

1. ELVENE

'MARAUDERS APPROACHING FROM SECTOR 7. TWELVE MINUTES 25 SECONDS AND CLOSING.' This was the second iteration of the warning by the ship's computer and Elvene was beginning to have that awful feeling of impending doom that is perversely sexual, when the brain seems to confuse fear with another primitive survival instinct. She was literally watching death approach and she had no means to impede it. Her mouth was dry and her stomach churned to the point of nausea. She had a feeling of defeat before the fight had even begun. Not that she was in a position to fight with marauders anyway.

Elvene was familiar with marauders, as was everyone in the Space Corps. They didn't negotiate, and they didn't bargain, their whole *modus operandi* was to seek and destroy, the most effective killing machines yet devised by man. Alone in space, out of contact; it was the perfect environment for them to pick off a lone ship. And space was the marauders' environment: it was the one they were best adapted for. They were built like modules, no bigger than humans but pyramid shaped. They used a collective mind system and trawled through space in packs, with the same abilities as any space-faring ship. Her ship only had a passive defence system, but even with weapons, it would not have been a match for a pack of marauders who could spread out and surround her with enough weaponry to destroy a war ship, let alone her modest craft. In fact marauders were so feared that her ship was enabled with a suicide command, should she choose to use it.

'How many did you say?' she asked the computer. But she was stalling, when stalling was not an option she had.

'A pack of six, from what I can detect.'

From what it can detect, she repeated to herself. They had used stealth to get within striking range, so there could be more, just out of range, but that was unlikely. Neither could she outrun them; if she tried she would buy some time but eventually they would encircle her before delivering

the inevitable death blow. With marauders there was no point in running unless you had somewhere to run to, and they were light weeks from any system with a known landfall.

‘Eight minutes 15 seconds and closing.’

That was how long before they would be within missile launching range. A distinct disadvantage of having an onboard computer was that it kept telling you how many minutes and seconds you had before you were about to die. Nothing like a countdown to your own execution to keep your mind focused. If she started thinking like the computer she knew she would die.

She wondered where they’d come from and how long they had been following her. Her mission was reconnaissance and this was an uncharted sector. She wondered if she had inadvertently stumbled into a nest of marauders without knowing it, or if they’d been following her ever since her warp point. Either way it pointed to a hole in the Corps’ intelligence. But she could ill afford to puzzle over these questions when they were of no assistance to her survival.

‘Are we in a position to warp?’

‘No, we don’t have enough time to create the nodes.’

It was a stupid question but she had to ask it. Warping was not a push-button affair. Creating a self-replicating wormhole without knowing where it was going to end was a very dangerous enterprise indeed. She’d rather be blown to smithereens than starve to death in an unknown corner of the universe without a return passage.

Previous experience told Elvene that fear was an ally if you knew how to focus it. While you have fear the mind keeps looking for escape. If she had been calm and serene in this situation she would already be defeated. It amazed her that her brain could analyse her fear even while she was trying to use it, but basically she was just looking for positives in a very negative situation.

‘Four minutes 12 seconds and closing.’

‘Shut up,’ she said in a burst of frustration. ‘Okay.’ She started talking to herself. ‘I have the emergency escape module, but they will destroy it as soon as it leaves the ship.’

‘Besides they can detect life on board if they get close enough.’ She imagined the irony of the scenario with them destroying her in the escape capsule and then leaving Alfa, her ship, untouched.

Then it hit her. ‘But that’s it. I’ll use it as a decoy.’

But they would still be able to detect me on board, she thought. Not if I’m in hibernation. They won’t be able to detect any life signs unless they come on board,

and that's most unlikely. Elvene was gambling that they would destroy the capsule on impulse without checking its contents. But she was also banking her life on an untried hypothesis: that once they'd achieved their objective, which was to kill her, they would leave the ship intact.

'One minute 10 seconds and closing.'

'Okay, Alfa, you need to do three things in the sequence I command you. You must put me into hibernation. You must break a quantum distress signal. And you must eject the emergency escape module at maximum velocity in a direction away from the approaching marauders.'

'I understand all your commands and they will be done in the sequence you requested.'

'Oh, and one more thing. I won't be in the emergency escape module.'

'If you were, madam, I wouldn't send it.'

'That's very thoughtful of you, Alfa. Now let's do it. The command is: "Abandon Ship".'

Elvene knew that her plan held no guarantees. She knew that the marauders would attempt to interrogate Alfa, irrespective of the outcome with the capsule, and if they failed they would then attempt a tractor beam. But the ship had its own inbuilt defence against tractor beams, and ships were often booby-trapped following abandonment. Alternatively, they could just destroy the ship anyway, but that was the gamble she had to take. Besides if they did destroy the ship, she was never going to know because she would be dead. It seemed like a good choice.

She lowered herself into the hibernation couch and watched the lid close; against all her resolve, it made her think of a coffin.

'Six seconds and closing' was the last thing she heard.

2. MYKA

MYKA STILL LIVED WITH HIS PARENTS. He was at that age where he was looking for his independence, but he knew it was just out of reach. The Elders made all the decisions concerning his life and its future, and there was a feeling of rebelliousness, not only within himself but also amongst his peers.

Like most people who lived in paradise, Myka was unaware of what he had. His people, the Kiri, lived on an island that was part of an archipelago. The island was mountainous in parts and heavily forested. They lived on the side facing the rising sun with a beach-lined cove. It was effectively a lagoon broken by a narrow strip of reef that led to the open sea. But, because they never saw their home as paradise, they were equally familiar with its deadlier inhabitants, which they never took for granted.

They made their homes in caves in the cliffs because that was the safest place to take refuge from the larger predators that cohabited with them on the island. Myka had heard that over the ocean, in the direction of the rising sun, there was land as big as the ocean itself, where even bigger animals could be found. Myka had ambivalent feelings about this. He would like to cross the ocean himself one day and see this land, but he wasn't sure he could contend with the thought of predators bigger than igrams. He realised, even at this early stage of his life, it was not a venture that could be done alone.

He had heard stories of other tribes, but if they existed he had never met them and the Kiri were the only people living in this archipelago. According to the Elders, strangers had come over the seas many generations ago and assimilated with them. Likewise individuals, and even groups, had left the island never to return. Despite his isolation, these stories held some sort of promise for Myka that there was more to his world than what he could see.

The island was covered in vegetation, ranging from rainforest on its slopes to more open grassland in its valleys, with bountiful supplies of water; his people had all the food they needed along with what they caught

at sea. Myka loved nothing more than to explore the island, but he was never allowed to venture beyond the mountain range alone. Predators like igrams rarely attacked humans in groups but a lone individual made easy prey. Myka was efficient with both spear and bow, but bringing down an igram required cunning, teamwork and a carefully planned strategy. There was the story of Seth who had killed an igram with a stone from a sling but no one ever attempted to emulate the achievements of a myth. Myka liked to go fishing, which he often did with his father, but these days he preferred to go alone or with his peers.

On this day he was going hunting with his friends, and they had been given permission by the Elders provided they stayed within certain bounds. As well as himself, there were three others: Maklyn, Sendra and Rafta. Maklyn was the eldest and Rafta, who was second eldest, was Myka's elder brother. Myka and Sendra were the youngest. Myka admired his brother who was better with both spear and bow and arrow than he was, but Myka could just beat him in a foot race, if the distance was not too long, and he was also a better swimmer. Myka enjoyed the water in all respects, including canoeing and fishing, more than his brother did. Maklyn led the party because he was the eldest, but they all knew that Rafta was the best hunter. Maklyn had been given responsibility by the Elders as the leader of the group. This made them feel like they were really adults and not just pre-initiates who were pretending. Besides they were going to hunt antrops.

The previous night they'd had a communal feast to celebrate the start of a new year. The new year was determined by sages who examined the heavens and could read the stars. He also knew that they studied shadows created by the sun, and he was fascinated by the ability to determine the passage of time by seemingly unrelated events. When he asked questions concerning this he was simply told that he was too young to understand.

The feast was held outdoors, not in their caves, but on a specially prepared ground between the beach and the cliffs, where large open huts were constructed out of tree trunks and broad leaves. It was one of the few occasions when they didn't retire to their cave-like homes till very late in the night. The planet had no moon; in fact Myka would not have known what a moon was, but one still had a sense of time. Myka could always sense the coming dawn before any change of light was discernible. If asked to explain, he would have described it as a feeling in the air and possibly a change in its smell. He often looked at the heavens and wondered what secrets they held, which was why he was keen to learn the way of the sages. He was yet to appreciate the link between the stars and the ability

to traverse the oceans, which was his secret dream. Myka was a growing adolescent, but he held ambitions in a world where the word did not exist.

Living in an island environment their clothing was rudimentary except on ritual occasions. They made clothing from skins or plant materials. The men wore loin cloths and the women wore skirts, and for the most part left their breasts uncovered. For hunting, Myka and his friends wore loin cloths and carried their weapons by hand. They had quivers made from skins to carry their shafts and also for provisions. How they brought home their kill or catch depended largely on how big it was. If it was really huge they would butcher it in the field, which normally meant returning to the village for help. This tended to restrict how far they could travel.

They climbed over the cliffs that made their home and into a valley on the other side. As well as their hunting apparatus, they carried water in skins and some pieces of fruit. Everything would be shared, including whatever they caught. There were small mammals that lived in trees, and some lived underground. These could be caught with traps, but they were after bigger game. The island also had flying creatures of various sizes and types. Some were like gliders with folds of skin between their limbs while others had genuine wings; both types ranged in sizes from no bigger than a human hand to proportions that defied comparisons. Myka had seen wing spans that were wider than an eight-man canoe was long.

The fur-covered creatures living on the island also ranged in size from the small ground and tree dwellers that they trapped, to large four-legged creatures that stood as tall as humans if they stretched their long necks, called antropos. These were not to be mistaken for igrans, who had scaly armoured skins and giant heads with sharp teeth. Antropos had long necks to allow them to eat vegetation in awkward places, and they were hunted by both igrans and humans. They also had tusks for digging up roots, but on the very odd occasion could impale an igran if they got an opportunity. These animals tended to stay in the valleys; they had difficulty climbing the mountainous parts because of their sheer size and they preferred to stay in open spaces where they could see predators. They defended themselves by forming a circle, but if they were attacked by more than one igran, they invariably lost one of their number.

Hunting antropos was a dangerous enterprise, not only because of their size and their herd mentality, but because they were also hunted by igrans – it was their common domain. Myka and his companions could see a mid-sized herd of about fifteen from their vantage point as they entered the valley. They were moving from right to left across their field of view. What they saw when they crested the ridge was a circular range of craggy hills

covered in vegetation. The valley below however was grassland with no trees. Myka was unsure why this was so, but legend had it that what they were seeing was the giant mouth of a sleeping creature. The Kiris believed that the island was alive and only tolerated their presence if they paid it due respect. Otherwise the mouth could open up and eat them all. But seeing the antropos grazing below they knew it was safe to enter. Superstition held that if a creature entered alone it would be devoured. But Myka could never remember not seeing antropos in this valley and wondered if they ever left it. The Elders, however, maintained that if the antropos ever did leave the valley, the Kiri would have to leave the island. No explanation was given for such a drastic measure, aside from the legend that the island would surely come alive.

The first thing they did was to check wind direction, as antropos had a keen sense of smell. The wind was in their face, so it was in their favour, but Rafta also wanted to check for igrum spore on their side of the valley before they broke free of their cover. Both species would enter the forest providing the ground was not too rugged or the vegetation too thick, but antropos did this rarely, whereas igrums, like humans, used the thick vegetation for cover. The best protection for humans was on the higher slopes – once in the valley, they were exposed. Rafta and Maklyn discussed the intended strategy before going down the slope. Once they got closer there would be no talking. The idea was for the two pairs to approach from different directions. The grass was long enough to provide cover provided they stayed on their stomachs. They would use pre-agreed whistles and mimic small animal calls when they separated, but once in the grass they would remain silent. Antropos were not completely stupid; if they heard a human voice they would simply bolt, whereas a whistle, even one that sounded unfamiliar, would merely make them stop and look up.

They broke into pairs and stretched out, looking for signs. Myka stayed with his brother, who moved to the right, and Sendra stayed with Maklyn. It was dark under the shadow of the mountain range, and the vegetation blocked out the sky. As soon as they were apart, they immediately felt less safe – now two instead of four. The floor of the forest was covered in fallen logs, vines and ferns. Sometimes they came across snakes in this environment, another hazard, but snakes didn't normally hunt humans and tended to stay hidden. Even so, Myka thought, he wouldn't want to arouse one unintentionally. Snakes were huge, so huge you couldn't get your hands around them, but they usually stayed in the trees where they hunted arboreal prey; even so, that was no guarantee you wouldn't find one hidden under a fern or behind a log. Also the snakes were masters of

camouflage, able to change skin colour according to their surroundings. Conditions were steamy even though they were out of the sun, and the two brothers could smell their own sweat.

They found no signs of igrām, neither tracks nor faeces, which boded well for the hunt. Besides igrāms marked their territory, so if you couldn't smell their urine it was a reasonable assumption that they weren't in the vicinity. Myka and Rafta were heading to the right to be behind the antropos, while Maklyn and Sendra would approach them from the front. The plan was very simple: when they were in position, Maklyn and Sendra would jump up, like they were rising out of the ground in front of the herd, which would turn and bolt. Then Myka and Rafta would do the same as they came towards them, which would create confusion. The antropos would not have the composure to form their protective ring, and in their panic they would momentarily divide, making it easier to isolate one of them for a kill. That was the plan, but timing was the key. If either party was too far away, it simply wouldn't work. The other danger was that an isolated antropos would simply charge; under these circumstances it took a lot of presence of mind on the part of the hunter to bring one down. This is why Rafta was on the receiving end. Everyone knew he had the best chance of making a kill.

When they reached the end of the tree line where the grass started, Rafta cupped his hands around his mouth and gave a call like a raucous bird with a diphthong note, and waited. The answer from Maklyn and Sendra was the same call, which meant they were in position. As expected, the antropos looked up and scanned the treeline at the sound of the calls, and neither party moved until they settled back to their grazing.

They had to assume that both parties would be in position at the same time, for once they entered the grass, they could no longer communicate. In spite of this, they always seemed to know when the other party was ready, which again, Myka would not have been able to explain. But when he had done this previously with his father, he always knew exactly when the other members were going to make their move.

He crawled out into the grass with his brother. Once again he thought of snakes; he knew of someone, only slightly younger than himself, who had been lost to a snake in the grassland, but again that was considered an aberration. Snakes preferred the trees and the coolness of the forest floor to the grass. A loss like that, for all the pain it caused, was considered a sacrifice to the benefit of the people as a whole. There were no certainties on this island; you had to have faith that the island itself would protect you. This was Myka's own personal mental defence against fear and the

fickle nature of the gift he called life. If the island should ever betray him, it would not only shatter his confidence, but his entire world-view. However if the island did betray him, it would probably result in the loss of his life.

These thoughts crossed his mind as he lay in the grass inching his way towards the antrop, which he could now smell. On their way out, both he and his brother deliberately crawled through some fresh antrop dung to disguise their own smell. They were almost in position and he could sense the tension in his brother as well as himself. It was a sense of anticipation mixed with excitement and a tinge of fear; his pulse had already quickened and his palms were sweaty. He knew that fear was important, as it stopped you from doing something stupid. He saw fear as an ally, not a handicap. He was at a cusp in time when his immediate world was about to erupt in bloody violence; he could feel it as if it was a part of his very being.

'Aiyeeee', was the call, and he sensed the antrop turn while his heart raced at a pace that was only matched by the thunder of their feet. He and his brother waited, for the timing had to be perfect. Rafta had the best judgement, and Myka lay with his head on his side, watching him for his cue. He could hear the hoofs of the antrop and imagined that they would be trampled if they didn't make a move, then his brother jumped up with his spear ready and Myka did the same with a poison-tipped arrow nocked to his bow.

'Lalalaloala', called Sendra and Maklyn in unison. The antrop were running scared with their eyes wide in fear. They tried to turn at the sight of Myka and Rafta, as if they realised they were trapped, but now they did not know which way to go, and their leader was at their back.

Myka saw them wheel to the right but the closest one to him went left instead, and that was what they wanted. Myka stood stock still and let the shaft fly so it hit the animal in her flank. The antrop kept running, but was going in the wrong direction to the remaining herd. Myka was about to give chase, when he looked over to his brother, and suddenly froze. A bull antrop was charging Rafta, but Myka watched helplessly; there was nothing he could do as he had already spent his arrow. His brother stood with his spear poised, his feet planted apart, his right slightly forward of his left. The animal lowered his tusks, but Rafta stood his ground. When the animal was almost on him, Rafta moved his front foot just slightly to the right and swiveled. The antrop tried to turn into him, but merely gave Rafta the opportunity he wanted. As the tusks swept past his legs, Rafta brought his spear down between the animal's shoulders just below his neck. The shaft sank deep into the antrop and it simply seemed to lose its legs, falling headlong onto the ground, then rolled over on one side, breaking the spear in the process.

Myka was relieved and without waiting further, went in pursuit of his own quarry. Maklyn and Sendra, who were at the back of the charging herd, had little opportunity to get a kill, nevertheless they had played their part well, and they joined Rafta as he bent over the bull. It was a great achievement to bring down such an animal with only a spear.

Myka's cow was now completely separated from the herd and could no longer run. To Myka, she was a pitiful sight, and when he could get close enough he would finish her with his spear. To take a life to feed a life required no sense of pity as far as the Kiri were concerned; it was simply the way of the world, and Myka and his people did it every day.

But then one of those aberrations that sometimes occurred on this island homeland of his happened before his very eyes, only this time he was part of it.

In his pursuit of the cow, they had wandered very close to the tree line on the opposite side of the valley, and now emerging before him, he saw an igram. It strode out on its strong hind legs, its tail behind for balance. It made no sound but it contained an ominous grinning set of teeth. Myka stopped in sheer terror and wondered if this time he was to be the sacrifice to the island he called home. Myka did not look behind him, did not dare, to see where the others were. The cow was between him and the igram. He would not quarrel over her. The temptation to run was enormous, but he felt instinctively that such a move would most certainly lead to his death. The igram reached the antrop in a loping stride, pulled her over with one foot and pinned her to the ground. Myka heard the cow moan before she gave up her life, but his eyes did not shift from the monster who bowed over her. The igram raised its head so it towered over him; even a full-grown man would not have reached the animal's chest. It looked at Myka, right into his eyes, and that's when it happened: what was for him, the most extraordinary experience of his life.

He felt for a moment as if he was in a dream, and that he could see into the animal's very mind. In his own mind's eye he saw the igram's young. They were in a nest and they were crying out. He said, not aloud, *Your children are alone, they need you.* The igram looked up and for the first time emitted a sound like a long mournful cry. She picked up the cow easily and carried her back to the forest. Myka was shaken, not so much by his brush with death, but with the experience of looking into another animal's mind, especially an animal with such terrifying might as an igram.

He was still standing, almost in shock, when the others came up to him from behind. He realised he was trembling as though he was cold.

'Are you all right?' Rafta asked.

Myka looked at him as if he momentarily didn't know who he was, then at the others, each with the same look of concern and bewilderment. 'Yes,' was all he could say.

His brother put a hand on his shoulder and they walked back to the kill. After a few steps Myka said, 'Don't tell Mother about this.'

'No, okay.'

'In fact, don't tell anyone.' Myka looked around at the others, still with the same look on their faces. 'Don't tell Father or the Elders.' He looked at all of them and then stopped them. 'No, you mustn't, please. Tell me you won't.'

'Myka.' Rafta spoke to him. 'You did nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary, you were very brave.'

'No, that's not it. I don't want anyone to ask me about it.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure.'

Rafta turned to Maklyn. 'What do you say?'

'We have a bull; it's a great tribute to you. We've no need to mention the igram. Besides if we tell them they may not let us go again.'

Myka nodded his head in agreement. Sendra said nothing but he looked bewildered.

'Okay then,' Rafta said. 'We won't ever talk about this again. You understand, Sendra?' Sendra nodded his head; he was too overwhelmed by the whole experience to disagree.

Rafta bent forward to talk to him. 'This was our initiation. This happened only between us. This is not for anyone else to know. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' Sendra finally said, and everyone knew that he was as committed as they were. It would be their secret alone, and Myka was satisfied.

Carrying the bull home was simply not possible, but equally they were limited in their ability to butcher it. So the solution was for two of them to go back to the village and get help. There was still a lot of light in the sky and they had plenty of time. So Myka and Sendra went off home while the older two stayed with the bull and started to skin it.

It took them the rest of the day to butcher the animal in the field and bring it back home. It involved a number of the villagers but everyone treated it like a big occasion and so it didn't seem like hard work. That night it would be cooked and smoked and salted, so it would last them a long time. The whole beast would be shared as that was the way of the tribe. But Rafta would be given special recognition for his role in its kill, even though he hadn't led the group.

Myka thought the incident with the igrum would not be broached, either intentionally or unintentionally, but he didn't realise how much he revealed of himself by just remaining silent. His mother, Lenya, had been observing him and wondered why he wasn't in a celebratory mood like everyone else.

'You're not yourself,' she said. 'What happened to you today?'

He was taken off-guard by her question. 'Nothing.' He tried to sound nonchalant.

'Are you disappointed that you didn't get a kill?'

'No.'

'Did you have a fight with your brother?'

Myka knew that the most effective lie was the one that wanted to be heard, and it was most convincing if it was partly true. 'I almost got a kill but she got away on me. It's no big deal.'

She smiled and ruffled his hair, though he was just taller than her these days. 'Don't worry, you'll have better luck next time.'

But Myka shrugged away and walked off, almost angry in his body language.

She didn't understand him, but knew better than to make an issue out of it. *He's at a difficult age*, she told herself, *and he's not telling me everything*. But she knew if something had happened out there, they would keep it amongst themselves, as that was the way of men. She could always ask Rafta, but that might only make matters more awkward. She decided it was not worth pursuing further, but could not help feeling a concern for her son.

The previous night had been late, so on this occasion they retired to their caves early; some people were falling asleep just sitting about the fire and had to be woken. Myka could not rid his mind of the day's events and he fell into a troubled sleep.

When morning arrived, he awoke to a glorious day and walked to the beach alone. But in the middle of the lagoon he saw a large dark rock that had not been there the previous day. He found its presence very troubling, but even though he was alone, he took a canoe and paddled out to it. It was unusually smooth and completely black in colour. When he touched it he noticed that it had become warmed by the sun. Overcome by an impetuous curiosity he climbed onto it. As soon as he did this, however, it started to sink below the waves, and he found himself going under with it like he was sitting atop a giant fish.

Then he awoke and realised it was a dream. Nevertheless, it was first light outside, and his immediate thought was to run to the beach, even though he feared what he might see.