

Ven

by Barry Sherwood

The Imperium is eternal. Four words etched, worn, or flown throughout the interplanetary Government that now spanned dozens of worlds. Adopted over a thousand years ago the creed served to remind Humanity the cost of exploration. One hundred thousand families set out from Earth aboard generational ships. Their goal was simple. Find new worlds suitable for long term colonization. Thousands of ships ventured into the darkness, yet many were lost to the cold abyss of space. Some explorers successfully ended their search, set roots, and declared new colonies. One ship called the Children of Abraham discovered an alien Humanoid species in the Ventus star system.

A majority of the Ven population lived on Ventus II, yet different variations of the same species were on all seven planets in the system. Unlike Humanity the Ven were a primitive species technologically inferior in every conceivable way. They were far from space faring, but that only added to the mystery of how the Ven occupied all seven worlds. Unfortunately, for the Ven, Humanities priorities shifted when scientists discovered the naive purple skinned race held

the key to faster than light travel within their genetic makeup. Scientists figured out that a deceased Ven body, or biomass, produced enormous amounts of a rare yet exotic radiation during its decomposition process. Humans tried to maintain their ethical high ground but eventually even those lines became blurred, to satisfy the ever-growing demand for clean energy.

Present Day, Ventus II, Imperium Vessel Pantheon, Class Destroyer

Teresa Westscott, an Imperium Admiral, stood at the center of the engineering section aboard her vessel. While engineers continued their daily tasks in the background, she remained motionless as she stared at a large circular reactor tank. Contemplating her forty-year career within the Imperium, she gazed upon a collection of meat and bones within the tank. Every time she gazed upon the Ven remains, she couldn't help but think of her daughter Elizabeth, an active anti-Imperium activist back on Earth. While the Admiral spent decades serving the overbearing Imperium Government, her daughter did everything she could to undermine the totalitarian regime. *What could I have done differently*, she thought. A blur of her own reflection stared back at her in judgement from the tanks two-inch glass.

A door on the other side of the deck whooshed open. The iconic squeaks of Captain Brennen's freshly polished boots became all too familiar. Eager to make solid long-lasting impressions the newly commissioned officer briskly walked across the engineering section. He only acknowledged engineers or scientists who crossed his path, and he made it a point to reach the Admiral as soon as possible. He approached from behind the Admiral. Her ears pinpointed

his location on the deck as his squeaks slowed to a halt. His blurry outline appeared on the tank as he stood patiently waiting at attention.

“Admiral, an unscheduled interplanetary courier arrived this morning. We received word that the newly elected Prime Minister Adar is on his way to inspect the status of our harvesting operations. According to the update he should arrive within hours. I’ve ordered the crew to begin standard ceremonial procedures in preparation for his arrival. Along with the alert we received a priority message that I have transferred to your personal archives,”

“Thank you for the update. Carry on,” She waited a moment as the captain gave the traditional salute. A quick head nod while simultaneously he thumped his fist on his chest just over his heart. She allowed his reflection to evaporate while he removed himself from the deck. The Admiral suspected that Adar was not pleased with the recent update from Ventus. The Pantheon being the second ship to leave the system empty handed did not bold well for them. Since it had been nearly two hundred years since an elected official traveled to the distant star system of Ventus. It could only mean one thing, disciplinary action. She remained silent as her mind played out multiple scenarios, but soon she was interrupted by a small alert that displayed within her ocular contact lens. Winking twice with her right eye, a retinal scanner examined her eye to confirm her identity before the message opened.

We regretfully inform you that your daughter Elizabeth Westscott was tragically lost during an Anti-Imperium rally. The Imperium extends its deepest condolences to you and your family. - The Imperium is eternal

Tears streamed down her face. She placed her hand against the tank, her head hung low between her shoulder blades. A moment denial passed as a dull whimper followed. She began to beat the side of the tank with her fist. Crew rushed to the closest exits as her cries only intensified with each passing moment. By the end her cries evolved into an animalistic scream before her legs gave out and she collapsed to the ground.

Pantheon, Hangar Bay

Several hours had passed. Her eyes still swollen and red from the devastating news. Every ounce of her wanted to crawl into bed for days, but the Admiral had no choice but to maintain her composure. She stood at the head of sixty men and women, dressed in ceremonial attire. By this time, everyone knew Adar would arrive in short order. Across the hangar bay, personnel not needed to display traditional formalities were ordered to continue their daily tasks. A loom of unexpected anticipation lingered in the air. No one knew what to expect. She lightly tapped just behind her right ear which briefly activated a subdermal communication implant.

“Open the hangar.”

Metal cracked and shifted as powerful pistons unlocked. An ear popping hiss reverberated throughout the hangar as air steadily gushed through a small one-centimeter crack that cut the large hangar door in half. It lasted only seconds before a bright blue line illuminated the growing swath. A two-person operations team in a command room attached to the ceiling continued to open the hangar revealing the blackness of space. Chatter amongst the soldiers behind the Admiral grew as a thin transparent blue shield was all that protected them from

certain death. Out in the darkness a blanket of white speckled stars provided a false sense of stillness. Accustomed to space travel the crew within the hangar appeared unimpressed as they continued with mundane tasks. The large metal doors clanged as they disappeared into the side walls of the hangar.

A bright white vortex appeared in the distance. *Here we go*, thought the Admiral. Only a moment passed before the hyperspace vortex disappeared. In its wake, a silver ship sped on course for the Pantheon. Despite emerging from hyperspace, a considerable distance from the ship, Adar's executive transport vessel closed the distance in mere minutes. For anyone unaccustomed to docking protocols, one would think it had intended on ramming the much larger vessel. However, only seconds from impact it decelerated at unimaginable speeds before it slowly transitioned through the thin shield membrane. Even before the submarine sized transport passed completely through the shield the Admiral turned to her soldiers.

"Attention!" Once the formation was quiet, ready, and waiting she turned back around. The small transport cruiser steadily lowered itself. A magnetic ping echoed when landing struts contacted the metallic deck. All eyes, including non-essential personnel stared at the transport. A single elongated ramp unraveled from the bottom of the ship. Only five minutes passed, but to those in attendance it felt like hours. In two rows twelve elite Praetorian's, a special administrative class of soldier, descended the ramp. Unlike the naval soldiers who wore formal attire for the illustrious event, each of the elite guard wore full body armor. Not only did they look formidable, but each were equipped with long swords and a built-in retractable shield attached to their arms. At the direct center of the two-column formation Adar arrogantly walked unincumbered. Once he reached the bottom of the ramp, he stopped and peered around.

Adar took several steps forward, “at ease. It appears word travels faster than hyperspace these days.”

“It is my pleasure to welcome you aboard the Pantheon, we’ve taken the liberty to prepare quarters for your visit. After you’ve rested, we’ve prepared an itinerary followed by an officer’s dinner later tonight,”

“Thank you, but quarters aboard will not be necessary. I’d like to proceed with the itinerary immediately,”

Pantheon, Engineering Section

Time flew by as the Admiral escorted Adar throughout the ship. She had never met the man directly. The few times she was back in the Earth’s star system, his face popped up a few times on general solar broadcasts during his campaign. He was charismatic, confident, and attractive, at least by societies standards. Although, he asked many questions about the ship, their progress, and crew morale. Her gut screamed at her that he was holding back. During her extended career it was very rare to meet any political officials, those she had spoke with were less than interested in mundane military assignments. Harvesting Ven was as menial as it came. Usually, questions revolved around pirates or illegal prospectors trying to snatch up a Ven for black market distribution. However, it was obvious Adar was deliberately avoiding any topics of contention, to include harvesting operations, or lack thereof.

“Last but not least, our engineering section. Commissioned only two years ago the Pantheon’s energy processing facilities are still considered the best in the fleet,” said the Admiral. Followed by only a single Praetorian, Adar walked the long rectangular deck as she trailed a few feet behind. Scientists and engineers throughout the deck miserably failed to appear busy as Adar examined the three tanks, two of which were completely empty. He circled the last nearly depleted tank.

“Admiral. With only weeks left in your harvesting assignment how many Ven do you anticipate will be captured?”

“I have teams working around the clock planet side, we’d like to capture a dozen or so Ven,”

“The Imperium dispatched you here nine months ago, according to your own reports, you’ve failed to find even a single Ven,”

“May I speak freely?”

Adar smirked as he stood before the Admiral, “No, you may not. After recent events back on Earth. It’s been decided to recall the Pantheon and her crew back effective immediately.”

“Recent events?”

“According to Imperium records, your daughter, a known anti-Imperium activist was recently killed during a protest while trying to subvert the Imperium. It stands to reason that your judgement may be clouded, hopefully by grief.”

“My daughter was-”

“I’m not finished. Upon your return, you will formally and graciously resign. Anything other than full compliance will be viewed as deliberate insubordination and possibly sedition. Dismissed.” A few moments passed. Her mind raced with dangerous thoughts. She considered bum-rushing the Praetorian, disarming him while simultaneously using the Praetorian sword to cut down Adar.

“I said, dismissed, Admiral.”

“Yes sir,” she replied. With an about face all eyes from the deck tracked her movement. Once in the corridor and a few paces from the door, she leaned against the wall. With watery eyes she bit her lip as her heart pounded. A voice pierced the feeling of shame and eerie silence from behind her ear,

“Ma’am, this is engineer Becker, we just finished standard inspections on the Prime Ministers transport, he should be good to go.” A cold yet calculated plan began to form in her mind. She tapped behind her ear and a devious smile replaced her shame-stricken face, “well done Becker, but I need you to do something for me.”

Pantheon, Hangar Bay

By days end word of Adar’s open transgression against the Admiral traveled faster than the clap in a colonial brothel. The tension in the air was palpable almost tangible. It hung in the air much like odor in an over-used gym locker room. To the surprise of most of the soldiers in attendance. The Admiral walked with distinction and confidence despite the rumors of her

imminent resignation. Many had assumed she'd skip Adar's official exodus ceremony. Even Adar was surprised to see her. Adar entered the hangar escorted by four Praetorians. He had rightfully assumed some sort of retaliatory response by the very seasoned Admiral. Crew across the hangar watched unsure what was about to happen as Praetorians stacked around Adar near the bottom of the ramp.

"Thank you, Adar, for your visit. It was both informative and I'm sure it inspired the entire crew."

"Of course, I suspect seeing true competence onboard would be inspiring." Eyes widened throughout the formation of soldiers behind the Admiral. There was no doubt in the Admiral's mind that Adar wanted to goad a response from her. While her eyes remained steadfast on Adar, her peripheral vision saw Praetorian's maintain a firm grasp on their swords.

"Indeed, we wish you safe travels back to Earth."

"Admiral. Please ensure that your men and women planet side quickly return. As you know, you are on the clock."

"Of course, my captain is already recalling troops from the planet, I suspect we will be ready to return to Earth in three days."

"Good, I look forward to it." Two of the nearest Praetorian's stood immobile. Both appeared ready for the Admiral to attempt some sort of attack. The remaining Praetorians formed two columns before Adar finally turned and ascended the ramp.

“Oh, one more thing, before I forget. Unfortunately, we’ve decided to take a more aggressive stance on anti-Imperium rhetoric. It’s been decided to lift the standard protocols when it comes to traditional burials to minimize the potential for any martyrdom. Therefore, we’ve been cremating and efficiently disposing the ashes of anyone found guilty of inciting or provoking anti-Imperium actions. This includes your daughter’s body. I hope you understand.” Adar soon disappeared into the transport. Minutes later the ship exited the hangar bay.

“Ma’am, we’re ready to lock up the hangar doors,” spouted one of the soldiers in her earpiece from the ceiling control room.

“Standby,” she replied.

Taking his seat, the interior of the transport vessel looked more like a modern-day passenger plane. Unlike traditional transports each seat was specially designed for comfort with plenty of legroom like one for a first-class passenger. Adar removed his black gloves before he aggressively tossed them onto a nearby shelf attached to the side of his seat.

“Once we’re in communication range of Earth, I want a secure line to the fleet commandant. She must think I’m a fool if I’m going to give her days to return, I want that bitch replaced immediately even if they must jettison her from the airlock of her own ship!”

“Yes sir,” replied one of the praetorians. Across the transport ships intercoms one of three pilots updated Adar, “Sir, we will be transitioning to hyperspace in three, two, one...wait what the!” Just as the cruiser activated its hyperdrive engine the transport exploded.

“Alright, now you can close the hangar doors,” whispered the Admiral.

Earth

Three days had passed since the death of Adar. Within the hour of the announcement hundreds of thousands of protestors marched against the Imperium on dozens of planets. At first Imperium officials tried to keep a lid on anti-Imperium protests, but with lack of leadership and guidance, Imperium forces began to gun down men, women, and children. At a makeshift triage hospital both Imperium and anti-Imperium forces could be seen scattered around. Those with non-critical injuries were patched up before sent on their way while beds were reserved on a case-by-case basis. The few wall-mounted televisions that miraculously survived the vibrations of both Imperium and anti-Imperium bombings displayed repeating news media. While surviving Imperium public servants called for calm, media continued to report as best they could on both the war effort and severe energy shortages throughout the settled worlds.

A young man, in his early twenties wearing a tattered and dirty Imperium security uniform pushed his way through the makeshift hospital ward. Although, he wore the uniform, his semi-long hair and face scruff made it obvious that he wasn't enlisted in the Imperium.

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth! Hold on, I'm almost there!" He attempted to shout over the wailing children and coughs of those still suffering the effects of tear gas recently used to disperse a group of unarmed protestors.

"Tom? What's going on? How did I get here?" Elizabeth laid covered in a slightly dusty white blanket with a puzzled look.

“How do you feel? Are you okay? What do you remember? So much has happened, I don’t even know where to start!”

“I feel sore. What happened?”

“Well, you were shot, a lot. Honestly, I wasn’t sure if you were going to make it. Doctors said they did the best they could, but with everything going on I couldn’t stay to find out.

“Why did they start shooting?”

“Oh snap, no one’s told you, have they?”

“Told me what?” replied Elizabeth.

“It’s your mom! Oh my god, I can’t believe you don’t know! Your mom killed the Prime Minister. Hell, she’s declared a one-woman war against the Imperium.”

“Wait, my mom? She was as tight assed as they came. Nothing was above service.”

“No seriously, we’re still fuzzy on the details, but what we do know is she unilaterally attacked the Pluto shipyards. I don’t mean just one, I mean all twelve. According to classified reports we’ve managed to find. She dropped out of hyperspace. Then bam! She nuked’em all. By the time defense ships knew what was happening, she was gone.”

“Why? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, whatever the reason, ships, troops, and people are flocking behind her. You always wished she understood why you joined the movement. Apparently, she’s now the face of the movement.”

“Where is she now?”

“Last we heard she managed to rally a group of heavily armed combat ships and a shit ton of soldiers. Some are setting up blockades in orbit of military strongholds while others are carrying out raids of Imperium loyalist facilities.”

The End.