

THE ARKSHIP ULYSSES

DELETED SCENE #1: The Black Sea

The following scene takes place during what is now Chapter 24: The Metapath. Due to a major shift in the order of story events between this book and its sequel, the events of this scene now play out very differently in the final cut. We enter the scene in media res following Stuart and Susan witnessing a meeting between the senior staff.

"They're playing at something," the woman declared.

"What makes you say that?"

"They're always playing at something. First the Hathaways. Then the Gull-Fossets. Now both together. Time was, House Sullivan was strong enough to stand against such antics. But now it's just the Captain left." She sighed and shook her head. "I don't know what their game is, but I fear we're seeing real insurrection in progress here. Step by step, the Sullivans are coming down."

Stuart didn't see it himself, but he wasn't about to contradict her. "Time was the Leightons could stand against them both."

"Once," she allowed. She cast a sidelong look at Stuart. "But I heard the Leightons were all gone now. Captain Ramiel Sullivan cast them down."

"One still remains."

"Is that so? A ghost, is it?"

"More like a memory."

She nodded to herself. "I know exactly what you mean."

She was silent for a time after that. Then, suddenly, she waved the images in the done away and rose to her feet.

"Come," she said. "I want to show you something."

Stuart followed leaning on her arm for support.

The going was hard and Stuart's arms were trembling before he'd even gone halfway, but the woman urged him onwards and to his surprise she didn't seem to mind the extra weight as she helped him along that plush corridor one step at a time, round a corner and down another.

He was so focussed on his steps that when the woman suddenly announced that they were there, it took him completely by surprise.

"The observation deck," she announced and Stuart looked up to find himself standing in the middle of a dream.

A grand gallery stretched ahead of him. Along one wall, at regular intervals, were portraits of the previous Captains dating back to Captain Lawson the First over 500 years ago. Here was Captain Dexter Sullivan, the beloved Captain who had undone much of the damaged caused by the unspoken during the Gellar riots. And here, Captain Ramiel Sullivan, Michael's father, stern faced and glowering off the wall as though Stuart's very presence was an affront to his pride. Michael Sullivan perched at the end of the row, a weak, pathetic thing in comparison. The wall beyond was empty.

Everything in this place was plush and dark blue, decorated tastefully and lit with soft, dim lighting. These rooms, for a certainty weren't abandoned.

"This is the Captain's private looking gallery," the woman explained to him.

"It's amazing," Stuart said, honestly. But it wasn't just the gallery that Stuart spoke of, it was the window - the honest to God window - that stretched above his head, a huge scar of glass that ran the entire length of the gallery. And through it, the stars could be seen twinkling down on them, the vast expanse of the Milkyway and its million billion tiny lights that sent his spine tingling with shock. At the very top of the window, Praxis, their local star, could just be seen, a tiny white light no bigger than a fingernail.

"It's amazing," he said at last, though the word barely did the sight justice.

"This used to be my favourite part of the ship," the woman confessed. "In my youth, I spent a lot of time naming some of these stars - those that didn't have names anyway. They were my friends. I talked to them. Drew constellations out of them and gave them all personalities. Like the ancients did, I guess, when they named their pantheon of gods. But then one day, one of those friends Wasted on me and after that I didn't feel like doing it anymore."

"So many..." Stuart said, his gaze lingering.

"But every day fewer."

The Milkyway has lost 4% of its mass since I was last awake, the voice rattled off in his head. Many more, and the whole galaxy could tear itself apart with torque. He saw the mathematics involved in that statement and realised that it was true.

Stuart frowned. That is, assuming dark energy stays constant through Wasting.

Difficult to say, the voice mused. Insufficient data.
Then we should get some.

Yes.

"Most of what we see out there are ghosts," he said aloud. "Remnants of stars that wasted long ago whose light hasn't reached us yet to tell us otherwise. Looking into space is like looking into the past. That's what makes charting the Wasting so hard. We know a few things about it, but never enough. It's always the G and K type stars that go first, we know that. Those with low metalicity. No one knows why."

"We'll never be around to see all of them fade," the woman said.

"No," he agreed.

"We will fade first."

"For sure."

Oddly, that thought seemed to cheer her. "Can I ask you something, Stuart?" she said after a pause.

Stuart only nodded in reply, wondering at the significance of her suddenly using his first name.

"There was something you were saying when you were delirious," she told him. "You said it over and over again. Something about... a sea?"

He froze, an echo of his fever dream flashing into his mind. An image of himself on a boat that was sinking despite his efforts to save it. Of laughter, water and cold. His sister's face bobbing above the waves.

He shuddered.

"It's nothing," he said. "A story I heard when I was little. I've been thinking about it a lot lately."

"As have I. Since you reminded me of it anyway."

That surprised him. "What do you mean?"

"Come," she mocked. "You've seen my dome. Do you really think there's much on this ship I don't know?"

"You're telling me it's a story? One you know?"

She nodded. "Quite a well known one too. I'm surprised you don't know it."

Stuart blinked. "Would you...? That is to say, I'd very much appreciate it if you... uh..."

She almost smiled. "I'm no storyteller," she said but Stuart thought he saw a slight hunger in her eyes as she said it, that same look of quiet desperation he'd seen on the Captain just a few minutes before. She wanted to be needed. She needed to be wanted. The fact that she was neither left this woman at a loss for what to do, drinking her days away because no one was around to care if she did otherwise.

Stuart frowned at that. He wasn't usually the most perceptive of people, but he thought he could read this woman like a blueprint. In many ways, she was just like him.

"I asked a priest about the story a while back, but he didn't seem to know the tale very well."

"No, he wouldn't. It's not exactly in keeping with modern theology."

"My mother used to read it to me, I think. When I was younger. I remember images from it. Nightmares, I think. When I was ill, it was all I could think of. As though my brain were tuned into just one frequency and couldn't let go."

"I can think of worse frequencies to be fixed on."

She regarded him warily and Stuart thought there was a glimmer of appraisal in those dark eyes as they made their way together down that corridor of painted captains and the ghosts of dead stars that twinkled overhead.

"Please," he said.

"Tell me, Mr Leighton, what do you know about the Earth that was?"

Now he was Mr Leighton again. He tried to ignore how strongly that stung him. "It was big," he told her.

"Very big. But did you know that most of it was covered in water? Not drinkable water, though. In fact you would die if you drank too much of it. It was called the sea.

"Long ago, back when our ancestors still lived on the Earth, before the Lord God in His infinite wisdom decided to punish mankind for its sinful ways. Long before our ancestors

were building ships like the Ulysses, when we still scabbled in the dirt for a living, and all the world was like the agricultural district... Back then much of the world was like vast open rooms without walls or ceiling, corridors without doors that stretched out endlessly. But the water - the seas - those were the walls that God had set around His world. The boundaries. To pass through those walls, you had to use a different type of ship."

"A boat. Made of wood." He remembered the image from his vision.

She nodded. "Just so. Anyway, there was one group of people back then that lived by the shore of this water. They lived in the shadows of a huge mountain that endlessly spouted noxious gases and life was very hard for them because the waters that surrounded them were very strange. Black, they were, and in them nothing could live and on them nothing floated for long."

"That's impossible," said Stuart.

"Hush, it's a story."

"Then it's not true?"

"Who can say? Some say even the existence of the Earth itself is just something our ancestors made up, though I personally disagree."

Satisfied the interruption was over, the woman continued. "The winds that came off this sea brought with them nothing but disease and death. They scoured the landscape until the soil was barren and dry and yielded nothing but weeds. Daily,

the villagers toiled in the dusty earth, scrabbling in the dust for meagre pickings they'd call food. They were always hungry, always weary with the effort of staying alive through those lean years. Every time they made some headway against the earth, the winds would blow in from the black waters and the land would be scoured clear once again. Everything they had struggled so hard to cultivate would die and they would be forced to start again.

"But they tolerated their harsh existence because it was said that one day a boat would come for them. A great ship that was made of a special material that could remain buoyant on those dark waters would sail through the mist and dock at that barren peninsula. Then it would gather together the faithful few who had survived, take them on board and carry them back across the waves to a land that was rich and bountiful far away from the black seas; a land where water fell from the skies and everywhere was verdant with life.

"Each of the villagers was given a ticket that would guarantee him or her passage on this boat when it finally came. No matter how hard things were for those villagers, no matter how much they starved or the winds from the black waters blighted them, the sheer proof of those tickets was enough for them. One glance at those tiny stubs of card and the villagers felt peace in their hearts that the ship was coming one day and that it would one day save them from their hardship.

"Many years passed. One day, one of the villagers lost his ticket. It was blown out of his pocket while he was working in the fields, settled on the black waters and thus, instantly sank, since nothing could float in those waters.

"`That's it,' he announced. 'There's no point in staying now. Not without my ticket. We may as well just leave this place and take our chances elsewhere.' So he gathered his family together and they headed inland to beyond the mountain where life was said to be a little easier. The soil was still barren and the sun still relentless and fierce, but without the black sea and its toxic winds it would be paradise.

"Before long, other villagers also started to question whether they should wait for the ship.

"`How do we really know this ship is coming?' they asked one another. 'We might have these tickets, true, but how do we know they're real? Someone could have forged them or made them to trick us. There might not be a ship at all. Our children suffer and need food. Who knows how many years they will have to wait for salvation?'

"The villagers saw how poorly off they were, how empty their bellies were and how dead the land around them and they looked inland towards where the others had gone, their hearts filled with jealousy and longing.

"And so, one by one, the villagers faded from that desolate land, crossing the wide mountains to settle in the more hospitable terrain beyond. Years passed and still no ship appeared. Many more of the tickets became lost or damaged,

their original owners long turned to dust. Until it came to pass that there was only one family left on that entire peninsula. And they had only one ticket between them.

"The husband of that family had been given the ticket by his father on his deathbed and it had been passed down father to son for many long generations. In all the world there was nothing more precious to the man than this ticket. He kept it in a box under his bed and every once in a while, whenever the hardships of life got to him, he would steal a glimpse at that faded stub and know that it would all be worthwhile eventually. With that ticket, the man could buy his passage onto the ship and thus, to paradise.

"The rest of his family, however, had a different take on the matter. 'We're the only ones left now,' his wife scolded him one day after yet another meal had passed with little to fill their bellies but dust and stones. 'Why do you cling to this delusion? We should head inland, where the others have gone. There's food there - our family can survive!'

"But the husband was adamant. 'We don't even know for sure if the others are still alive out there. We don't even know if life really is any better inland. All we know for certain is this - there is no sea beyond the mountain. The promised ship will not be able to reach us there when it comes.'

"'But there might not even be a ship!' his wife cried.

"The father refused to listen to her. 'Of course there is a ship,' he said. 'We have the ticket to prove it.'

"A single ticket for a single person. How do we know they'll even take the rest of us when they get here?"

"The woman meant well by her words - she loved her husband dearly - but she was exasperated by his stubbornness. She was tired of seeing her children starve.

"Once again, the husband refused to listen to his wife and she knew that once again they would starve. 'We will persevere,' he told her and that was the end of the discussion.

"That night, the wife crept into her husband's room while he was sleeping and taking the ticket from the box under the bed tore it into tiny fragments which she scattered across the sea. She went back to him afterwards and woke him. When he found out what she had done, he covered his face and wept bitter tears.

"You wicked, sinful woman!' he cried. 'You have shamed me! Leave, if you are so determined to do so. But I shall remain here until the end of my days.'

"His wife was shocked by this reaction. She had been sure that with the ticket gone, her husband would start to see sense. She broke down and sobbed before him. She pleaded with him to come with her. 'The ship won't take you, even if it comes!' she reasoned. 'You have no ticket anymore!'

"But the man was adamant. 'I don't need a ticket!' he declared. 'They will take me, because I am the only one left!'

"And so the man stayed. Though his family left and his people left; though the ground was barren and could barely

support life; though he had no ticket to call his own, the man stayed behind in solitude on that peninsula. And many years passed."

There was a stretch of silence that seemed to go on forever. The woman closed her eyes and Stuart, baffled, just hauled himself upright against the plush wall and waited for something more.

"And...?" he demanded.

She cracked an eye open. "And what?"

"What happens next?"

"Nothing. That's the end of the story."

"But... you can't just end it there!" he protested. "It makes no sense!"

"Why not?"

"Well, does the ship come for him or not?"

She frowned at him, her head tilted slightly to one side. "I think you're missing the point of the story," she said gently. "It's an illustration of faith."

"Yeah, I get that but was it justified? It's not hard to add a few lines onto the end. Something like: 'And he waited and waited and the ship never came and he died regretting his misplaced life.' The end."

"So you believe there was no ship?"

"Well no... I... Why, do you think there was a ship?"

"Maybe. But it doesn't matter what you believe, or what I believe. The important thing is that the man in the story believed there was a ship. Truth matters little in matters of

faith, Mr Leighton. No matter what others say, or what common sense may tell us, what matters is that the husband believed and his wife did not. Whether the man's faith was justified or not is not the point, because it wasn't the fact or the non-fact that decided the his course of action. It was his belief in that fact."

"Bullshit!"

She looked amused. "Why are you angry?"

"Because it's stupid!"

"Fair enough," she said with a shrug. "I just thought it was a nice story. Do you want anything else?"

"A proper ending perhaps? Or should I just write one myself?" He turned to face her then and there must have been something strange in his expression because suddenly his captor was smirking at him. Then smiling.

Then, suddenly, she laughed. A real, genuine laugh that bubbled out of her and echoed down the plush corridor, gentle as the starlight of ghosts.

The woman clasped her hands over her mouth, stifling her laughter as quickly as it had come.

She stared at Stuart for a long time after that, as though she were only now seeing him for the first time. Not in the scrutinising way of a laboratory experiment, nor with the dark suspicion that had clouded her look since he first wakened in her rooms but... what?

Stuart suddenly found himself unable to meet her gaze.

"Stories never seem to have proper endings, do they? Just points at which they stop. But then I remember how appropriate that is. For there are no proper endings in life, Stuart Leighton. Things don't tie themselves up neatly at the end. The cast of characters changes but the play continues. And so it should.

"We live in the shadow of our ancestors, cupped in the palm of the hand they built for us. We must never forget this. With faith, we choose to trust this vessel that they built for our protection, even as the stars fade around us and this vessel grows ever weaker. Faith binds us, draws us together. Saint Paul said that without it, we are nothing.

"We must trust that everything we have seen tonight is for a reason, for deep and infinitely unknowable is the mind of God and we are the scattered crumbs that were too stubborn to be eaten."

The last she seemed to say to herself.

It was a long time before she spoke again. "I feel as though you and I are much alike, Mr Leighton."

"Stuart, please."

"Stuart then. I am beginning to believe that your coming here was more of a blessing than you know."

"Yeah," he said, sarcasm dripping from his words. "I'm a real gift from God me."

"Perhaps you are. I've certainly prayed for someone like you enough times."

He wasn't sure how to take that.

"All we are is the legacy we leave behind us. We know the Earth existed because this ship exists and it must have come from somewhere. We know the human race existed because we continue to exist. Without children of our own, what are we? An evolutionary full stop. As soon as we're written, the next sentence is begun and by then we've served our purpose. The cast of characters changes. The story continues."

He could take it no longer. "Who are you?" he demanded. "You saved my life. Don't think I'm ungrateful for that but I'd like to know what I'm dealing with here. I'm a wanted man."

"Yes I know. Convicted of smuggling and murder."

Five charges have been made against you. The information thudded unwelcome into his mind. Two of them false.

"You're quite the celebrity among the inner decks, you know. Some say you must be pretty intelligent to have evaded capture for so long. Others say you must be pretty dead. But if so then where's your body? Did you throw yourself into an incinerator? Ascend Jesus-like into heaven?" She smirked at him and Stuart noticed how her cheeks dimpled as she smiled. "No, you're the scientist. You're the one who fits hypotheses to observable evidence. So you tell me. Who am I?"

I do not know this woman, the voice told him again and Stuart paused over the meaning of those words.

Assuming the voice belonged to the ship, it should have records on everyone. It had known who the security officer that had beaten him was. It knew who Stuart was and the

charges that had been levelled against him. It knew the Captain and all the officers in the party below.

Stuart suddenly realised that throughout his viewing at the dome, the ship had been feeding him information subconsciously, the switch ever going off in his mind to feed him choice bits of information directly into his brain.

In fact, now he looked for it, he realised that it had continually been feeding him information ever since he had first plugged himself into that torrent and it was only Stuart's waking mind that was able to shut it out. If he closed his eyes and focussed - just for a second - he could feel it still, reporting to him over and over again the status of everything the ship was and saw.

It was almost overwhelming when he thought about it.

But it didn't know who this woman was. As far as it was concerned, she shouldn't exist.

Meaning that she must be excommunicated too.

Perhaps that was why she hadn't turned him in to the authorities yet. Because she couldn't.

All of this took just the briefest microsecond to process, but even so it was a few moments longer before he answered. "You're noble born," he decided. "You call the Captain by his first name and live in a forgotten, excommunicated part of his quarters like some kind of squatter." He looked at her sharply at that as though daring her to deny it.

He stared this woman over cautiously, with all the assessment the Captain had used earlier on his new bride-to-be. He tried to fit this skinny, frizzy-haired woman who dressed in rags and smelt of finebrew alongside the sheer opulence of the world around her. It wasn't a neat fit. She's younger than she looks, he realised. And sad.

"You have money, because you were able to pay for medication and food for me when I was ill. Yet you live in squalor. A concubine perhaps? A friend of the Captain's?"

"Of sorts," she hedged. His use of the word squalor seemed to have made her self-conscious of her appearance, for she hugged one arm across her dress as the other played absently with her hair. "I feel perhaps I've been unfair to you, Stuart, holding all the answers for fear that you were here to betray me and giving you nothing in return, when the truth is that there is not much that separates the two of us at all."

"I've felt the same way."

"Good." The woman sighed, then suddenly, piece by piece, she seemed to collect herself together. It was difficult to say exactly how she did it, but she seemed to transform herself in that moment. Her chin lifted, her back straightened, her arms came to rest together neatly in her lap. As Stuart watched, the cloudy heaviness of the finebrew, the sadness and false years, lifted away from her as if by magic until Stuart felt he was standing next to a complete stranger.

A noble. Highborn.

I do not know this woman.

"My name is Susan," she said at last and gave a shuddering breath as though they were words she had longed to say for years. "Susan of House Sullivan. The Captain is my brother."