

SENTINELS OF TZURAC (SAMPLE CHAPTER)

UNDER SEIGE

LESS than a day into its scheduled consignment voyage, the craft'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 officer in charge of the consignment, was immediately disoriented. He had been standing in the main cabin in the centre of the craft monitoring the visual scanner that displayed the perimeter of the transporter. Suddenly, a renegade Trelidar battle ship had materialised from nowhere at the rear of the ship, deactivating its cloaking device just before the transporter was assaulted. There had been no time to avoid the ambush.

The craft attacked by directing a high-powered magnetic reverse-polarising beam on the craft's propulsion system. This over-excited the super-magma energy flow of the transporter, disabling the power source and rendering the defence shields and weaponry useless. The reverse polarisation also interfered with the crew members' nervous systems and the distortion was amplified in the Sentinels' highly sensitised neurological circuitry. It severely affected their motor skills and their highly attuned senses.

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

"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 different 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 monitoring 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, Caden sounded desperate. Even though his speech was slightly slurred his message was clear.

“We're under attack Captain! There appears to be half a dozen or more... they look like Bladers...”

Again the communication was interrupted by static. Then Morell interrupted.

“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.

Ahrmon realised that his troops were also affected by the pulsating vibration that was echoing throughout the ship. It was creating weird sensations similar to 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. Ahrmon yelled into the intercom.

“What, in the name of the Ancients is happening, Captain?”

There was no answer. 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 communications. I’ll keep trying Captain. Over and out!”

On the screen Ahrmon could now see the plunderers, wearing protective headbands to shield them from the distorting frequency, and boarding the craft through the cargo hold with little resistance. These marauders were cold-blooded killers who would stop at nothing to steal their bounty. Ahrmon knew that the pilots, who only had basic weapons training with laser pistols, wouldn’t stand a chance against the attackers if they reached flight control. Time was of the essence. The attackers had to be contained 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 pulsating frequency,” Ahrmon continued, “but I need all of you in the cargo hold immediately! The Bladers have Caden and Morell pinned down. There are 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. Ahrmon moved as fast as he could but, being 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 that coming into contact with the super-magma would instantly char his body. His main thought was to reach the cargo hold before his men were annihilated. He knew that the slide pole to the deck below was about one hundred yards ahead. Once there, it was an easy slide to the deck of the cargo hold and then a

fifty-yard span to his right to the automatic metal sliding doors that provided the only other access.

He was nearly out of breath by the time he reached the slide pole and he was still shaky on his feet. Ahrmon 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 the outside of his drill uniform pants. Leaning over the hole in the grilled metal 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, metallic-silver 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.

Ahrmon leant back to his upright position while raising his head, wiped his now-beaded brow with the sleeve of his right arm, focused on the slide pole in front of him, 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 that his laser pistol would be the best weapon of choice. 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. Ahrmon was surprised to see that the shooting had ceased, but he was extremely apprehensive and ready for anything unexpected. His eyes, moving from left to right, quickly scanned across the large expanse.

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.

Then his eyes fell on Lieutenant Dakhar. Dakhar was standing in the centre of the room and a Blader flanking his left side was aiming a laser pistol directly at his head.

“Glad you could join us, Ahrmon. Don’t be shy, come on in.”

He was addressed by the grinning Blader in a guttural, Trelarian voice. The Blader continued.

“You can drop the act now Ahrmon, the game is up. Bring him here to me!”

Before Ahrmon could raise his laser pistol, two burly Bladers who had been concealed on either side of the doorway lunged forward, grabbing both his arms whilst tugging the weapon from his hand and the staff from his belt. 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 he was dragged roughly towards their leader, who was still pointing his laser pistol at Dakhar.

Ahrmon recognised the insignia of crossed daggers on his attackers’ well-worn uniforms. This identified them as a splinter group of guerrilla freedom fighters or Bladers from the planet Trelar – a band of renegades who had opposed the peace treaty from the outset.

During the two-hundred-year war Bladers had worked alongside the Trelarian army. But, after the war, they had deserted 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 or personal use. They would lay in wait along known flight paths in their invisible cloaked ships to ambush unsuspecting foes. The Bladers were a law unto themselves and extremely hard to apprehend, since those with whom they traded gave them sanctuary.

The leader of the Bladers had long, thick, straight black hair, swept back in a pony tail, dark sunken eyes and 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. He wore dark-brown, tight-fitting leather pants tucked into suede-leather knee-high boots, with a matching battle jacket over a 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 leader spoke to Ahrmon as if he was a known acquaintance.

“Hello Ahrmon, remember me? Captain Cronaz. Your plan went well,” he said in a friendly voice.

Lieutenant Dakhar gave a puzzled look in Ahrmon’s direction.

“Who are you and how do you know my name?” responded Ahrmon, defensively. He had never seen this man 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!” exclaimed Ahrmon angrily in a louder voice, “I don’t know who you think I am, but I have 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,” replied Cronaz, casually. As he spoke, Cronaz slowly and forcibly placed the barrel of his antique laser pistol onto the temple of Dakhar’s head. “But if you do not 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. The Bladers standing beside Ahrmon grabbed him more tightly, one of them thrusting the sharp edge of a dagger against his throat as he struggled to break free to tend to his friend.

“No use worrying about him, he’s dead,” Cronaz spoke coldly.

Ahrmon was incensed. His wide eyes glared into the eyes of the Blader leader and his pulse was racing. Struggling against the grip of his captors he called out in a rage.

“You murdering 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 the Lieutenant in *your* hand. We’ve been told not to kill you, so, adieu Captain Ahrmon Tyros.”

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

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It was a little over six hours after the assault on the transporter when the Tzuracian Security Force or TSF boarded the spacecraft. Their tracking system had shown no movement of the craft for some time and there had been no response to their attempts at communications, prompting them to investigate. Security guards were now busily searching the craft 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 had 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 now visible figure to the two Sentinel guards standing either side of Ahrmon.

Ahrmon could now discern that the officer in charge was dressed in the imperial red and black colours of the Security Force and he felt the vice-like grip of Sentinels tighten painfully on his arms as they followed orders. And there, 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 clearly 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 officer, 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.

Using his black-leather gloved hand, Zarkwin carefully picked the offending laser pistol up by the barrel. He stood silently, his piercing dark eyes staring directly at Ahrmon for quite some time. Then, with conviction in his gravelly voice, he decreed:

“Captain Tyros, I’m arresting you on suspicion of conspiracy against the Federation and for the murder of Lieutenant Dakhar. Sentinels, take him to the holding cell and secure him.”

Ahrmon struggled as the two Sentinels forcibly marched him away and, looking back over his shoulder, he tried desperately to explain to Zarkwin the events that had taken place.

“Listen, Zarkwin, I didn’t do this. It was the Bladers. Listen to me!”

His pleas fell on deaf ears.

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During the voyage back to Tzurac, secured within the boundaries of his small cell by a force field, 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 his name? How could he prove his innocence when none of his company of escort Sentinels were alive to bear witness to his innocence? Was there an insider trying to frame him and for what purpose? Who gave the orders to leave him alive? Was there some sort of conspiracy? How would he be able to console Lieutenant Dakhar’s family now that he had been accused of murdering their son? Would his reputation and his unblemished army record attest to his innocence? Or could the accusations of the highly respected Chief Zarkwin convince the Senate of his guilt?

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 his 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.