

Prologue: A Message from God

If you were to ask most people, they would insist that the universe is mostly black, or in some cases beige, but as it turns out they are on the whole wrong. The majority of the universe, thanks to the intermolecular lining that perpetually generates zbeq energy, is in fact a light shade of purple. As this omnipresent portion of the universe is a constant colour, and the part everyone sees is multi-coloured, the former constitutes the most. And you could theoretically get an infinite number of shades of purple, depending on the ratio of blue to red. But nothing is interesting after seeing it for hours on end.

Unfortunately this particular Braknagh *had* been staring at solid purple for what seemed like hours. It had started off well. It wasn't often that any Braknagh (the slave workers of the Brethren Lords) got to ride in one of the official shuttles. It hadn't been too bad when he'd been laden with the constricting crude space suit and heavy back pack. His day had taken its turn when he had been ejected through the floor of the shuttle, been sent tumbling through the void and into the Rift from the Outer Region and into the Alpha Realm. He had done as he'd been told. He'd taken the cube out of the back pack and let it drift as they spiralled into the tear in the fabric of the dimensions.

Now this is where he was, in the Rift, the intermolecular lining of reality, and he was sick of the colour purple, though from the looks of it he was near the end of his freefall. Below him a pool of light was growing. Already re-entry instructions were flashing on the inside of his visor.

The asteroids he sought were there on the other side of the Rift, orbiting the corona of the star. The star was actually a focused ball of energy that had seeped through from the Outer Region into the Alpha Realm, and as it wasn't thus strictly meant to be part of this plane of existence it hadn't destroyed the cluster of rocks thousands of years before as other stars would have. The corona therefore didn't vaporise him either the moment he reintegrated and passed through.

He hadn't lost momentum in the Rift, so the Braknagh plummeted down out of the star, slamming into the central asteroid. Lights were popping in his head as he weakly got to his feet. He was knocked on the head by the cube he had brought with him which was now sizzling from the effects of travelling through the Rift. The Braknagh picked it up, only to drop it suddenly with a yell. Its alarmingly high levels of excess heat passed through even the gloves of the suit. After a few seconds it stopped smouldering and he deemed it safe enough to replace it in his back pack. He looked around the barren ball of rock, searching for the column.

At last the visual sensors in his helmet picked it up over the lip of a crater. The Braknagh flew across the surface in one stride. Landing shakily on his feet, he gazed at the ancient device. Removing the cube from his bag once more, he found the six buttons on its base. He punched in the combination. Nothing happened. The Braknagh shook the cube, hoping for a reaction, needing a reaction, else he wouldn't be able to return at all. Suddenly the ornate carvings on the column began to change, softening into a faultless surface upon the cylinder. There was an abrupt hiss and the top, which had been sculpted it seemed into the form a crown of overlapping petals, opened up under the burning light of the star. At the same time the shining skin of the column caved into the shape of the Braknagh, a mould for his body. Cautiously the Braknagh stepped up to the cylinder. The cube still in his gloved hand, he touched the pillar. All of a sudden he was falling uncontrollably into the unknown.

It was strange. He did not in his mind feel confined, yet the surrounding blackness felt like tar or gel somehow all the same. He could move, but it was slow going as he met constant resistance. The column shook, and he felt the cube fly out of his hand up out of this mysterious substance. He himself experienced minor tugs on his neck and limbs, but he must have been of a far denser material than that of the cube, as his ejection took far longer. As it was, the armoured figure did eventually get shot out of the ancient column and back into the star as well.

The shuttle glided back into position. What it didn't do however was reopen the airlock on the underside.

"All I'm saying is that you must have realised his plan can only end in failure. It's too risky."

In the cockpit Lord Stark Vingfamyn turned to face the hideously disfigured Lord Petti Lance in his high backed chair, his stubby legs wagging over the lip of his own.

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"And what would you propose as an alternative?" Petti sighed; it wasn't the first time they'd had this discussion, and it wouldn't be the last.

Stark ran his chubby fingers through his rag of dirty-blond hair, "I'm just saying, right, we don't have to return the cube. We could, I don't know, say it was damaged in the debris field."

Surrounding the scar in the skin of reality was a minefield of mechanical parts, a mixture of obliterated ships and fragments from the Tower which once stood over this part of the Alpha Realm. This particular conflict in the Entities' prolonged pursuit for maintained supremacy had left no fighter alive. This was thought to be dead space.

"Do you really think that is a good idea?"

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Stark glared, but Petti lifted his hand away. The sight of his gnarled digits no longer caused him shame or regret. He wasn't even certain any more how many years it had been since he along with the late Lord Upre Shun had been sent on that fateful mission into the Alpha Realm, ending in an accident that had rendered him unsightly in the first place and his partner deceased.

Petti turned back to the controls, "The cube's coming into range now."

He set the underside airlock to open, ready to catch the projectile. A high-pitched screech emanated from Stark's console.

"We have movement elsewhere in the debris field," Stark read aloud.

Petti didn't take his eyes off the cube visible on the monitor, "If this is another attempt to sabotage the mission..."

But then he saw it too. Amongst the scattered remains of a long ago battle, a ship, mostly intact, stirred. It was shaped like the human letter 'T', however five hundred miles long. The horizontal bar at the rear of the ship was in turn two hundred miles long, most of it constituting the engine. Where the engine met the main straight body of the ship there was a reinforced dome, the bridge. Either side of this was a stout cylinder capable of three hundred and sixty degree movement, the secondary weapons system.

"That's impossible," Petti breathed. "It's a Maelstrom Class Warship."

Stark looked up as well, "But...such vessels are far too modern for this battlefield."

"It's not that. We've known it was here for some time now. But we've scanned it hundreds of times. That ship is dead. It has been since just after that type was launched."

Stark glanced back at his console, "We have the cube, a little longer and we'll have the Braknagh."

"We may have to leave it. It'll just be collateral damage."

"Hold on, they're sending a message." Stark's fingers danced on the controls, transferring the message to the overhead speakers. "It's just white noise."

"Already running it through the filters."

"...respond. Unidentified craft, please respond."

"This is Petti Lance of the Brethren Lords, with whom am I conversing?"

The radio crackled into life again, "You call us Entities. We are your Gods."

Petti didn't reply.

"Aren't you going to respond?" asked Stark.

"We're in no position to offer them anything."

Stark let out a nervous chuckle, "They have two massive guns, as well as...and we have a pesky little shuttle."

Petti weighed up the odds before reopening his line of communication, "What is your intention?"

“Grant us asylum. We are unaware of how long it has been since we became damaged by the debris during our passage through it. We were to be in suspended animation until our vessel was back to optimum conditions, however the presence of some other ship a somewhat short time ago triggered our gradual reawakening. You are the first to come our way since. At this moment we barely have enough power to run the main systems. For the duration of our automated repairs we have but limited use of engines, communications, life support, weapons and possibly long range sensors, but not all at once or for very long.”

“Request denied,” Petti barked.

A dark edge lined the voices of the Entities this time, “We are your Gods. You cannot deny us.”

“You are not Gods. We have seen you for who you are, what we used to be.”

The air in the cockpit seemed to thicken. The Entities did not respond. All of a sudden a warning light turned on.

Stark began to pant madly, bursting into a sweat, “They’re powering weapons!”

Two sapphire beams discharged from the warship’s cannons. Swiftly the shuttle moved out of the way. Unfortunately for the speeding Braknagh he couldn’t change his course as they had. The warship began to turn, the strain on the power supply evident by the internal metallic groans. For the last time the Entities made contact.

“It seems that we are not in fact dependant on *your* assistance. Nevertheless, do not expect to get away with your insolence for long.”

The line went dead. Stark whimpered.

“What did they mean?”

Petti didn’t answer straight away, “It means they’ve detected another Entity vessel.”

This only made Stark worse, “We can’t keep off one ship, let alone two!”

“You evidently haven’t followed the path it is taking then.”

Stark watched the ship through watering eyes, “But it’s going through the Rift.”

“Precisely.”

On the other side the Maelstrom Class Warship emitted a faint energy pulse from six arrays on the outer hull. In its damaged state, and with the corona of the star creating interference, the long-range sensors could only detect other Entity-built ships, which is why as it passed a silicon-based planet it didn’t pick up on the white craft flanked by a fleet of smaller circular drones latching itself onto its underside. The Entities continued on their path, oblivious to the incursion below.