

The Fifth Horseman

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We made love on the jump, Joella and I. As the engines started to whine she peeled off her officer's tunic. As the hyperdrive engines started their pent-up judder I cupped her breasts in grateful hands. And as time and space flexed, soared, exchanged and stood still in the eternal n-dimensional micromoment of the jump, we shared everything. The ultimate trip. Or perhaps only a metaphor for what I thought about the mission.

Afterwards we shared mature gouda and even more mature St Julien I'd smuggled aboard at the station. The least of my crimes. Crumbs in her cleavage, sweat on my brow, secret smiles as we touched each other's lips. Cohabitation on active service was bad enough: between enlisted men and officers, unthinkable. But probably no one would know. We were both off shift, and who cared anyway? Up on the bridge the smoky sun of Epsilon Eridani would be filling the screen, even at this distance. I remembered enough of my navcom training to imagine it. And no one would be thinking about venial sinners on this, mankind's greatest mission. Or most mortal sin.

We were in her quarters. Enlisted men didn't have quite the privacy we needed, even aboard the *Belisarius*. Joella, Joella. I made her laugh with my unexpected desire to say her name over and over. And in fact I was probably the only person to speak aboard the entire fleet as we jumped. Some would be awestruck, others gripped with amazed introspection, others awash with sweat and vomit even in the fractional jumptime some subatomic particles would envy.

She told me how it was, later. As a bridge officer, albeit a junior one, she had a rare ringside seat.

From the first, it was all wrong.

We'd been sent because another sentient species had been discovered. As usual, there was that frisson of xenophobia through half the worlds, but it was disguised with a thousand more civilised noises. We'll contact them, find a modus vivendi, do the decent thing.

If that's true, perhaps someone will explain why our means of communication was the most heavily armed fleet in Earth history. The *Belisarius* alone could have devastated planets, let alone her sister ship the *Narses*. She, as the second of the two to be laid down, had a few extras that even we lacked. Let's put it this way: the old symbolism of the handshake in the right hand while the spear was held in the left was sadly lacking.

But for once, we weren't the aggressors. Not technically anyway. But I'm getting ahead of myself. The way Joella told it, the fleet reassembled after the jump. Commodore Larsen had his sensors complete the roll: everyone had arrived except a minesweeper. Jumps were like that. Not entirely reliable, but reliable enough to make them worthwhile. And everyone on the bridge heaved a sigh of relief and said that minesweepers were expendable, always had been.

Then the conventional-drive engines were energised and the whole fleet began lumbering off, infinitely slowly compared to our previous mode of travel, towards the smoky star. We were ready for anything. Even, if you believe it, peace in our time.

It took some days, of course. Days I spent, when not going through combat procedures I knew by heart anyway, with the lovely Joella.

One day sticks in my mind. She was playing some music, soft and gentle, through her little sound system in her quarters. Sounded like old Earth stuff. I don't know what it was, but it filled me with peace. Or perhaps it was Joella who did the filling. For some reason, don't ask me why, we were drawing on each other's body with these non-toxic crayons she had. Then there came a buzz at the door and a girlish voice calling her name.

"Don't come in," called Joella, and then we could hear the override on the lock being input. "Don't come in!" she shrieked; and I was struck by how fear and amusement made up her voice in equal measure.

The door actually snicked open, and we could see the flat light of the corridor in a pencil-thin strip; then an unending moment, and finally the door sighed to again. We guessed it was one of her colleagues who knew what she was up to and wanted to kid her along. However it was, it certainly gave a piquancy to the next fifteen minutes.

But all the time we were carousing in each other's arms, the fleet was moving slowly, inexorably, forward, until finally the fifth planet was in view and the sun just a warm blur at the edge of the viewers. Joella was on the bridge that day, and even as junior an officer as she had her work cut out. The comms to the planet were still producing no response, and then, out of nowhere, these tiny craft were all around us, streaming from the planet, subdued sunlight slicking their hulls. Alarms blaring, ECMs activating, weapons systems powering to full, everyone to stations.

And that's what I mean by everything going wrong. They didn't respond to our comms; they didn't even attack in a way that we could relate to. But it was an attack all right. The smaller ships, like the fighters the *Narses* launched, they tried to ram. The larger ones, like transporters and auxiliaries, they clamped onto. Sometimes three or four at a time. Then they must have initiated some sort of auto-destruct, because they'd blow away from the ships in pieces, tearing the hulls apart. It was crazy. Joella said she didn't see a weapon fired on their side.

Needless to say, we fired plenty ourselves. The little black ships smushed out of existence in the stream of our plasma generators; but they kept on coming. They even tried to headbutt their way to the flagships, but our repulsor fields were too much for them. Even so, shockwaves constantly ripped through the *Belisarius*, throwing everyone to the floor.

Finally, it was all over. The ships were all gone: and by gone, I mean destroyed. They'd either been blown away by our cannon crews and fighters, or had taken ships of ours with them in their blind kamikaze rage. Joella said sensors showed not a single ship returned to the planet's surface. She wasn't the only one on the bridge to feel faint at the sheer scale of the losses – and more significantly, the uncompromising rejection of anything we could comprehend.

And so, with the still largely intact fleet circling the planet, it was time for me to do my stuff. Me, and thousands like me. The infantry. Shock troops. Or refuse collectors.

Before we moved, we bathed the planet in every killer radiation known to man, orbit after orbit to make assurance doubly sure. Nothing should have been left alive after that. Nothing we'd ever come across, anyway.

We took ourselves down to the fifth planet in state-of-the-art assault craft, swarming down as the black ships had swarmed up. Naturally we were taking no chances even after the bombardment. Because any race that could afford to throw away such wealth in technology as that first attack could somehow have found a way to survive our assault. And none of us had set eyes on an Eridanian, living or dead.

On the way down I sat with my fellow troopers, staring at the windowless walls. There were fifty of us in my craft. Half the time I pictured the whole assault wing, drifting down like vampire bats for the kill, because it gave me the strength I needed to believe I was going to come back. The other half of my mind was off with Joella. My mind was filled with her beauty. Strangely, not so much her sexuality, but more what she meant to me. I remembered watching her one day as she slept, her body rising and falling as gently as any child's. I thought at that moment that I'd never loved her more.

All of these things I thought of as we sank down through the atmosphere like multi-pronged grappling hooks. But as soon as we hit bottom everything else shot out of my mind. Survival time.

Radio links established that none of us was under fire. The sergeant gave the order. The wall in front of us dilated and there we were, staring Epsilon Eridani V in the face.

I'd known – who hadn't punched up all the details months ago? – that Epsilon Eridani was about one-third of the sun's luminosity. I'd known that, yet I hadn't thought about the effect that would have on the fifth planet. And if I had, I doubt it would have prepared me.

We walked out gingerly, clutching our automatic rifles and our flamers, and with our jacket sensors on full. The sun was big and red, cynical and depressing and sad. It dwarfed us, not only us grunts but the whole ambition of Earth. We seemed juvenile and naïve, and I thought again that I didn't want to be part of this venture. But it was too late now.

There was a bluish sort of twilight haze everywhere, and lots of vegetation, low-lying and thick, with a bluish tinge to it too. There were low buildings all around, empty to the sky and the gentle winds. But what really struck me was the smell. The smells. At first, as we walked away from our small craft, it was like the gentlest perfume, the kind of bouquet that put you in mind not of things or places but of yourself, further back in a more innocent, childlike time. It was beautiful, of a beauty that doesn't seem to exist anymore. It was like the way my father was when my brother Peter was still alive.

But as we walked on, the smell changed to something else. Suddenly it assaulted our nostrils; and as it did so it tore away the memory-odours with no hope of returning, a brutal and despairing thing. It was a charred, hopeless smell. The breath of death.

We saw the first of them very soon. It looked like slippery rubber, smeared over the well-kept borders of the blue-green grass. And then, wherever we looked, they seemed to be there. Heaps of destruction. I think it

was Fleming, the guy next to me with the *Narses* insignia on his arm, who first suggested that these smouldering objects were Eridanians. It seemed incredible that, whatever we'd done to them or whatever they'd done to themselves, however you remoulded them, these things could ever have been sentient beings. They looked to me more like plants than animals. But by the time we reached the temple, everyone agreed with Fleming.

I call it a temple because that's how it seemed to me. It was reached by flights of steps from five angles and stood high in the sky. But I'm probably as wrong to think of it as a temple as we were all wrong, from beginning to end, about the Eridanians. Purple light deepened as I walked to the top of it. Others had been there before me, each walking with that easy yet alert tread of the soldier who knows he's in enemy territory. Who expects to be attacked. Yet no one had been.

I stood at the top and looked around me. Starfall was tingeing the planet a grey hue, mixed with a wild red that I'd never seen on Earth or elsewhere. The gardens fanned out from the temple in a way that looked random; and then it seemed to me that, far from being random, it was ordered in a way that was too sophisticated for me to grasp. It struck me then that this sunset, for all its beauty, would never be seen by a single Eridanian, all of whom had been destroyed, or had destroyed themselves rather than be captured.

After a moment I walked into the temple, which was open at both sides and at the top. There was a raised dais in the middle, and flowers in sconces around the wall. I stood while my eyes adjusted to the gloom, and as I did so I heard a sound behind me. I turned quickly, in time to see a panel sliding back: and there, darker than the shadows, was a slick, plantlike thing whose limbs moved sensuously. Even across our incommunicable void I felt its loss.

A limb speared out across the floor and touched my hand. Pain and pleasure intermingled almost unbearably and I reeled away, crying out. Fleming entered, half-caught me as I staggered back and gasped at the otherness of the thing swaying in the dark. Then the Eridanian made a sound that seemed to me like exultation. I was sure it was dead before Fleming flamed it into charcoal.

That was the only Eridanian anyone saw. Sensors detected nothing more. The tunnel under the temple led nowhere.

The fleet left the Epsilon Eridani system with an anticlimax that all the victory vids could not disguise. Anticlimax, a feeling of having been cheated, and guilt. I felt all of these myself – and something more. The alien's touch. That hand on mine. How had Cook's men felt when they saw their first Polynesian? And those men were all of the same race. What had touched me was sentient, intelligent, but as different from me as the universe permitted.

And why had it touched me, anyway? Had it sensed my doubts, my empathy? Or had it just been a coincidence of timing?

All this and more I shared with Joella. She was sympathetic, soft, soothing. Our lovemaking was more urgent, more vital, than ever before. But also, in a strange way, more strange.

"You really love me, don't you," she said once, the lighting in her room a parallel to that last sunset on Eridani V. Her voice was hushed, expectant. Her hair flowed over her pectorals like weird flowers.

“More than ever before,” I said, although I couldn’t explain it.

The fleet slunk back – it was the only word to use – to the hyperspace jump-point. But it was destined never to reach it.

Joella was on the bridge that day, a day like any other. On the viewing screen, the fleet flowed onward, distant light from Epsilon Eridani casting razor shadows on the metal hulls.

The *Narses* left formation, moving lazily out of the point position she’d adopted, she and the *Belisarius* shepherding their flock of silver sheep. Joella said that twenty seconds or more passed before Larsen ordered comms. And as he did so, the full force of the *Narses*’ main plasma generators hit us in the stern.

For us it was bad enough. Scattered like trees before a meteorite throughout the ship, we heard the deep-throated roar of protest from the emasculated hyperdrive. Felt the quivering of the violated flagship. And knew the wrongness of it before we knew the cause.

But on the bridge, watching that golden wave torrent towards our undefended ship was far, far worse.

Larsen ordered ECMs and called for emergency power to the conventional-drive engines. But he and everyone on the bridge knew that it was too late.

And yet it wasn’t. The *Narses* executed a slow, contemptuous turn away from us and started in on the fleet. The unshielded ships tore, buckled and crumpled like paper aeroplanes. Some shot away at desperate angles only to be caught, tractored like slow moths in the hand of a sadistic schoolboy.

By now the *Belisarius* was powered up, its leviathan bulk moved like silk by its screaming c-drive engines. Larsen took her out on an ellipse to break the weapons lock and levelled out in the attack position. Even now, everyone on the bridge knew that the *Narses* should win any fight between them. That was the only certain thing in this pit of unknowns the *Narses* had flung us into.

The uncertainty was raised a notch as the officer on sensors reported that the *Narses* was unprotected. The *Belisarius* opened up with all generators; but even before they struck the bridge crew saw explosions flare in suddenly released air from the underside of the *Narses*. Then the plasma caught the stricken ship and ripped her open. Golden roiling light sang like sunrise against the flat blackness.

Reduced to a scorched, scarred handful, the remnants of the fleet limped on back to the jump point. But all the purpose, all the givens, seemed to have vanished with the *Narses*’ terminal attack.

As for us, the jump was no longer possible. A journey of perhaps two weeks had turned into something even our whole lifetimes were insufficient to achieve. We cruised aimlessly, waiting for the ravaged fleet to send repair craft to our aid.

And as we waited, we dallied, Joella and I. The shock of that day lingered with us and coloured our lovemaking. Pain and pleasure became increasingly the same. And the desire to please merged with the desire to hurt.

Then one day there seemed to be a lull. I was spending more and more time with her; my superiors were too listless to care what the hell anyone did. And I touched her cheek as she rode above me, a now-rare softness in her eyes as she looked down. She hummed gently along to the music.

"That's nice," I said.

"Theme and variations by Brahms," she answered.

"Sounds like our lifestyle."

Her hands met lovingly around my neck, then chokingly. Manic force in those tiny hands. Screaming, raging, lost to the world. My brain squeezed red needles through my eyes. I lashed out, knowing I was dead whatever happened next.

I stood at the door looking down at her, her eyes seemingly engaging mine in stunned surprise. I stood there for a long time. Then I was cradling her broken body in my arms one more time. And then I was gone.

Outside, the inmates had taken over the asylum. Bodies lay twisted in the corridors. Rifles and flamers roared together.

I crouched and ducked my way back to my quarters. I understood nothing, but it was survival time again.

Inside the dorm my assault rifle was still intact. About the only thing that was. The carnage was on the Eridani V scale. But these were the bodies of my friends.

I grabbed cartridge belts and ran out. If there was an explanation, it could only be found on the bridge. In fact, surely no explanation was possible; but at least I might hope for some end to the slaughter. Or even some purpose, someone to tell me to do something.

A shot rang past me near the lift. I felt its heat past my face, heard it puncture the outer hull behind me and heard the gush as the skin resealed itself. I got him with my next shot, stepped over him into the lift. Saw his officer's flash on his tunic arm. Not a good sign.

The bridge door wouldn't open. Then I saw why. Someone had bled the air out into the corridor. Someone on the bridge itself, or someone in the auxiliary control room. It didn't matter now. I fired through the bridge door, but it took several seconds before the air could find a way back in. Built to last, the *Belisarius*.

On the bridge, Larsen and his watch lay where they'd fallen. Faces purple as the starfall on Epsilon Eridani V. And on the viewing screen, the callow emptiness of space.

A body leapt through the air from the corridor onto my shoulders and we fell together onto the control console. One of us hit something and the ship was barrelling, tumbling us over and over. I caught myself steady for a fleeting second, long enough to fire, then launched out to the controls. With my half-remembered navcom training and the whirling room it took minutes for me to bring the ship under control. And by then, the sound of gunfire was growing less.

I sat for a long time in one of the chairs on the bridge. Waiting for the trembling in my bruised arms and legs to subside. The trembling in my brain took longer.

Then I took the lift back down to my quarters, hooked up a jacket sensor and hunted down the last of the madmen.

It didn't take me long.

So now I'm alone, on a ship designed for thousands, unable to jump back home. I sat there on the bridge for a long time, thinking how my father had always wanted me to be an officer. But he'd wanted Pete to be an officer more. And so to spite him I joined up all right, but as a grunt. A jerk. A decisionless killer.

But now I need to make decisions after all. Because there's no one left in command.

Thinking about command I think of my father again, the way he changed after Peter; it was like he blamed me, or something. And those years did something to me, made me shut up shop and slam down the visor, and believe I'd never find anyone else to think about except myself. But I did. I found Joella. Joella, who wanted me dead; me and everyone else.

So did a lot of people on the *Belisarius*. Everyone but me, in fact. So then I get to wondering why it all happened, and why everyone went insane except me.

That didn't take me long either.

And all this means that I can't go home. Even if some uninfected ship should return to Earth and bring out a repairer, I can never go home. This is my home now, the echoing vaults of the *Belisarius*, vast empty corridors littered with rotting bodies. It's all too much to bear.

I don't know when I come to the conclusion, whether it's hours or days. But I'm raising my rifle to my head. When something stronger than me, something older than me, holds me back.

The touch of the Eridanian turned me into a carrier. And carriers never get the disease, as everyone knows. What did I get? Some chemical gift to unzip my DNA like a whore. A spore whore. Even as I think that, the image changes in my mind into more like the caress of a mother.

Yes. I like the idea of a mother.

By frequent trips between the bridge and the engines, I manage to get the *Belisarius* into motion again, and broadly following the course that's suddenly familiar to me. Have to do it now, while I'm still small enough to use the lifts. The exact heading doesn't matter, and in any case I won't be around to see us arrive.

But it's good to know that those nutritious bodies won't go to waste. And it's nice to think that these empty corridors will be full of slippery life by the time we reach our new home.