

LESS than a day into its scheduled consignment voyage, carrying a cargo of the precious blue crystal called Xytrinium, the transporter's thrusters suddenly went into a high-pitched scream and the hull began to vibrate uncontrollably. Within seconds, the thrusters cut out and the craft stopped dead in its tracks. It had been hit.

Captain Ahrmon Tyros, the Tzuracian officer in charge of the consignment aboard *Kargnaus 23*, was immediately disoriented. He was a well-built Sentinel, tall in stature, with fair hair and blue eyes, and dressed in the distinctive midnight-blue-and-maroon Sentinel uniform.

He had been standing in the main cabin in the centre of his ship monitoring the visual scanner that displayed the perimeter of the transporter when, suddenly, a threatening renegade Trelarian battleship materialised from nowhere at the rear of the ship, deactivating its cloaking device just before the assault. There had been no time to avoid the ambush.

The battleship attacked by directing a high-powered magnetic beam or 'lightning bolt' – a killer surge – on the transporter's propulsion system. This overexcited the super-magma energy flow of the transporter, disabling the power source and rendering the defence shields and weaponry useless. The reverse polarisation and the unexpected high-pitched pulsating noise that followed, interfered severely

with Ahrmon's nervous system, affecting his superior Sentinel motor skills and highly attuned senses. He'd never experienced an auditory weapon like this before.

To steady himself, Ahrmon clutched onto one of the headrests of the metal seats bolted to the floor. He shook his head, trying to shrug off the distortion, but it had no effect. He pressed the communicator on his earpiece instinctively and spoke as clearly as he could to his Sentinel unit. 'Lieutenant Dakhar, report!'

At first, Ahrmon heard only white noise of interference on the open line. Then a zapping sound, like the noise of a laser pistol, cut into the interference. There was another blast and another again. Then dead silence.

Ahrmon tried his communicator once more. He called to the other members of his unit stationed at various locations throughout the craft. Lieutenant Dakhar was on the starboard deck guarding the armoury with Corporal Pella. Sergeant Caden and Private Morell were in the cargo hold and Private Strax was watching the crew's sleeping quarters on the port deck. 'Caden, Morell, Pella, Strax – report in!'

Sergeant Caden responded instantly. Amid the interference on the line, he sounded desperate. Even though his speech was slightly slurred, his message was clear. 'We're under attack, Captain! There appear to be half a

dozen or more. They look like black-market Bladers – pirates.’

Again, static interfered until Morell’s voice broke through. ‘We’re surrounded, but still holding them off. It’s hard focussing with this damn dizziness. Can you get here as fast as you can, sir?’ Suddenly the line went dead.

It was clear to Ahrmon his troops too were affected by the pulsating high frequency echoing throughout the ship. It was creating weird sensations like alcohol intoxication, with blurred vision, loss of balance, slurred speech and slowed reflexes.

Trying with all his mental strength to combat these effects, Ahrmon instinctively dived for the intercom panel on the wall and waved his hand across the switch. He could hear an interfering static on the open channel, but he needed answers. He yelled into the intercom. ‘What in the name of the Ancients is happening, Captain?’

There was no answer. So, he spoke again with urgency. ‘Come in, Captain Gharrok. This is Captain Tyros. Can you hear me?’

There was a faint response above the static. ‘Yes, I can just hear you,’ the pilot responded. ‘Sorry, Captain Tyros. There was no warning. They just appeared from nowhere and opened fire. The shields are inoperative and so is the weaponry. My head is spinning. I ...’

‘Thank you, Captain,’ Ahrmon interrupted. ‘Arm yourselves immediately and stay alert. Can you send a distress signal to Tzurac Command?’

‘I’ve already tried, sir, but the attackers are jamming all external comms. I’ll keep trying, Captain. Over and out!’

On the screen, Ahrmon could now see the plunderers boarding the craft through the cargo hold with little resistance. They were wearing protective headbands to shield them from the distorting frequency, and he recognised the insignia of crossed daggers on the attackers’ well-worn uniforms. This identified them as a splinter group of guerrilla freedom fighters or Bladers from the planet Trelidar – a band of renegades. The marauders were cold-blooded killers who would stop at nothing to steal the bounty – the precious cargo of blue Xytrinium crystals.

Ahrmon’s cargo, and the lives of the soldiers who were guarding it, were at risk. The pilots, who only had basic weapons training with laser pistols, would stand no chance against the attackers if they reached flight control. Time was of the essence. They must contain the attackers in the cargo hold.

Ahrmon tapped his earpiece and started calling his unit. ‘Dakhar, Pella, Strax – can you hear me?’ There was no response. ‘Answer me!’ he called again.

There was static on the line when Dakhar responded.
'Yeah, here, Captain.'

Then Pella. 'Here, sir.'

Strax responded seconds later.

'I know you're all affected by this killer surge,' Ahrmon continued, 'but I need all of you in the cargo hold, immediately. The Bladers have Caden and Morell pinned down. There's about half a dozen of them. I'll see you there. Out!'

'There's one less to worry about, Captain,' Dakhar responded. 'I took care of him at the armoury. Over and out!'

The cargo hold was one deck below Ahrmon. He moved as fast as he could but, disoriented, he occasionally slammed into and bounced off the internal walls. He was experiencing everything in slow motion and his impaired vision made the passageway appear twisted and distorted.

On each side of the passageway, hot vaporised super-magma was gushing from ruptured pipes. Ahrmon knew if he came into contact with the substance, it would instantly char his body. His main thought was to reach the cargo hold before the Bladers annihilated his men. He knew the slide pole to the deck below was about a hundred yards ahead. Once there, it was an easy slide down to the deck of the cargo hold. Then a fifty-yard span to his right would bring him to the automatic metal sliding doors allowing the only access.

He was almost out of breath by the time he reached the slide pole, and he was still shaky on his feet. He channelled his thinking: *Focus, concentrate, just like you did in training.* His hands were sweating inside his leather gloves and the annoying pulsating frequency was still interfering with his concentration.

Ahrmon quickly removed his gloves, tucked them into his leather belt, and wiped the palms of his hands on his drill uniform pants. Leaning over the hole in the metal-grille deck floor, he glanced down at the deck below. It was a drop of approximately ten yards. Below that, was a fifty-yard fall onto the hot metal pipes that traversed the craft from the thrusters. Under normal circumstances he could easily leap to the deck below, but now it was a real challenge even to reach the slide pole.

Ahrmon leant back to his upright position while raising his head, wiped his now-beaded brow with the sleeve of his right arm and focused on the slide pole in front of him. He licked his dry lips, took a deep breath, then jumped out to the slide pole which was approximately ten feet away. At full stretch, he just managed to grab the pole with his left hand and slide rapidly to the metal grid floor below, landing with a heavy thud.

Still standing, he shook his head, refocused, grabbed the pistol handle with his right hand, and pulled it from its

holster. He knew that, in his present condition, he would be incapable of wielding his staff sword and his laser pistol would be the best weapon of choice. Xytrinium crystals were highly volatile, but laser fire would be safe in the cargo hold where the Xytrinium was stored in heavily shielded containers and there were no fuel pipes.

Ahrmon staggered as quickly as he could to the metal sliding doors and waved his hand across the electronic switch to the left of the door frame. The doors parted from the centre, retracting instantly to each side. He was surprised the shooting had ceased, but he was extremely apprehensive and ready for anything unexpected. His eyes quickly scanned across the large expanse, moving from left to right.

His apprehension suddenly changed to shock and heartfelt pain when he spied his elite Sentinels scattered across the breadth of the floor, lying motionless with laser wounds to their torsos. All appeared fatally wounded at the hands of the band of cut-throat invaders.

Then his eyes fell on his best officer and best friend Lieutenant Dakhar, who was standing in the centre of the room with a Blader flanking his left side, aiming a laser pistol directly at his head. It was Ahrmon's worst nightmare. *How had the struggle for Xytrinium brought them to this atrocity?* Time stood still momentarily as fragments of history flashed through his mind ...

The deep-blue crystalline substance had been formed in some of the planets and stars in the Grekadian Domain when they were first created. Subjected initially to extreme heat and then compressed under immense pressure as the planets cooled, Xytrinium had the density of diamond and an atomic weight heavier than gold. The energy trapped within it was so potent that one-tenth of an ounce could power a large city for a year without the devastating side effects of other energy sources such as uranium and plutonium.

The Tzuracians had been the first to discover the substance and its unique benefits. In medicine, Xytrinium was used as a pharmaceutical with incredible healing properties. When liquefied and blended with different metals, Xytrinium dramatically increased the strength and resistance of manufactured products. It increased their ability to withstand heavy impacts and extreme temperatures and provided ideal alloys for the hull structures of spacecraft and the blades of swords and daggers. When used as a fuel, it replaced conventional propulsion systems, allowing spacecraft to travel at hyperspeed covering far greater distances in minimal time than previously imagined.

The most significant discovery, the details of which were kept top secret and restricted to only three of the

leading Tzuracian alchemists, was the successful assimilation of purified Xytrinium with the Tzuracian DNA structure. The effects were miraculous. This process amplified the senses, increasing hearing and magnifying sight, especially night vision; increased bone density and muscular strength; gave rapid healing to injury; developed telepathic abilities; and increased the one-hundred-year life span to an amazing four hundred years.

The Tzuracians were a peaceful race with a strong belief in the preservation of nature and the proliferation of all life. But, fearing more aggressive races might try to use Xytrinium as a weapon of destruction, the Tzuracians had chosen not to share their knowledge of the substance and its benefits with the other planets. The Tzuracian Senate decreed immediately the process of DNA infusion would be restricted to their elite Sentinel army – an army which could then better defend its people against their enemies.

Their secret had been kept under wraps for more than a century until it finally surfaced. Then, two hundred years of bloody war had followed between the civilisations of the planets in the Grekadian Domain. Three of the most aggressive planets – Trelidar, Diunon and Kyronis – wanted to take total control of the valuable resource and pitted themselves against the Tzuracians and their allies. The

Tzuracians were not warmongers, but in this instance, they had been quick to take up arms against the aggressors.

It was only after two centuries of struggle that the Tzuracians had finally been victorious. Peace was eventually restored, and an alliance known as the Federation of Planets formed. All the planets signed a binding treaty agreeing that Xytrinium would be used only for the good of the races and never for weapons of war. The Tzuracians agreed to share some of their Xytrinium as an energy source under rigid conditions in exchange for primary produce and, in return, to share in any new Xytrinium resources discovered by Federation members. On behalf of the Federation, and using their powerful Sentinel armies, Tzurac would escort all shipments of Xytrinium and continue surveillance of planets throughout the universe to maintain peace.

Yet, rogue elements sought to seek power and control for themselves. A splinter group known as Bladers had deserted the Tredarian army and adopted a life of piracy, preying on vulnerable space travellers and defenceless cargo ships, taking no prisoners – except for the women they fancied – and confiscating the bounty for trade and personal use. Transporters carrying valuable cargos of Xytrinium relied on Sentinel escorts for protection, but now Ahrmon's superior forces had been taken by surprise and decimated.

His eyes were now on the ruthless marauding Blader standing before him. The Blader wore tight-fitting dark-brown leather pants tucked into suede-leather knee-high boots, with a matching battle jacket over a blood-red shirt. The epaulets on the jacket identified his rank as an officer. Judging by their condition, his leather clothes had seen many battles; they were well worn and creased with stale sweat and faded blood stains. The Blader had dark sunken reptilian eyes, copper skin and oily jet-black hair swept back in a long and loose ponytail, with overgrown stubble around his mouth and chin. The look on his hard pitted face was one of proud satisfaction, like a predator that had just swallowed its prey.

The smirking Blader addressed Ahrmon in a guttural Trelarian voice. ‘Glad you could join us, Ahrmon. Don’t be shy. Come on in.’

Before Ahrmon could raise his laser pistol, two burly Bladers concealed on either side of the doorway lunged forward, grabbing both his arms and wrenching the weapon from his hand as well as the short-staff from his belt.

‘Comrades, bring him over here!’ ordered the Blader leader.

Ahrmon struggled, but he was too weak and still disoriented. Lacking his normally powerful strength he was

no match for his captors. He felt like a helpless rag doll as they dragged him roughly to their leader, who was still pointing his laser pistol at Dakhar.

The Blader spoke to Ahrmon in Tzuracian as if he were a known acquaintance. 'You can drop the act now, Ahrmon. The game's up. Remember me? Captain Cronaz.' He added in a friendly voice, 'Your plan went well.'

Lieutenant Dakhar shot a puzzled look in Ahrmon's direction.

Ahrmon was on the defensive. 'Who the hell are you?' he demanded. 'And how do you know my name?' He had never seen this alien before.

Cronaz was unfazed. 'Stop pretending, Ahrmon,' he said, showing signs of mild impatience. 'Just give me the code to release the cargo. Don't worry, you'll get your share as we agreed when we sell the stuff.'

'Listen,' Ahrmon said angrily, raising his voice, 'I don't know who you think I am, but I've no idea what you're talking about and I'm not about to give a thieving, murderous rogue the code to a valuable cargo.'

'Okay, Ahrmon, have it your way,' said Cronaz, slowly and forcibly placing the barrel of his antique laser pistol against Dakhar's temple. 'But if you don't give me what I ask for, I *will* have to kill your lieutenant.'

In that instant, Dakhar lunged at the weapon, trying to wrest it from his captor. The weapon discharged and Lieutenant Dakhar slumped to the floor, lifeless, blood seeping from a nasty gash on his forehead.

As Ahrmon struggled to break free to tend to his friend, the Bladers beside him gripped his arms more tightly, one of them thrusting the razor-sharp edge of a dagger against his throat.

‘No use worrying about him. He’s dead,’ Cronaz said coldly.

Ahrmon was incensed. His wide eyes glared into the eyes of the Blader leader and his pulse raced. Struggling against the tight grip of his captors, he called out in a rage. ‘You murderous swine! I’ll see you executed for this, and I’ll be there personally to give the order.’

‘They’ll have to catch me first,’ Cronaz retorted. ‘Besides, they won’t be looking for *me* – they’ll already have their killer when they board this craft and find the weapon that killed Lieutenant Dakhar in *your* hand. We’ve been told not to kill you, so adieu, Captain Ahrmon Tyros,’ said the grinning Cronaz while giving a quick salute.

Before Ahrmon could respond, he was struck heavily from behind and everything went black.

It was a little over six hours after the assault on *Kargnaus 23* when the Tzuracian Security Force or TSF – a special force of Sentinel officers charged with internal security – boarded the transporter. Their tracking system had shown no movement of the craft for some time and there had been no response to their transmitted communications, prompting them to investigate. Security guards were now busily searching the vessel for survivors and any clues that might assist in the capture of the attackers.

‘Captain Tyros, can you hear me? Captain?’

Ahrmon was still dazed and not sure where he was or who was calling his name in a raspy voice. He was sitting upright on a metal bench in the cargo hold of the transporter. His head was still pounding from the blow he’d received. His vision was partially blurred, and he was trying hard to focus on the large shadowy figure standing in front of him. Suddenly his memory flashed back to the moment before everything had gone black and he lashed out violently at what he thought was the Blader leader.

‘Hold onto the Captain and cuff his hands behind his back,’ ordered the figure to the two guards standing each side of Ahrmon.

Ahrmon, whose vision had now fully recovered, could clearly discern the officer in charge was dressed in the imperial red and black colours of the TSF, and he felt the

vice-like grip of internal security guards tighten painfully on his arms as they followed orders. Just a few feet away, lying motionless on the floor, was the body of his closest friend, Lieutenant Rhyk Dakhar, a pool of congealed blood underneath his head from the fatal laser wound.

One of the security guards approached the officer who Ahrmon now recognised as the Chief of Security, Khane Zarkwin. ‘What is it, Lieutenant Brantz?’ asked Zarkwin.

‘Sir, the Xytrinium consignment was removed using an electronic tampering device.’

‘Thank you, Lieutenant, record that in your report. That will be all!’

The officer saluted rigidly with a right-hand snap to his forehead, replaced his arm to his side, reversed on the spot, snapped his heels together and marched off to resume his search of the transporter.

Zarkwin carefully picked up the offending laser pistol by the barrel in his right black-leather-gloved hand. He stood silently, his piercing dark blue eyes staring directly at Ahrmon for quite some time. Then he spoke with conviction. ‘Captain Tyros, I’m arresting you on suspicion of conspiracy against the Federation and for the murder of Lieutenant Dakhar. Officers, take him to the holding cell and secure him.’

Ahrmon struggled as the two security officers forcibly marched him away. Looking back over his shoulder, he called out desperately, trying to explain. ‘Listen, Zarkwin, I didn’t do this. It was the Bladers. Listen to me!’

His pleas fell on deaf ears.

During the voyage back to planet Tzurac, secured within the boundaries of his small cell by a forcefield, Ahrmon’s mind, now fully recovered from the side effects of the attack, could not rest. He had mixed feelings of grief and guilt for the loss of his loyal comrades, combined with anger for the senseless murder of his lifelong friend. He paced back and forth, trying to reason with his inner voice.

How did the Blader leader, Cronaz, know my name? Who gave the orders to leave me alive? Is there an insider trying to frame me and for what purpose? Is there some sort of conspiracy against me? How can I prove my innocence when none of my Sentinel unit are alive to bear witness? Will my reputation and unblemished army record attest to my innocence? Or could the accusations of the highly respected TSF Officer Chief Zarkwin convince the Senate I’m guilty? And how will I be able to console Lieutenant Dakhar’s family now I’m accused of murdering their son?

Ahrmon reflected on his childhood when he and Dakhar had played and fought together like brothers, sparred

with their staffs and blades, laughed and cried together, protected each other, kept each other's secrets and talked out their fears until they were old enough and strong enough to become cadets and, eventually, fearless Sentinel warriors. Ahrmon wrestled with mixed emotions, torn apart by the loss of his friend, and filled with anger and hatred for the Blader leader whose face he would never forget.

