

The Thessalonica Legacy

Chapter 3: The Silvertongue

Nadir Jump Point

Valexia, Capellan March, Federated Suns

9 November 3068

The klaxon sounded again, counting down to the impending hyperspace jump.

Ramirez closed his eyes against another wave of nausea. He hated the sensation of weightlessness. Space travel didn't bother him in general, but most of his time in space had been spent on DropShips burning into and out of star systems, when their massive engines provided a semblance of gravity through raw acceleration. It was during the transition times—orbiting a planet, at mid-journey when the DropShip flipped over to begin its long deceleration, or when docked with a JumpShip—when he experienced the floating sensation of microgravity that he hated. He always felt sick and disoriented, like his stomach was doing flip-flops.

He steadied himself against the railing of the elevator cart. His companion in the car smirked.

“Haven't gotten your space-legs, huh ground-pounders?” Edgar Tartaglia, captain of the *Felicity Klimkosky*, smiled through his bristly blond mustache as he held himself in place with a simple handstrap, his long, lanky legs bent so the tips of his toes just brushed the floor of the open cart. Lights in the walls of the well-lit shaft glinted off his bald head. Ramirez gave the tall, thin man a weak half-smile. Somehow he felt the DropShip captain was being rather cavalier about the whole situation. Their third companion, a large, muscular mountain of a man with close-cropped almond hair and a scarred face that seemed to be stuck in a permanent scowl just grunted. He seemed to be adjusting to the lack of orientation better than Ramirez, but only just.

Ramirez had managed to rendezvous with the *Felicity Klimkosky* at the hidden base in the mountains shortly after midday. The *Leopard*-class DropShip had begun its takeoff run almost before Ramirez's BattleMech had finished being loaded. It had taken almost a week at just over a 1 g burn to reach the *Silvertongue* waiting at the Nadir Standard Jump Point clear beyond the plane of the solar system, far, far beneath the south pole of Valexia.

They were traveling with a minimum complement. Normally, a *Leopard* carried a crew of nine in addition to pilots and technical teams for four BattleMechs and two Aerospace fighters. On the run from Valexia, the passenger quarters of the DropShip had seemed oddly empty. With no other pilots and no technical teams aboard the normally cramped quarters were surprisingly spacious and surprisingly lonely. The technical teams would all be needed for the guerilla campaign against the Capellan occupiers, leaving only a small squad of seven volunteer infantry, led by the large man sharing the elevator cart, in their place. Ramirez normally would have occupied the long journey by helping his chief tech repair and rearm his *Valkyrie*, but with no spare parts and no ammunition aboard, all he could do was clean his 'Mech of Valexia's dirt and grime. He felt guilty about not being back there, not standing with the Militia, adding his

‘Mech’s firepower to the fray. Still, he knew his duty. He knew his orders. He told himself he was still playing a vital role.

But each time, he kept seeing Din’s smashed *Osiris* and the gaping hole where the cockpit should have been.

The *Felicity Klimkosky* now sat like an odd, angular wart midway along the *Silvertongue*’s slender fuselage. He had initially been surprised when Captain Tartaglia asked him to accompany him over to the *Silvertongue*. Now that he thought about it, he realized it made sense. As the lynchpin of the operation, if he could make contact with the necessary channels as soon after arriving at their destination as possible, their mission would be completed that much sooner. Ramirez also had to admit to himself he was excited. He had always ridden out hyperspace jumps in the past in his bunk aboard DropShips. To watch a jump from the bridge where things actually happened? How could he pass it up?

The elevator cart ran the length of the JumpShip, next to the massive jacket that housed the K-F boom. The *Scout* was small as JumpShips went, less than 275 meters from end to end. Its small size meant it could only carry a single DropShip with it through hyperspace, but made it ideal for exploration and quick raids into enemy territory. They were now in the bulbous forward section of the ship which housed the crew quarters, medical bay, galley, and way at the tip, the bridge. The decks were laid out perpendicular to the length of the ship so that it was built like a skyscraper hanging in space, with the bridge on the topmost “floor”. Reaching the top of the shaft, the cart jolted to a stop. Tartaglia reached out his hand to the smooth metal door and it slid open at his touch.

The bridge was nothing like how Ramirez had imagined it. Without having to deal with the constraints of gravity, the bridge seemed to defy all attempts at logic and order. Command stations, with crewmembers strapped into padded chairs, were positioned all around the bridge at odd angles so that some were upside down or sideways compared to others. Only the bulkhead beneath him and the long, window “skylight” above gave any clue to which direction had been nominally declared “up.”

Even the activity surprised him. Ramirez had expected a flurry of activity with crewmembers shouting out reports and orders. He expected excitement and an electric energy in the air. Instead, the mood was much subdued. Only the soft hum of computers and the life support system filled his ears, and when crew members did speak, it was just as calm and soft. There was no excitement, only routine.

Seeing their entry, a small woman with black hair pulled back into a tight bun, light tinges of grey just showing at her temples, unstrapped herself from a console that seemed to be almost floating at the center of the tangle. She pushed herself to the aft bulkhead and clomped in her magnetic boots to greet her new arrivals.

“Edgar! Pleasure to have you back aboard the *Silvertongue*.” She smiled, wrinkles showing around the corners of her eyes and mouth as she extended a hand to the tall officer.

“Satenig. Pleasure to see you again.” He grasped her hand warmly, and then turned towards the two men floating behind him. “Captain, may I introduce Sergeant Brandon Ramirez and Lieutenant Dieter Ling both of the Valexa March Militia. Sergeant, Lieutenant, this is Captain Satenig Mawsley.”

Ramirez came to a smart salute “Pleasure to meet ‘ya, Captain. Thank you for inviting us aboard.” Ling saluted, but said nothing, not even cracking his permanently affixed frown.

Mawsley ignored the sour Lieutenant and looked directly at Ramirez. A young man, tanned skin, middling height, his dusky brown hair tied back in a short ponytail and his temples shaved clean in the style popular among MechWarriors, he had the distinct feeling she was sizing him up. “So, you’re the reason for our little fool’s errand, eh?”

Ramirez stammered for an answer, but the Captain just waved her hand.

“Well, the K-F field is forming nicely, and we’ll be making the jump to Almach in a matter of moments.” She kicked off the floor and floated back to her console. “We’ll be arriving at the Zenith Jump Point. There’s a recharging station there, so we should be able to get in contact with the AFFS or MIIO or whoever you need to talk to pretty quick.” She slipped into the seat and drew the harness straps over her shoulders. “And now, gentlemen, if you’d be so kind as to strap yourselves in?” She gestured to a bank of chairs along the aft bulkhead facing towards the ceiling, harness straps floating loose.

As they were strapping themselves into their seats, Ramirez turned to Tartaglia.

“Can I ask you a question, sir?” he asked softly.

The tall officer cocked his head “What is it?” He loosened one of the shoulder straps.

Ramirez waved a hand towards the complicated mess of consoles in front of them “Why are all the seats all...” he struggled to find the right word.

Tartaglia smiled “You mean why are the bridge consoles all twisted around at weird angles like that? It does look kind of odd, doesn’t it.” he nodded to the complicated tangle, “Watch their heads.”

Ramirez looked again. The personnel of the bridge crew were all intently watching the banks of displays at each of their stations. They talked softly to each other, and often communicated simply with quick gestures and glances. Watching their heads as instructed, he realized they were all clustered together. Any one crew member need only glance up, left, or right to meet the eyes of any other crew member, always a short distance away, always an easy distance across which to communicate. And Captain Mawsley was in the center, able to see and be seen by all. Ramirez let out an “Ah!”

“You see it now?” Tartaglia said softly. Ramirez nodded, and the Captain continued. “Without having to worry about gravity and which-end-is-up, some JumpShip bridges have gotten a little... experimental... in their layouts. The idea behind this setup is to facilitate communication between stations.”

Above them, armored shutters slid shut across the windows, cutting off their view of the stars beyond.

Far beneath where the *Silvertongue*'s bridge crew performed their oft-rehearsed routine, a shimmering, almost translucent figure pulled quickly at the service ladder rungs running beside the track of the elevator cart. The chameleon-like sneaksuit wasn't strictly necessary. All the JumpShip's crew should be up in the bulbous fore compartment, not down here with the mess of machinery. Still, just in case some technician had decided to stay behind, better to play it safe and avoid being spotted.

Already, time was running out. The jump process had already been initiated. It wasn't the jump that had the clandestine figure worried, it was more the complication of being caught down here should everything else go as designed. No, it was better to be far away from the engineering section when the K-F drive reached peak charge. Better to be back where the sneaksuit could be safely hidden away and a plausible alibi established.

Reaching the landing for the DropShip docking collar, the figure offered up a silent prayer the way in was clear. To come so close, failure now would just be embarrassing. Moving quickly, the figure slipped through an open hatch.

As the K-F field built in intensity, the *Silvertongue* and the *Felicity Klimkosky* were enveloped in a harsh light. Inside the vessels, time seemed to stretch on, though only a few minutes could have passed. On the bridge, Captain Mawsley acknowledged a series of all-clears from her subordinates. The JumpShip was prepared to make the jump through hyperspace. At this point, the process was entirely automatic. Only the failsafe systems could prevent the journey now. In an instant, the ship would disappear from the space around Valexa and instantly re-appear 28 light-years away above the Almach system, deeper in Federated Suns territory.

Far to the stern, deep in the engineering section, a small sensor noted the electrical charge being dumped into the K-F boom reach a particular level. At this point, the sensor sent a small charge to a block of C8 plastic explosive tucked up between the K-F Initiator and a bulkhead for a helium seal. The small bomb exploded with a sharp crack that sent a shudder through the entire structure of the ship. On the bridge, subdued voices turned to panic as warning lights flared across console displays.

The bomb had not been intended to destroy, but to cripple. The intent had only been to

knock out the K-F Drive Initiator and prevent the JumpShip from entering hyperspace in the first place. It should have worked. The failsafe systems should have activated and the K-F field dissipated. Instead, the field wavered, flickered, and then rapidly built again. The *Silvertongue* disappeared in a bright flash.

Aboard the JumpShip, only moments had passed. Warning klaxons blared as warning lights flashed. All their sensors and computers indicated that the jump had taken place, but something still did not sit right. Something had certainly gone wrong. Captain Mawsley barked out orders, trying to call upon her crew's experience to stave off panic.

The helmsman activated the navigational sensors. It would take at least half a minute for the computer to scan the stars and constellations to determine their location. In the meantime, Mawsley ordered the armored shutters on the windows opened. She unstrapped from her console and pushed off, floating up to the ceiling. She knew it wouldn't help to determine their position or their situation. It was more psychological than anything. She steadied herself with a hand on the frame of the long window.

Her face turned pale as she muttered a curse under her breath. She turned to face the tangle of crew and computers beneath her "Flight control! Get your sensors online, and calculate an orbital burn!" The helmsman hesitated, processing the strange order, then acknowledged.

Tartaglia noticed the tinge of panic in the other Captain's voice. He unstrapped from his seat and pushed off to join his counterpart by the large window. He expected, perhaps, to see the distant glint of starlight off a Capellan warship awaiting their arrival. What he saw instead sent ice through his veins. There, surrounded by the faint points of stars, was a planet. A shining blue and green jewel, half shrouded in shadow and swirled with white clouds.

"Impossible" he whispered.

A hyperspace jump could only be performed between regions of space with suitably low gravity. Too close to a star's massive gravity well and the K-F field would fail to form. Normally, JumpShips operated from points high above or below the orbital plane; far enough out that the star's pull didn't disrupt the field. It was possible to jump to a point closer in by aiming for transient Lagrangian points where the gravities of planets and moons served to counteract and neutralize the star's gravitational pull. Such jumps required precise knowledge of the target starsystem and careful planning. Yet, somehow, the *Silvertongue* seemed to have found such a point nestled some 60,000 kilometers above a silvery grey moon, around which they were now orbiting, and the beautiful green and blue planet. It would have been a feat any JumpShip navigator would have been proud of—if it had only been done on purpose.

Mawsley shook her head. What they had just done was impossible, *should* have been impossible. And yet, there before her, hovering on her holographic display, was undeniable proof. It was a lovely planet, with large seas and lush continents. What's more, where the land

lay in the shadow on the darkened side, there were the unmistakable twinkling lights of inhabited settlements. They were very faint, they had almost missed them if not for computerized image analysis and a sharp-eyed bridge officer. There was only one thing those points of light could mean: civilization. Wherever in the galaxy they were, there were people down there, and where there were people there was hope of rescue and repair.

“Is it Almach?” Tartaglia asked over her shoulder.

The navigation officer shook her head “Almach doesn’t have a large moon like this, and has more surface water.”

“Then where are we?”

Mawsley answered for her subordinate “Navigational sensors are having trouble getting a fix. In the meantime, I’m more concerned about the damage to my ship.”

The ship’s technician team had been combing through the engineering section for the source of the shudder they had all felt—the shudder they all suspected as the culprit behind their misjump. So far they hadn’t found any damage to the drive itself—news which was most welcome—but a helium seal had broken, pouring supercooled helium out from around the K-F boom. The drive would be inoperable at least until the seal could be repaired and the helium coolant replaced.

The communications officer, a nervous young man, requested to speak. Normally on edge, their current predicament had him even more flustered. His words tumbled over each other, “We’ve been, uh, broadcasting a distress signal for a while now, but, um.” He paused, unsure how to continue. Mawsley tried to calm him down, entreating him to breathe and relax. Squeezing his eyes shut, he forced himself to enunciate, “I’ve been scanning for chatter on all channels to try and get an idea of where we are.”

“Very good,” Mawsley prompted him.

“Well, you see, I’m not picking up anything. No comms of any kind.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that, ma’am. No radio, no HPG pulses, nothing. This system sounds completely empty.”

“Are we not receiving?”

The young man shook his head, “No, comms are fine. I ran the diagnostic five times, and we’re picking up the proper background radiation. There’s nothing out there.”

Mawsley looked again at the faint twinkling lights on the planet’s nightward side. “Well,

someone's down there.”

Tartaglia scratched at his mustache, “A lot of systems are pretty backwater. If we’re somewhere in the Periphery or the Davion Outback, there’s probably not a lot of chatter to start with.”

Mawsley nodded, “Those lights are awfully faint. Those settlements are probably pretty small.” She turned to face the lanky DropShip captain floating behind her, “What do you say, Edgar? Care to take your little boat down and take a look for me?”

Tartaglia smiled “Sounds fine to me. Care to join us? Stretch your legs dirt-side?”

Mawsley shook her head, “No, my crew needs to stay up here and repair the *Silvertongue*.” She noted the concern on his face “Don’t worry, we have supplies to last several months, and I’ll send someone with you to explain what we need to finish repairs.”

Tartaglia nodded. “We’ll de-couple immediately.” He stared at the holographic representation of the planet hovering before him. Where in Kerensky’s name were they?

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