

Chapter 4: Rift Run

Captain Udon Tellyz surveyed the Bridge of his ship, Kidman.

The newest in the Jones fleet, only five years old and currently state of the art for trade ships. Much smaller than something like the old Drake, she was being built primarily for trade; freight was a secondary duty.

Joseph had recruited Udon specifically for the new ship, something strange in freight or trade circles; usually the owner got all new ships, but Udon had a number of advantages over Joseph. The key attribute that had brought him to the attention of the Jones organisation was his heritage and knowledge of the Rift.

The Togarth Rift is a horrible expanse of space, almost as bad as the fabled Stygian Black. Gravity anomalies, huge shifts in orbits of asteroids and planetoids, coupled with massive cosmic storms made it almost impossible to traverse. Being located in the Illium System made the Rift a huge problem.

Over the past few decades, this system had become a gold mine; the Daldaro asteroid belt was one of the best sources of rare minerals. These minerals were essential for construction of the new ultra-efficient MAM reactors, and this in turn was essential for the continuing push into space. The Rift caused some huge trade and freight issues – the way round it could take as long as twenty days – but for those who could traverse it, the journey was no more than four.

Udon was Altarian, and only Altarians had found a way of navigating through the Rift. He was one of a select few of his race who had the knowledge and ability to pilot a ship safely through. Many others had tried to find the route – some owners had even hired Altarians and placed secret data recorders on board – all to no avail. The route was never the same, twice.

One brilliant example had been by one of the major corporate freight lines, Galactic Freight Inc. They had hired an Altarian and recorded his flight through the Rift. Once through, they disseminated the navigational data to their ships in the region, and sent four ships hauling time sensitive freight, through the Rift.

The corporate executives refused to listen to pleas from Altar not to do it – they were warned that their plan wouldn't work. But, as has been the case with many Corporations over the centuries, a new, young executive was placed in charge, and he was on a mission to impress. Impress he did, all four ships were lost, along with all hands and all freight. What happened to the

executive, nobody knows, but from that day on no Altarian would work for any Corporation. Udon only agreed to work for Joseph because his organisation was independent, even then he only agreed after a comprehensive confidentiality agreement was signed.

'Pilot, disconnect umbilical.' Udon's voice, smooth and deep, reverberated round the Bridge. 'Comms thank the dock Commander for his assistance and give him my regards.'

The Pilot confirmed that the various umbilical lines that attached the ship to the dock were clear – they were ready for space. 'Back us out, Pilot.' Udon sat in his command chair at the centre of the Bridge.

He was a tall man, over two metres with a slightly green hue to his skin. As with all from his race, he was bald – Altarians having no hair on their heads, unlike most other Humanoids. His face was long and his features soft but his eyes were striking; deep black pupil inside a brilliant orange iris. The sclera, the white part of human eyes, was light green and the effect of his gaze was hypnotic.

He watched as the ship cleared the dock and turned for their departure coordinates. As they reached the outer marker, Udon turned to his Navigator.

'Set course one eight five mark zero six seven, ahead full.'

The Navigator entered the course and the Pilot corrected the ship's trajectory, increased power to the Gravitron drive and reported to the captain. 'Course one eight five mark zero six seven, drive now at full power.'

'Thank you.' Udon acknowledged the reply. 'Navigator, how long to our insertion point?'

'Twenty-seven minutes, Sir.'

'Thank you, Mister Barton,' Udon addressed the Pilot. 'You have the Bridge. I'll be in my ready room, please call me fifteen minutes after we enter the worm hole.'

'Aye Sir, I have the Bridge.' Phillip Barton, Pilot and First Officer, acknowledged his Captain's orders. He left the pilot station and took the command chair as Udon left.

Altarians have many things in common with humans, and indeed most Humanoid races share much commonality in physiology. All Humanoids are bipedal, warm blooded mammalian creatures; some features, skin colour and other physical attributes, while similar, can set races apart.

But it is the unseen that is the real difference and for Altarians, this comes in an almost mystical ability, for some, to read spatial anomalies. It all stems from a small organ in the centre of their forehead, a third eye some call it. Udon had no clue as to how the organ worked, or why it didn't work the same with all Altarians. He only knew it allowed him to feel what was happening in space

– but it had a downside. For him to utilise his skill completely, he needed to block out all other stimuli.

The door closed behind him, and he walked to the cupboard to the left of the entry. Here he removed a black storage case, and opened it with trepidation. It contained a full body suit and a dark helmet. The design of these was such that the wearer was completely isolated from any sensory input from their surroundings. Once he was in the suit and connected to the ship's systems, he would not hear, see, feel or smell anything outside. The normal background buzz of shipboard life would disappear. He would not be able to sense anyone near him, only the organ – the Dratarium Bud – as it was officially called, would feed information to his brain. He would, truly become part of the ship. Udon shivered, remembering how Jones had once lent him an old human book that dealt with the writer's idea of space travel.

He chuckled to himself as he began to remove his uniform, he remembered thinking that it must have actually been written by an Altarian as only in one of these suits could anyone actually *feel* the total isolation that the book described. The idea made him feel better, he didn't know why, it just did.

Udon secured the suit collar round his neck; all that remained was the helmet. He took this out of the inner case, unrolled the cable that would be connected to the ship's sensors and inspected it for any damage. Everything was in working order.

'Fifteen minutes, Sir.' Phil Barton's voice broke through his thoughts.

'Thank you, Mister Barton. I'll be right there.' Udon picked up the helmet and walked back to the Bridge.

The sight of their captain dressed in this garb caused most of the Bridge crew some unease. Although some had been through this many times, it was still against human nature to trust something they viewed as a form of magic. Udon smiled, knowing the feelings his crew were now experiencing.

'We are about to run the Rift once again. I know some of you are new to this, but it is something I have done many times. All I ask is that you do your jobs and allow me to do mine. If at any time, you feel you cannot continue, please let the First Officer know and return to your quarters; there will be no repercussions.' Udon nodded to Barton.

'As the captain said, some of us have done this with him many times, but if you feel too uneasy to stay, please leave. But understand this, once we transfer control to the captain, we cannot, and will not resume it – until Captain Tellyz requests us to do so.' Barton waited, giving all a few

moments to decide; no one moved. 'Very well, we reinsert in three minutes, Captain please take your seat.'

Udon moved to the Pilot's station, sat down and connected the helmet input to the console. Next he placed the helmet on his head, instantly images flooded into his mind. He was floating in a huge ocean of coloured bubbles, constantly changing, moving; rushing past him but never touching him.

His body was now the ship; what it "felt" through the sensors, he felt as well. He felt the power of the drive system, hurtling him through space. He felt the periphery of the worm hole; the beauty of space flashing past. Then he felt something different, something changed. The worm hole started to decay, like it was dying and normal space was being born to replace it.

Then he felt it, the massive, mad dissonance that was the Rift. He felt the ship, huge, heavy and ponderous. In his mind he also saw the controls at his fingertips. Gently he started to caress them, like he was making love to his ship. Then he took command.

He felt Kidman respond to his caress, obeying his desires. The entry to the Rift was easy, nothing much to sense, but further inside he could already feel the power building, like a raging beast, waiting for the chance to smash this puny tin can.

Phil Barton had done this with Udon many times over the last five years, but he still remembered his first time. He looked round at the crew; three were Rift virgins and the expressions on their faces told the story.

'Computer... initiate protocol Rift Run Alpha.' His voice was confident as he began the process.

'Rift Run Alpha protocol initiated, please authorise.' The digitised voice responded.

'Authorisation... Barton-six-delta-niner-x-ray-one-four.'

'Authorisation accepted.'

Barton turned to the crew. 'I would suggest that everyone take their seats and strap in; these runs can be a bit violent.' He initiated the ship wide broadcast. 'This is the First Officer. We have commenced our Rift Run; this may necessitate some fast and violent course changes all personnel please assume necessary safety protocols. That is all.' While the inertial dampeners should stop any internal damage, Barton always made the same announcement every time, just in case.

Udon felt the Rift – he was now part of it – and he moved with as much grace as he could, given that his body was now the trade ship he commanded. Ahead he felt a gravity well form; he altered his trajectory to skirt it. Another suddenly materialised below the ship, he fed more power to the drive and the ship responded, barely avoiding the trap.

In Udon's mind these looked like huge whirlpools in space. He felt the gravity fluctuations, felt their deadly pull. Now, something he had never experienced, a huge black mass lay ahead. But it wasn't a mass, more truthfully it was a huge black nothing, as if something had torn a huge piece out of space, blackness and emptiness had replaced it. This was the only way he could rationalise what he was now seeing, and it was rushing toward him.

Madly he flung himself to his left and dived below his horizon, slamming all available power to the drive.

'Inertial dampeners are overloading.' A panicked cry came from one of the new engineering officers.

Barton replied. 'The captain is aware of that, keep calm.' But his thoughts were less than confident; he had never seen the ship thrown around so much this early in the run, and they still had several hours to go.

For Udon this was personal, the huge black emptiness was trying to swallow him. He ducked, dived, zigged and zagged; but still it came - relentless. He could feel the strain on his body, the ship was protesting. She was a trade ship, not built for these manoeuvres.

He could feel the stress, the loads on the drive and reactors, but he couldn't stop. The survival of the ship demanded even more. The tear was deepening, but he spotted a chance. Desperately Udon flung himself into the new course, the ship obeyed, reluctantly. He could feel the strain on her systems in his gut. She was close to the absolute limit.

The ship responded and together, they made the final dive to safely pass under the anomaly. Udon made a mental note to replay this from the sensor log. Something was dreadfully wrong with what they had just experienced.

Now in the clear for a while, Udon slowed the mad forward rush, allowing the ship's systems to normalise again. It also gave him a chance to rest, the last hour had been excruciatingly demanding.

Barton saw the captain remove his hold on the control system, lift his arms and remove the helmet. Udon was now disconnected from the ship. He unbuckled his harness and moved to Udon's side.

'Are we through?' The question came from one of the new crewmen.

'Not quite half-way,' replied one of the older hands.

'That was some ride, Captain!' Barton said as he checked Udon's vital signs. Apart from extreme stress response, he was ok.

'Yes, Mister Barton, something I've never encountered before; we'll need to review the sensor logs thoroughly after this. Now I could use some coffee, we should be in null for the next hour or so.' Udon was referring to the part of the Rift that they were now traversing, very slowly so the ship, and Captain, could recoup and prepare for the next onslaught. He stood and headed for the ready room door. 'I'll be here.'

'Fine Sir, I'll start working on a ship status update.' As the door closed Barton turned to the crew. 'Right, back to work – I want a full ship system status report in twenty minutes.' After an hour of total inactivity, the Bridge crew leapt to the task, glad they had something to do to take their minds off what had just happened.

Udon entered the ready room, ordered a coffee from the dispenser and removed the suit. He placed it into the case where it would be cleaned and prepared for the next use. He ached, all over, his body felt like he'd been thrown down a long, steep rocky abyss.

What very few knew was now being evidenced on his body. Interfacing with the ship was physical, as physical as if he had actually done every move in person. To pilot ships in this fashion was hugely taxing, and sometimes deadly, for Altarians. Udon inspected his body in the mirror. Although he was tired and sore, he bore no permanent damage from the first run.

He commanded a bath to be prepared. A few minutes later, and with a fresh coffee, he entered the bath. The deep blue liquid was a unique Altarian preparation that could rejuvenate and reinvigorate him in minutes. He climbed in and immediately started to feel the benefit. He lay there for fifteen minutes before he felt completely normal and climbed out, the liquid had changed colour, now a very pale blue.

I was in a worse state than I appeared, Udon thought to himself almost in disbelief. He stood under the dryer and a wave of air blew over him removing the last vestiges of the liquid. Finally, Udon walked back into the main room and put the suit back on. As he finished, Barton announced he was at the door.

Barton started his report. 'The ship is in fine shape, Sir. We had a few minor incidents, but they've all been rectified. Here's our current position and course. We're slightly out of place compared to where we had projected, but nothing too problematic.'

Udon studied the data. He knew his mad piloting to avoid the tear had pushed them further away from their theoretical optimum trajectory than either wanted, but it was unavoidable. 'Thank you, Number One... time to go back to work.'

They left the room together. Barton took the command chair and Udon went back to the Pilot's station. He looked round the Bridge before replacing the helmet on his head. Slowly Udon

reintegrated with the ship's systems. She had indeed been through a lot, he could sense what had been repaired or replaced. He felt a pang of guilt; it felt as though he had deliberately hurt a firm friend, but this soon passed, and he got back down to business.

As he assumed control of the ship, Udon sensed a huge ion storm approaching. Rather than trying to run through it, he turned away and skirted it perfectly. This added another two hours to their traverse time, but it was well worth it.

The rest of the transit was fairly quiet; the normal gravity wells, a couple of hugely charged ion storms but nothing too taxing. Four and a half hours later, Kidman broke free of the Rift and control was passed back to the crew. In all, the run had taken almost seven hours, much longer than usual, thanks to the strange black void they had encountered.

Udon removed his helmet. 'You have the con, Number One,' he said as he stood.

'Aye Sir, I have the con.' Barton's response was accompanied by a barely audibly sigh of relief from the new crew members. They had survived their first Rift Run and were all grateful they had.

Udon was exhausted; his usually light green skin was now more of a dull grey. He needed rest and lots of it. He returned to his ready room, commanded the bath to be prepared again and removed the suit, placing it back into the storage case. He coiled the helmet harness and stored it back in its container. With this finished he took a small breathing mask and attached it to an air feed beside his tub. He climbed in, placed the mask over his face and lay down, completely submerging this time.

Two hours later Udon surfaced. He removed the mask and went through the drying routine before he moved back to the other room, selected a clean uniform and began dressing. That's when he realised he was incredibly hungry and tired, mentally tired. He ordered a meal of steak and salad from the dispenser and called the Bridge as he waited.

'Number One, please come to the ready room.'

Moments later the door opened and Phil Barton entered. 'Thought you would like to know, we just entered our first displacement. We have another four to go, but we should arrive at AG Four Eight Five, in about seventy-five hours. I've changed the duty roster; third shift will take over in half an hour Sir.' Barton knew all too well how much the Rift Run took out of his Captain. 'You don't need to be back on the Bridge; the crew is handling things well.'

Udon smiled, he and Barton had developed a very strong partnership, and he was grateful for it. 'Thank you, Number One. Truth be known; I'll probably sleep for most of the transit; I'll be my quarters.'

'Aye Sir, I'd better get back for shift change. Sleep well.'