Chapter 17

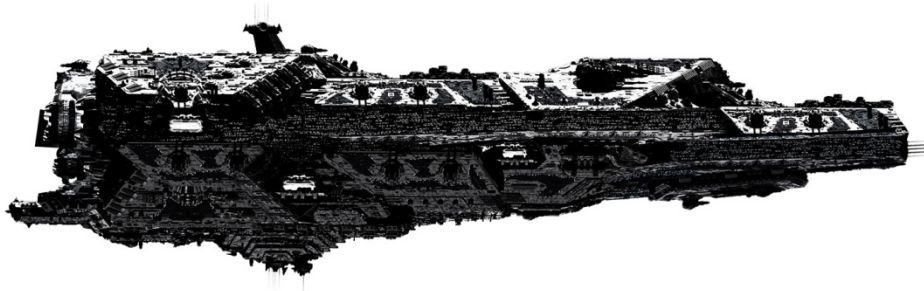***B****eep beep, beep beep, beep beep . . .*

Doctor Stevon Elder reached into his outer lab coat pocket and fumbled with his holo pad to turn off his alarm. As soon as the incessant beeping stopped, he subsided with a sigh and began shivering violently where he lay. He realized he couldn't feel his toes, and he could barely see his hands in front of his face. The cold and darkness were a reminder that he was no longer living among his own kind. The Sythians had come, and even though they now used human slaves—as opposed to Gors whose native environment was dark and frigid—somehow these humans weren't bothered by either the darkness or the cold the way they should have been. Perhaps it was a question of mind over matter. *Thank the Immortals they haven't messed with* my *mind yet.*

Stevon turned his head and felt a sharp stab of pain in his neck. He reached around to find a molten chunk of transpiranium poking him there. He threw it to one side, and it landed a few feet away with a *thunk.* All around him were debris, shattered equipment and twisted girders. It was hard to believe he was still aboard the *Valiant*. He'd found this abandoned alcove by accident a few weeks ago. An old med lab, hiding almost at the bottom of an abandoned lift tube. Based on the amount of destruction it had seen, there had been some kind of explosive accident.

Whatever had befallen the lab, Stevon was grateful for it. He had known the Sythians would do one of two things when they came aboard—execute the fleet's officers en masse, or turn them into slaves the way they had with the refugees they'd found in the Enclave. The skull faces had opted for the latter option, which was far worse than the former in Stevon's opinion. Better to die and go to Etheria than to live and be forced against one's will to serve a heartless, soulless enemy.

Then again, the Sythians likely wouldn't let him live once they found out what he knew. If they had the chance to turn him into a slave, his newfound loyalty to them would make him tell all, and one of the first things he would tell them was what he had done to hide the location of Avilon. After that, his life and Admiral Heston's would be forfeit, but not before both of them were thoroughly tortured to find out what they knew. Stevon would use the suicide tooth the admiral had given him long before it came to that, but it occurred to him that there was a better option than sitting around in

the ruined med lab, waiting to be discovered. The admiral had given him the coordinates to get to Avilon, recorded on a micro dot inside his suicide tooth.

Perhaps the Avilonians wouldn't welcome him—an Etherian—or perhaps the sector had become more open-minded since Hoff had been there all those millennia ago. Either way, Stevon knew the Avilonians were the key to humanity's survival. Even if they killed him upon arrival, at least he might have a chance to warn them about the Sythians and what they were doing in Dark Space. When Atton had left to get help, the invaders had been at a standoff with humanity. Now, things were much more serious.

Stevon stood up and brushed a fine layer of white dust from his clothes which had accumulated while he slept. Clearly the air filters weren't working in the ruined med lab. Taking a deep breath to steel himself, Stevon turned toward the far wall and the out-of-service lift shaft which he'd climbed down to get here. It was now or never. He'd set his alarm for the middle of the night cycle in the hope that he'd run into fewer of the Sythians' slave soldiers. He had to try to get to the hangar and steal a ship. If he failed and had to use his suicide pill, or got shot to pieces while trying to escape, then he would suffer the same fate as if he stayed here, only swifter.

Even rationing himself and sleeping as much as possible, it had taken him less than a week to exhaust the 100 pound grav bag of supplies he'd brought with him. Now he had just two options—stay and die a slow, painful death from dehydration, or make a run for it and go down fighting.

Stevon started toward the broken lift tube shaft. Bits of transpiranium and duranium crunched underfoot. There was a hollow ache in his belly, and he was swaying on his feet as he walked. He reached the shaft and looked up. It looked as daunting as a mountain, but he reminded himself he only had to climb up three floors to get out. After that . . .

He wasn't sure what he would do.

*One step at a time, Stevon,* he told himself. *Immortals help me . . .*

He found his first handhold and almost lost his grip while trying to pull himself up onto a fallen girder. But, step by awkward step, handhold by handhold, somehow he made it. Panting and sweating from the exertion, he reached the doors on the third level up from the ruined lab. He pried them open with shaking hands and slithered out into the corridor. Exhausted, all he could do was lay there on his belly and catch his breath. Thankfully, the corridor was deserted, but he knew better than to rely on that. The *Valiant* had holocorders everywhere, and someone, somewhere would be watching. His heart pounding, Stevon pushed himself off the cold deck and hurried down the corridor. As he ran, he struggled to remember which way he had to go to get to the nearest hangar. But the ship was too vast, and he barely knew where he was. His best bet would be to get to the nearest rail car tunnel. Once there he could search the ship's directory for its hangar bays. He hurried on, his booted-feet pounding down the corridor.

Then something caught his eye.

Up ahead, gleaming in the low, lavender-hued light, which the Sythians had set the ship's glow panels to produce, Stevon saw a suspicious-looking black dome hanging down from the ceiling—a holocorder. His legs shaking, he ran faster as he passed beneath the camera, irrationally hoping that if he ran fast enough it wouldn't see him.

Come on, Stevon . . . pull yourself together. . . .

* * *
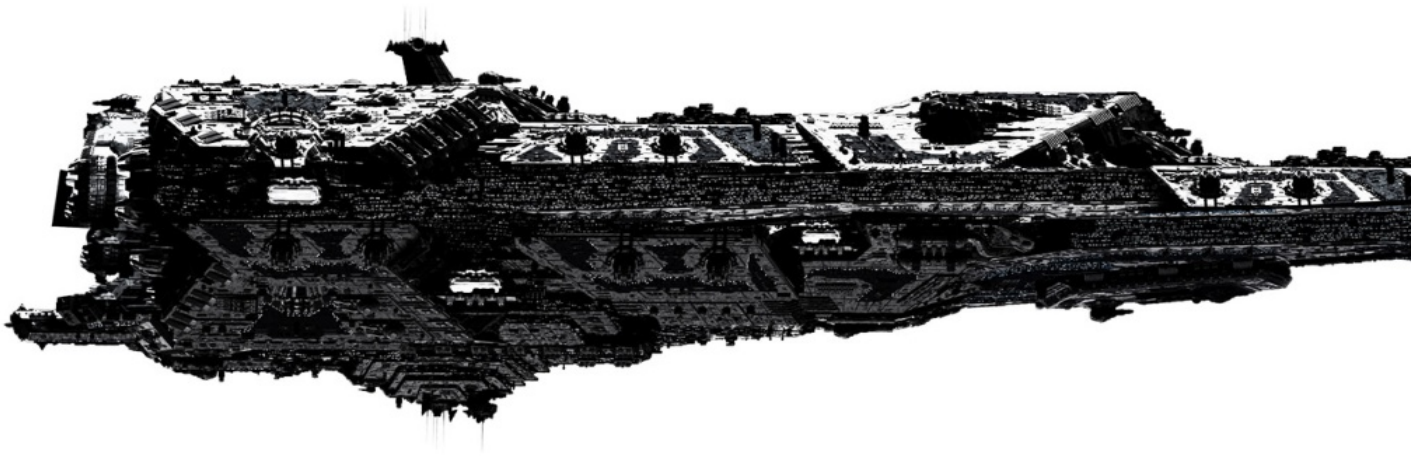
"My Lord, there's a security alert on level 15," the *Valiant's* security officer said.

Kaon turned away from the Captain's table with a hiss. "What is it?" he warbled.

"A man, Doctor Stevon Elder, according to visual analysis. He appears to be in a great hurry to get somewhere. The security system flagged his behavior as suspicious. He is not one of us."

Kaon walked up behind the officer in charge of security and studied the hologram projected above his station. It showed footage of the doctor in question, running as fast as he could down one corridor after another. "What is the reason for his haste?"

"I do not know. Perhaps he is trying to get off the *Valiant* before we find him and make him join us."

"We already find him."

"He must be desperate to believe we wouldn't catch him."

"I like to know what he intends to do," Kaon replied.

"Should I seal off the section where he is and send in a squad to capture him?"

Kaon considered that. "No. Seal off sections around him so that he is to take the path we choose." Kaon turned to find The Pet standing behind him, the man's gray eyes glued to the hologram. "You—Pet—you are to go meet this doctor. You are to pretend to be escaping, too. Gain his trust; find out what he is doing, and then incapacitate him and bring him to me."

The Pet hesitated only slightly before turning away from the screen and bowing his head. "As you will, My Lord."

Kaon turned to the pair of guards standing watch over his Pet and then pointed to the former admiral's bound wrists. "Cut him loose and give him a weapon."

"A weapon, My Lord?"

"He cannot disobey me or betray us. To do that would take more strength than he has left. I have broken him, and he is mine. My *Pet*. Are you not?" Kaon reached out to stroke the human's cheek with the back of one armored hand.

The Pet stared back at him with haunted eyes. Abruptly Kaon hissed and gave him a vicious backhanded slap. The Pet stumbled away, shock written all over his face. Kaon advanced quickly and hit him again, this time breaking his nose with a spray of blood. The human cried out and collapsed to the deck, trying to staunch the blood streaming from his shattered nose. "You tell the doctor you escape, and that you sustain these injuries during that escape."

Turning back to his guards, Kaon gave them a deadly look. "Set him free and give him a weapon!"

This time neither of the guardsmen hesitated to obey.

* * *

Doctor Elder reached a junction in the corridor and tried the doors at the end, waving his wrist over the identichip scanner. It beeped and flashed red.

Locked.

Stevon whirled in a quick circle to see another two sets of doors to either side of him. He tried the pair on his left. They swished open and he ran through.

That was the second set of doors he had encountered which refused to open when he tried them. It wasn't unusual for certain sections of a ship to be restricted access, but it *was* unusual to find whole corridors blocked off. That only ever happened when they were exposed to space, and the *Valiant* hadn't seen any action recently, so what were the Sythians doing?

Stevon hoped he could still make it to one of the hangars. Up ahead he saw a glowing sign hanging down from the roof which read *Rail System* with an arrow pointing to the right. Hope swelled in his chest. He might actually make it!

So far he hadn't run into any Sythians or their slaves, but that wasn't surprising. The *Valiant* had been running on a skeleton crew when the Sythians took it, and during

the night cycle, there'd be even fewer people to walk the ship's 150 plus decks. The ship's size was working in Stevon's favor now.

He came to another set of doors and raised a trembling hand to the scanner, hoping the doors would open for him.

Swish.

Stevon ran through into a much broader corridor. Along one side lay a set of rail car tracks, separated from him by a wall of transpiranium doors. Right now there wasn't a rail car waiting in the station, so Stevon stepped up to a nearby directory and brought up a map of the ship. He found the nearest hangar bay—port ventral—and punched that in as his destination. While he waited, he shot a quick look over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching.

Then he spotted the roving black eye of another holocorder hanging down from the ceiling, and he looked away before the eye could turn to see his face. The fact that squads of armored troops hadn't descended on him yet was encouraging, but Stevon didn't want to push his luck.

A rising whistle heralded the approach of a rail car; it screeched to a halt in front of the station, and eight sets of transpiranium doors swished open in perfect synchrony. Just as Stevon started through the pair of doors in front of him, a thought occurred to him: what if there was someone waiting on the rail car?

Stevon's right hand fumbled past his lab coat to find the butt of the sidearm strapped to his waist. He drew the plasma pistol and clicked off the safety before peering around the corner of the rail car doors.

To the left—no one. To the right—

A man slumped against the far wall, wearing a tattered and blood-stained white uniform. For a second Stevon didn't recognize that uniform, but then he caught a glimpse of the insignia. Six golden stars surrounding a clenched fist. The symbol of the Imperium and the Supreme Overlord.

"Admiral?" Stevon asked, unable to believe his eyes.

The admiral raised his head to offer a weak smile. "If you think I'm going to surrender peacefully, you're wrong," he said.

Stevon heard a subtle click followed by a screech of energy being released. The shot went wide and hit the wall behind him. "Hoi!" Stevon said, raising his hands. "Admiral! It's me! Doctor Elder."

"You're not . . . one of them?"

"Not yet. How did you escape?" Stevon's gaze flicked over the admiral from head to toe, taking in his disheveled, unshaven appearance. Between his facial hair, the accumulated grime, and the layer of dried blood caked over his nose and upper lip, it was obvious he hadn't been treated well.

The rail car began moving again, and Stevon walked slowly toward the admiral. The man's breathing was slow and labored, his eyes narrowed to slits, as if he barely

had the energy to keep them open. "It's a . . . long story," Admiral Heston managed. "We don't have time for it right now. We have to get out of here."

"Yes . . . in hindsight, surrender was not our best option."

"Perhaps not, but at least we are alive."

"For now," Stevon replied, taking a seat beside the admiral.

"Tell me you have an escape plan."

"I was going to ask you the same thing."

"I'm just surprised I managed to escape. Haven't had time to figure out the rest."

Stevon frowned. "Well, I did. I'm going to steal a ship and head for Avilon."

The admiral turned to regard him with one eyebrow raised. "Even if you escape, and even if the Avilonians accept you, the Sythians already know where Avilon is." The admiral's expression twisted miserably and his voice filled with self-loathing as he explained, "I told them."

Stevon gave a wry smile. "No, you didn't. Avilon is still safe. Before you surrendered, you had me alter the coordinates in your memory. That's why you were suffering amnesia when you woke up in med bay a week ago."

The admiral's eyes widened. "Is that why I can't remember where my wife and daughter are?"

"They're with the Gors, stirring up krak for the Sythians."

"And Atton?"

"You sent him to Avilon to get reinforcements."

Relief shone in the admiral's eyes, but then something dark and ugly rose up to steal that light away. Abruptly all the muscles in his neck began standing out. His jaw muscles bunched and his eyelids began fluttering. "I . . . I need to tell you . . ." He began in a strained voice. His expression became a rictus and veins began standing out on his forehead.

"What's wrong?" Stevon asked quickly. "Admiral? Are you okay?"

"I . . ."

"Admiral!" Stevon began to worry that the admiral was suffering a stroke. His face did appear to be drooping, and he was definitely having difficulty speaking. Then, abruptly, the symptoms passed, and his features smoothed into a more orderly smile.

"I'm fine," he said. "Sorry. It's just a bad headache. Came out of nowhere."

"I see . . . and what is it you needed to tell me?"

"I need to tell you that if it comes to it, we can't let them take us alive."

Stevon accepted that with a frown. "Yes, I know. You're the one who gave me a suicide pill, but let's hope it doesn't come to that. As soon as this car arrives we need to make a run for it. Do you think you'll be able to make it, or should I grav you to the nearest ship?"

"No, you'll need my help if we run into trouble. I'll be fine. Just tell me you have the real coordinates for Avilon."

"It's on a micro dot in a fake tooth right alongside the suicide pill. . . . You really don't remember any of that, do you? I did a better job erasing your memory than I thought."

"You must have," the admiral replied.

The rail car began slowing down, and Stevon looked up. "We're almost there." He watched out the nearest window as they pulled into the rail car station next to the ventral hangar bays. Light flickered through the rail car from passing glow panels. He scanned the station platform, looking for any waiting Sythians or human slaves, but it was deserted. "Looks like we're clear. You ready?" Stevon asked, turning back to the admiral.

"Are you?" he countered.

That was when Stevon noticed the sidearm Admiral Heston was aiming at his belly. "Frek!" He fell out of his seat in his hurry to get away, but he wasn't fast enough. Hoff pulled the trigger with a screech, and this time he didn't miss. A powerful jolt went through Stevon's body, leaving him twitching on the floor. His eyes drifted shut, and then the darkness took him and he knew no more.