

Elysium's Awakening

The Prequel To The Elysium Chronicles

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CHAPTER 2

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“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Looks can be deceiving, ma’am. It’s already killed two exploratory teams.”

Karen Mulholland turned away from the window to regard her executive officer, ramrod straight and staring into the middle distance.

“Once a security officer, *always* a security officer,” she said. “Those exploratory teams didn’t deserve what happened to them.”

The exec nodded sombrely. “Agreed.”

“Well, I’m glad of your presence. I don’t know where this ship would be without you, Commander, and that’s a fact. I don’t know where *I’d* be without you. You’re an asset to us scientists. We can be rather single-minded in our pursuit of knowledge; we *should* be single-minded, because knowledge deserves to be found. But we need to remember from time to time that the road to knowledge is often paved with danger.”

Sara May half-smiled and inclined her head in awkward thanks.

“I appreciate it, Captain, but I’m just one woman in a team. We’re all in this together. I was far more ... rigid in my thinking before I transferred here. I’ve learnt a lot about the shades of grey we’ve got in the world. I can protect you and the crew more effectively because I understand how you think. It helps me do my job ... and, I’ll admit, it’s opened my mind.”

Mulholland nodded in agreement, but it was all she could do to not roll her eyes. Her exec still couldn’t take a compliment without dismissing it in some way. And it certainly *was* a compliment. Both had been unsure of the other when May joined the crew a couple of years before, after Mulholland’s previous executive officer and security chief had been killed in a tragic accident on an exploratory mission.

We weren’t careful enough, and we should have been, she thought. *We ... I made a mistake, and I made my second when I argued against you being my new deputy. Now I’m continually gratefully that you keep us on track ... we could have lost more down on this planet if it hadn’t been for your expert training.*

Mulholland – like the majority of the crew on one of the fleet’s few science vessels (warships being seen as more valued in seeking out worlds and subjugating them) – was a scientist through and through. May’s career, on the other hand, had been focused entirely on security operations and military policy. They had ended up discussing their philosophical differences over a whiskey on May’s second night on the ship, and both had had ample opportunity since to prove themselves to each other. Mulholland had quickly come to realise that they had complementary skills, and she hoped – no, suspected – that May thought the same. They were a good, solid team.

Mulholland smiled and, to cover her momentary embarrassment at having lost herself in a deep recess of her own memory, turned to look out the window again. From their current orbit, the captain could see the north-eastern portion of Pangea. The azure-blue sea glittered against the sun, and was cut only by island dots and wisps of cloud.

“Isn’t it stunning?” she said over her shoulder. “I can’t help but keep looking at it.”

“It’s ... absorbing, yes. But dangerous as well.”

“A world without any sapient beings shouldn’t be that savage. But its species’ took our crew mates’ lives, and I’ll never forgive myself for that. We didn’t know what we were going into.”

“That’s why the first expeditionary team should have had more than one guard with it.” May sounded passionate now. “I know they were going to a relatively isolated area, but we rushed ahead of ourselves, ma’am, if you don’t mind my saying. Some more prep time wouldn’t have hurt.”

Mulholland wheeled round again. “A security detail didn’t do any good for the second team.”

“It would have given them a fighting chance,” May noted. She had regained her composure, her tone calm again. “I want both teams to come in here now like nothing happened, but it *has*. We need to explore the world in more detail from up here so this doesn’t happen again.”

Mulholland released a slow, thoughtful breath; she couldn’t argue the point. Despite being a science ship, her security team were amongst the best-trained in the fleet; May had seen to that. Mulholland was grateful to the exec for increasing their rigour and discipline, allowing the ship to explore a wider range of different worlds – including Elysium – more safely. That was why she had sent down two teams in quick succession to the world below them; she had forgotten, in the excitement of discovery, that her crew weren’t immortal. Life in the Outmarches had promised to be dangerous and, given the deniable aspect of their mission, there wouldn’t be any

back-up along the way. They didn't know what they would find during the course of their long exploration – maybe even the Rixxians on their own secret missions.

And I don't ever want that to happen, she thought. *That'll start something that certainly wouldn't end here.*

She bit her lip and studied the planet again. The two of them were in her ready room, just off the compact bridge of the *Ulysses*. They'd been in orbit for two days now, having first detected this world on long-range sensors three months ago. Whilst it had looked intriguing, they hadn't come straight here; after all, they were on a careful, four-year study of the Outmarches, the first by the Republic in nearly a century, and the captain had wanted to take her time. They weren't quite half-way through their mission yet, and Mulholland knew better than to bounce around from place to place just for the hell of it. Elysium was interesting, but not *so* interesting that she would authorise jumping here ahead of schedule.

They had started by barraging the planet with as many scans and probes as they could, and they had a *lot* of sensors at their disposal. A highly advanced science ship such as the *Ulysses* could examine a world in a thousand different ways before sending a single member of the crew down to carry out more precise measurements. That didn't mean, of course, that her crew hadn't pressured her, from the moment they had pulled into orbit, to allow them to get down planet-side and get stuck in. Mulholland had resisted for the first day or so before indulgently giving in and allowing them free reign; she conceded to having become carried away with their enthusiasm.

Some had never returned, and Mulholland had reeled from the shock of their deaths – acutely feeling the impact of every single one – and she had agreed, in a moment of weakness, to send down a second team to find out what had happened. Their portable sensors had been smashed in the struggle with the world's native wildlife, and Mulholland wasn't leaving without answers. In any case, they had a tradition when exploring a new world; their scouts always helped to supplement their still-healthy food reserves with local delicacies, and the captain had been keen for the logistics teams to work their magic.

But those risks hadn't paid off, and *she* was accountable. The captain always was, and she accepted that, but she suspected that Sara May felt it as well. Responsibility for defending the scientists had fallen to her guards, and they had failed on two separate occasions. Mulholland looked at her now, and noticed that the exec was looking out the window; her shoulders slumped

and a slight redness in her cheeks. She blinked and suddenly seemed to pull herself out of her reverie as she swallowed. As she looked at Mulholland, her eyes set hard again.

“Will you write to the families?” she asked.

Mulholland nodded. “Of course. I’d never give that up.”

“I’d like to add a personal note to the families of the security teams, if you have no objections?”

“I’d expect nothing less.” Mulholland expelled a breath and slumped back down into her chair. “So we’re back to sensors and unmanned drones for a while. I don’t want to send any more teams down there until we know precisely what we’re dealing with. We can’t just keep throwing people at the problem; we’ll run out of crew before that world runs out of threats.”

“You’re right.” May sat in the visitor’s chair across from the captain. “I’m actually working on a potential solution to that with the engineering team.”

“Personal shields?” Mulholland asked. “The chief mentioned it to me when he was up here with the energy depletion levels.”

“Personal shields,” May repeated. She gave a faint, grim smile. “If anyone can make them work, Josh Mallek can. We’re moving this from priority three to priority one.”

“Well done,” the captain said. “I know part of the problem has always been making the energy packs small enough, so if Mallek can get around the problem, then I’ll make sure he gets that raise I’ve been promising him for a while. Let me know if you need any extra resources thrown at it.”

“Don’t worry, Captain, we’ll make it work. By the by, I had an excitable message from Dr Fairfield. He was due to be next down to the planet, but in the meantime, he’s been studying life signs on the continent, I think. I couldn’t entirely follow everything he was saying. Can you shed any light on what he’s found?”

Deputy Chief Science Officer Henry Fairfield specialised in anthropology. He had a tendency to get rather excited when he found something that he was passionate about, often speaking at high speeds as his brain got carried away with itself.

“He caught me about an hour ago,” the captain said. “Shortly before he left you that message. As it turns out, there’s a bipedal species living on Pangea. They’re mostly localised in the north-east corner of the continent. Fairfield thinks they have a lot of potential.”

May’s eyes widened. “Bipedal? Are they conscious? In the same way we are, I mean?”

“No, but they *are* intelligent. Fairfield won’t be able to tell much more until he gets down there, but he’s been following them around with unmanned drones for the past day. His capacity to work out how communities integrate is well beyond my ability to comprehend, but he’s managed to work out that they seem to have Neanderthal-equivalent levels of intelligence. They fashion basic clothes appropriate to the weather, and use tools to kill food, defend themselves, and so on. Oh, and get this – they’re green.”

“Green?”

“As in their skin is as green as a plant stem. It’s absolutely fascinating. Imagine what evolutionary chain they must have followed to have reached – what?” she added, as May chuckled.

“You can take the captain out of the Science Division ...”

Mulholland laughed. “Point taken,” she said. “Well, I can understand Dr Fairfield’s excitement. He probably hasn’t even realised it, but he gets naming rights on the species. They’re now the Fairfields. The good doctor gets his name recorded for posterity.” She turned to look out the window again. “Mind you, he may get a species named after him, but I get to name the planet.”

“What have you decided on?”

“Elysium.”

“I don’t recognise the word,” the exec said thoughtfully. “Is it a human one?”

“I’m surprised at you, Commander,” Mulholland said, looking at her with raised eyebrows. “It’s from Greek mythology. Elysium was the place where heroes went after death. The literal meaning is to be deeply stirred from joy.” She pointed down to the planet. “Look at that view and tell me that it doesn’t stir that kind of emotion in you. At the very least, doesn’t it make you hope that the afterlife looks something like that?”

The captain couldn’t suppress the twinge of satisfaction. She’d never had the opportunity to name a planet before, so she was savouring the chance now that the *Ulysses* had found something not yet pinned to a map by the Imperial Astronomical Agency.

One of just nine science vessels in the Praetorian Guard, the *Ulysses* and its siblings were always busy. Mulholland hadn’t been about to complain about such a long scientific mission, even one as off-the-record as this, when it had been *her* ship selected for the mission. It gave her

the opportunity to at least *pretend* they were free for a few years, and undertake some proper scientific research for a while.

Her first love had always been science, and her ability to navigate the Republic's political waters had meant she had been given command of the *Ulysses* six years ago at the tender age of just 27. She and May were the same age, but her exec was more gung-ho and ready to leap where angels feared to tread. Some of that had rubbed off on the captain, and she hoped that some of her thoughtful, scientific mind was rubbing off on May.

Mulholland saw May's eyes were unfocused; she had drifted off as she watched the planet slowly rotate on its axis. The captain clicked her fingers and May blinked, bringing her back into the room. The exec cleared her throat.

"Sorry, ma'am."

"Where were you?"

"Ma'am?"

"In your head, Commander. Where were you just then?"

"I didn't realise I—" May stumbled, "I was just thinking about ... To tell the truth, Captain, I was thinking about life and how it's evolved so differently on so many worlds. It's fascinating."

"Now *that's* an exciting thought," Mulholland replied, nodding sagely. An impish smile touched the corners of her mouth as she considered the wide-eyed look that was still at least partly visible on the exec's face, despite the flush in her cheeks. "Science still hasn't found all the answers about that yet. In a way, I'm glad; I'd be bored if we knew everything. It's nice to see you taking such an interest in those types of questions."

May looked down at her feet and frowned. "I apologise for being distracted," she muttered quietly. "It won't happen again."

"I hope it does," Mulholland said, waving the apology away. She breathed a sigh of relief as May looked back up at her and raised a quizzical eyebrow. "It's okay to be distracted from time to time, especially when that distraction means that you're being curious about the world around us. That's part of what makes all of us human ... even cast-iron military types like you."

She grinned and, after a moment, May smiled as well and shook her head. Mulholland chuckled, pleased to see the smile, and then unzipped her uniform collar half an inch or so, as a motion to indicate they were speaking more informally now. She rested the chin of her elfin face gently on her hand.

“So now we know just how dangerous Elysium is,” May said, bringing the conversation back to Elysium, “what do you propose we do next? Do we just leave well alone, or do we indulge Dr Fairfield and the others? This world certainly seems to have captured their imagination.”

“It’s certainly the most ... lethal planet I’ve encountered in a long time. I’d like to do some more aerial surveys, back it up with some underwater surveillance, and then ... well, we see if there’s any useful minerals the Republic can use while we continue the rest of the study.”

She could *hear* the edge in her own voice, but she didn’t even attempt to hide it. Normally, she would watch her tone, as any good captain would (and should) –, and she *certainly* would watch it in front of the crew. But right now, she was talking to her exec in private, and she knew that it was okay to let off some steam. She could trust May not to go running off to the Imperial Political Office to report her slightly heretical thoughts.

Edgardo was just as bad as his predecessors with regards to his view of the science fleet’s purpose; he saw them as existing to find new worlds and civilisations, and only asked three things when one was discovered. Could it be mined for its wealth? Could it be settled on? Could it be neutralised by force if necessary?

Why can’t a world just be there?

May pursed her lips as she crossed her arms over her chest, then shrugged.

“We live or die from the minerals we get from the worlds out there ... out *here*.”

Mulholland fixed her with a steely glare, and May returned it levelly. May was still concerned about what Command thought of her; she was ambitious, so was always careful about her wording – or, to be more exact, careful when there was the chance her opinions could be overheard. If a Command spy was on board – certainly not unheard of – then placing a bug in the captain’s ready room wasn’t outside the realm of possibility. The captain, however, no longer cared what Command thought about her. A science captain was a valuable resource, and so she had a certain latitude that her second-in-command lacked, especially if May valued her career path and wanted to become a captain herself one day.

“You don’t believe that imperial crap any more than I do,” Mulholland retorted. “We’re a science vessel, not a mining craft. We should be seeking out new worlds for pure scientific value, not for their mineral or animal wealth.”

May gave a short, sharp nod. She *did* agree, there was no disputing that, but her eyes flicked up to the sound recorder above their head. It was set to record for purely internal use, but if that was ever leaked by a bug in the system...

The two officers usually saved these conversations for the privacy of one of their quarters over a late-night drink. At least there, the recorders could more easily be switched off. One of the privileges of rank. Mulholland, however, was feeling rather rebellious. She had just lost members of her crew to a world that they hadn't yet even *begun* to understand, and she was soon going to be writing to their families to break the news to them. *That* was what was important.

"You know what I *do* believe?" May said. "That we'll get to the true scientific value of Elysium before very long. Perhaps we'll even convince Command of that value as well. It might set a new trend, don't you think?"

A smile danced across her eyes, and she glanced again at the sound recorder. Her comments were certainly going to be usefully neutral in one context, but Mulholland could read between the lines – as well as read straight through the smile on May's face.

"I certainly hope so," she said. "You know, I rather like the logic of your argument, Sara May. We'll make a scientist of you, I'm sure of it."

May's grin broadened. "Good luck trying, Captain. I admire your persistence."

Mulholland rolled her eyes, then glanced at her computer. It whirled gently in the background; clearly some data from the science chiefs being uploaded for her to review, and the familiar butterflies fluttered upwards in her stomach. She wanted to see what the initial scans and close-contact fly-bys were saying. This really *was* one of the best parts of her job.

"Well," she said, "let's get this review started, shall we? Command will want to see our analysis before very long, so we'd better know what the hell we're talking about if we want to convince them it's interesting, with or without any minerals."