, everyone in the landing party looked up. Nothing hung above them, nothing visible beyond a few coils of mist and a blackness like the night between stars.

"Can you change the view?" Bethede continued the questioning. "Can you come down here with us?"

"No, I can see down there, but I can't come down. It's like looking at a view screen. It seems I can see many locations at once. And I know some things. This place, the plain of weapons. . . it does belong to Tir. It is a collection of sorts, a. . ."

The words stopped.

"Are you with us?" asked Christopher. "Freyshel, do you hear me?"

"Sorry, Captain. I was just trying to find the right words. This place is a recreational area. I know that sounds strange. There's no other way to put it. It's a very small part of the ship, one of many centers for such activities."

"Ship?" asked Christopher. "Tell us about this ship? Is Tir in command here?"

"No, Captain," came the reply. "Tir is a member of the crew. If I understand correctly, he is the ship's Security Officer- aboard the. . . the Wolverine. . . no, the Wolf's Fury."

"Wolf's Fury?" asked Kartian. "Who's telling you this?"

"I don't know," Freyshel responded, her voice quavering. "The ship is called the Wolf's Fury, and I feel like I'm supposed to tell you that. I don't know how I know these things. They just keep coming into my head. Captain, I'm frightened."

"Ensign," said Christopher, "every fact you convey will help keep us going. We will not abandon you."

"I understand," Freyshel responded. Her voice seemed low, accepting. "I can't feel my body. I don't even know if it exists. But I'm still alive. Yes, this is the Wolf's Fury, and the aliens who man her are known as the Kriss. Some things they are not telling me, not letting me see: crew capacity, size, and power. But the dimensions are certainly huge, almost immeasurable. This ship must be the size of a planet."

"Captain," Freyshel continued, "your priest friend down there seemed to know something about this, about what's happened to me, I mean. You may not be able to help me, but I'd appreciate knowing what's happening."

"I'm sorry, ensign," Bethede said, "I don't really know. I can only speculate. It may be that your mind has been transcribed into a set of algorithms, copied into an artificial intelligence system aboard Wolf's Fury. I'm only guessing."

"A computer?" asked Freyshel.

"Yes," said Bethede. "Years ago, The Society experimented with a program of absorbing human intelligence into cybernetic systems. We were trying to preserve the wisdom and experience of some of our most valued people."

"Immortality for the Father Believer and his Circle of Brothers?" asked Freyshel. Even in a disembodied form, her voice was filled with sarcasm.

"I am not your enemy, Ensign Shain," Bethede said. "I will do everything I can to help you." She paused. "The Society decided not to continue its efforts at cybernetic immortality, more out of fear of criticism in its growing conflict with S'Blood than"

"Not to interrupt, but I don't give a damn about your problems with S'Blood," Freyshel said. "Can this process be reversed?"

Bethede hesitated. In her heart she held little hope for Freyshel's return to the life which had been so cruelly torn from her. She bowed her head, unable to respond and forgetting that the ensign could see her reaction of despair.

Christopher gave Freyshel her answer. "Our best chance of helping you now lies in negotiation. Ensign, can you lead us to the command center of this ship?"

"Wait. Wait. I'm thinking about it. You won't believe it, but getting the answer is like trying to bring up old memories. Yes, I can give you a course. As a matter of fact, I can provide a magnetic beacon. Head north for two kilometers. You can't see it now, but you won't be able to miss your goal as you approach."

Christopher pulled the communications pack from his belt and activated a homing receiver. There it was. A beacon pulsed, as if the magnetic pole of a planet flickered on and off, drawing them toward its mysterious call. With a wave of his right hand, he signaled their march "northward."

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Even before the landing party reached the end of their two kilometer jaunt, the land beneath their feet began to change once more. The crystal surface darkened. When Christopher went to his knees, he could discern no forms in the icy matrix.

The mists remained, and though their atmospheric samples showed a breathable mixture about them, no one had the inclination to crack a helmet and trust a breath of alien air.

On the march, Christopher checked with the Intrepid and was pleased to note their communications were not being interfered with. Commander Rand and Chief Engineer Davies seemed to have things well in hand. Repairs were underway. Guards were posted outside the ship, and so far no sign of Tir or any of his kind had been noted.

The crew, Rand reported, was taking the opportunity to rest, wait, and wonder. Section Leaders, both from The Society and the regular crew, kept a wary eye for any sign of sabotage, and for whatever trouble might ensue if rumors of their having landed on unholy ground began to circulate.

"There," said Bethede. She pointed.

It was impossible to believe that the structure ahead could not have been seen from Intrepid. In fact, Bethede stepped back a few paces, wondering how she had failed to note it only seconds before.

Temple columns and walls of stone filled the landscape ahead, rising with the same imposing, mind-numbing authority as the architecture on Balecentros. There seemed no place for men here. Wide as buildings, the columns rose in marble elegance toward angular capping stones, each embracing three or more column tops, linking the whole into a single structure.

Mountainous barriers ran down either side of the edifice, and from within, from between the columns, came an eerie light not unlike a glow from the horizon before dawn.

But most of all there was silence.

If this were some great center of activity, its days of music and ceremonial procession were long past. Perhaps Tir was the last, mad survivor of a civilization dead in all but the loss of its final representative. Those were the thoughts playing out amidst the silence of the landing party, and their only question was whether these thoughts had come naturally, or by design from those who had engineered the building before them.

"Ensign Shain, are you still with me?" asked Christopher.

"Yes, captain."

"Can you tell me if this structure was here a moment ago? Was it hidden somehow, or did it appear as we approached?"

"Both, I think," Freyshel answered. "Sorry to be so unclear, Captain. The structure did exist before your approach. But until a moment ago you would have had no access to it from your previous position. This ship has what appear to be a number of dimensional twists and turns."

"Is the crew of Wolf's Fury inside that structure?" asked Bethede.

"Yes," came Freyshel's answer. "If you proceed inside, a party of officers will meet with you. I'm told their facilities with language are outstanding. You'll have no trouble communicating. I believe they're learning more from me with each passing second."

Mists followed the landing party up along a slope of shallow steps. It was as if a rising tide of vapor came in from behind them, blocking their escape by obscuring any sense of the backward path. In turning, there was no sight of Tir's collection of war machines.

Now there was only one choice for them, to move forward into the labyrinth.

With Christopher in the lead they proceeded, walking between massive columns, moving quietly past imposing statuary. The space within was lined by massive figures, statuary that proved both as alien and as graceful as Tir had displayed himself to be. Yet as they continued, differences in the colossi became apparent.

"Look," said Christopher. "You can see this one is a representation of flesh. There's more definition to the muscles and joints, even an attempt to portray blemish and age. This is a different type than Tir."

"No, Captain," came Freyshel's reply. "You're looking at a lesson in Kriss development. As you approach the center of the structure, the representations are from earlier ages."

"Not as tall now," said Kartian. "What we're seeing is a descent into mortality. A walk back in time." They moved on, slowly examining the changing sculptures.

"Yes, I see what you mean." Christopher nodded toward another figure. "Here you can differentiate the sexes."

"Form follows function," said Bethede, blushing. She tried not to laugh. "This tells us we are dealing with mortal creatures. If they seem demonic, or god-like now, it must be based on their present state of development, technical as well as physical."

"Or they wish us to believe so," said Kartian.

A few steps further and the statues came in pairs. Instead of proud, commanding stances, the images became by degrees erotic and more than a little suggestive. Beds of marble hosted forms entwined in passionate embraces. With the same exquisite care that had detailed earlier forms in lithe and godly fashion, these sculpted creatures showed every human indication of desire.

A shocked breath, a sigh: these were the only sounds to come across the helmet-coms. They continued walking, proceeding toward a light that had begun to emanate from one end of the interminable, endless columns about them.

And at their feet and at first unnoticed, a sea of mist began to rise. Soon it passed the level of their knees. Within moments, they could not pass through it without creating an agitated cloud which blocked their sight.

"It's a test," Christopher said. "This isn't communication. I feel like we're running a gauntlet. Ensign Shain, can you explain-"

"It's a trap," said sergeant Hambly. She whirled about, trying to find a path through the thickening fog. "Ensign! Tell him!"

"Captain, maybe I . . . my apologies, Captain," said Freyshel. "I've only now come to realize that some of what I'm telling you is controlled. False information. I don't know. . . I can't tell which is which."

"Captain," said Bethede. "Kartian is missing. He was on my right up to a few seconds ago. I raised a glove to clear the mist from my visor, and now he's gone."

"I'm getting tired of this," said Christopher. "Freyshel, what is this ship? Can you tell us its purpose, the reason the Kriss are in human space?"

"Only that they are on a mission," Freyshel replied. "I have a high confidence in that. It runs through everything. It goes beyond the individuals, the crew. They are on a mission of great importance. We seem to be a significant surprise for them. Like us, the Kriss have never before encountered an alien race."

"Can you give them a message from me?" asked Christopher.

"They are listening," Freyshel assured him. "Watching too, I'm certain of it."

"I want straightforward negotiation," Christopher said. "I want to see and speak with the captain of this ship. And, by His Blood, I want it now!"

"I'm sorry, captain. They have other plans."

As Freyshel's voiced faded, Christopher found himself alone.

No voice answered his calls, neither Freyshel's nor Bethede's. Kartian and his men had vanished in the rising fog, and the Intrepid either refused to answer or could no longer hear his distressed pleas.

Soon white on white was the only vision open to him, and the light that once came from the center of the building now seemed to be everywhere about him and increasing in intensity.

It closed about him.

It swallowed him whole.

End Chapter