

Offworlder: Book II of the SOFAR Trilogy - Chapter One

CHAPTER ONE

Azrnoth-zin stood up from the navigation console and stretched. His senses dulled from the lingering effects of post cryo-sleep, he felt as if he were dwelling in the gray world between sleeping and waking. In a vain attempt to alleviate the stiff joints and muscles, he assumed several unusual and uncomfortable positions with his neck and torso. He was surprised the soreness was still present after three cycles.

The ship's computer had awakened from stasis after a navigational error in the auto-piloting system had caused them to miss the next wormhole jump. With the jump sequence out of sync, the ship was forced to take a longer way home. Azrnoth-zin did not mind this major inconvenience in their flight plan. He would arrive back with the Delfinian fleet all too soon. He knew what was waiting for him.

A computer-enhanced voice came over the ship's communication network, interrupting his thoughts.

"Commander of the Third Order, the human is coming out of stasis. You are requested to report to the medical-surgical bay."

"Update on vital signs," said Azrnoth-zin, punching a set of coordinates onto the flat bluish-green console.

"Core temperature is at ninety-two point four, Earth standard measurement in Fahrenheit degrees. Heart rate is thirty-two. Respirations are at nine. Encephalographic readings are within normal limits, but are erratic. Alpha patterns are not stabilized at present. This could be due to the inducement of increased cortical activity from the neural assimilators."

"Keep monitoring his life signs," said the alien. "I want him observed even after he comes out of stasis. I am returning the ship to auto-pilot mode."

Azrnoth-zin moved his hand reluctantly over the flat screen once more. The ship's controls were now guided by the computer system. He wanted the chance to pilot the long-range transport himself for a while. He knew it would be the last flying he would be doing.

"I am on my way to med-surg now," he said. Turning clumsily, he walked through the passageway and descended to the lower deck.

He had never been this cold before. It was the coldness of the ocean abyss, the vacuum of space, the endless antarctic ice fields. All he wanted to do was to curl into a fetal position and sleep forever. He groped for the blanket he thought lay somewhere near his bare and frozen feet. But the blanket was not there.

He stood on a vast, frozen tundra. As far as he could see, everything appeared a muted and opaque white. Land and sky fused together into one blinding entity. Snow swirled around his naked feet. When he looked down at his feet, all he saw were leathery flippers. Holding his hands in front of him, he witnessed the transformation: his fingers were fusing into paddle-like appendages.

He shuddered. Strange creatures appeared out of the swirling white. Dream creatures. A large yellowish animal resembling a slug slithered across his path. It

possessed appendages that appeared and then withdrew into its gelatinous body, only to reappear in another location on the torso. Small furry creatures that walked upright with bulging black eyes milled around him, then disappeared into a swirl of snow.

Walking down the dimly lit corridor, Azrnoth-zin's footsteps reverberated on the metal floor grating. The ship was utilitarian, designed for long-range reconnaissance and recovery missions. Due to space constraints and great distances between star systems, Azrnoth-zin placed himself in cryostasis to conserve much needed resources. Before going under, he had reviewed the logs that were imprinted into the computer from the Water Council. Upon his return to the fleet he was to be met by a security detail. He suspected incarceration prior to his arraignment before the Council.

In seventeen cycles, they would rejoin the Delfinian fleet. The armada was in a completely different quadrant of space since he had left. That was not surprising. Their enemy was perpetually on the move. Azrnoth-zin's mood further darkened as he wondered how many of his former comrades were still left.

The *Kren-dahl* was unmanned except for a skeleton crew of "metallics," sophisticated robots that maintained the ship's navigation, life support, and emergency medical treatment as it traversed the great void. Azrnoth-zin knew no Delfinians would be spared from the war effort to bring him back.

He looked down on a blue and green planet from space. He desperately wanted to reach its surface. He wanted to go where it was warm. He would give anything to feel the sun's warmth again. The planet looked like Earth. But it was not Earth. It was completely covered in water. Where were the continents?

He found himself moving underwater, the fluid chill enveloping him, sapping his body heat. His arms and legs were of no use. The current was too strong.

Two large blue dolphin-like creatures swam alongside him. They turned their heads ninety degrees to look at him, revealing eyeless sockets that stared at nothing. The dolphin-creatures possessed fins that looked like some bizarre hybridization of a flipper and a hand. The digits moved independently of one another. The alien dolphin-beings gestured to him, beckoning him to follow.

The dolphin-creatures spoke to him in a language he had not heard before. Yet on some level, he vaguely understood the high-pitched rise and fall of their dialect. He tried to speak back to the creatures but no sound escaped his lips. The strange nektonic beings faded into the blackness, powered by their heavy trident-like flukes. Caught in the wash from the flukes, he began to tumble uncontrollably. The strong current dragged him down into the cold blackness. His struggling became feeble as the abyss enveloped him.

Azrnoth-zin entered the med-surg section of the ship, which also housed the cryo chambers. Four cylindrical chambers about ten feet in length fanned out from the center of the room. All of the elongate sleep tubes were empty except one. Over the farthest pod a metallic hovered, monitoring the life signs of the occupant floating in the cylinder.

The metallic possessed an ovoid central body for data processing and mechanical functions. Two multi-axial hinged appendages with flexible finger joints and opposable thumbs were capable of performing the most intricate digital manipulation. Above the

central body, a sensory disc processed tactile, visual, and audio information. Below the alloy body, three hinged legs were retracted into grooves that would distend and act as a tripod when the metallic rested on a fixed surface.

Azrnoth-zin approached the pod and peered inside the transparent portal. Inside the cylinder, the naked form of Ridley was bathed in a viscous, cobalt-colored solution. Synaptic leads were attached to Ridley's body, with the greatest concentration placed on his head, chest and around the wound sites.

Azrnoth-zin checked the monitors located at the top of the pod. Scrolling across the screen in Delfinian characters, readouts of all of Ridley's physiological systems were being displayed.

"I do not like the readings from his diencephalon," he said.

"I have experienced difficulty in stabilizing the hypothalamus. This could explain the erratic changes in core temperature," said the metallic, adjusting the settings with one of its mechanical hands. "Most of this procedure is experimental. We have no records of human physiology. The parameters of the neural reorganization are set for Delfinian brains."

"I was operating on the assumption that Delfinian and human brains were more similar than not," said Azrnoth-zin.

"In basic structure, they are similar," the metallic said. "The frontal, temporal, and parietal sections are more developed in Delfinian tissue. Observe here at the central sulcus." The robotic medical unit pointed a mechanical finger to an area on the monitor screen. "Do you see the activity here?"

Azrnoth-zin nodded.

"This area is one-third as developed as the Delfinian equivalent. From my analysis, another major difference is the speed of axoplasmic transmission. The rate of nerve conduction in Delfinians is faster than humans."

Ridley's body went into a series of convulsions, causing his body to writhe in the thick fluid. Several times he bumped against the walls of the cylinder. The readings on the monitor jumped off the screen.

A great chamber lay before him. There was something sinister and foreboding about this place. Cold fear invaded his being as he walked through a room like none he had seen before. All around him, as far as his eyes could see, large glass-like cylindrical chambers stood shrouded by a ghostly mist. Inside the chambers, a greenish-yellow gas swirled. Someone or something was inside the capsules, but the sickly looking fog obscured the occupants.

His dread grew ever deeper as he walked among the chambers. Suddenly, he felt an uncontrollable urge to get out of this place, to flee from the coldness. Here was a different type of coldness: the coldness of dead things.

With a hiss, the chamber in front of him opened, pouring the yellowish cloud onto the floor. It crept toward him, enveloping his feet and moving up to his knees. Another tube opened, then another, all unleashing their poisonous vapors. He saw movement inside the chamber.

He needed to find the door. He needed to get free of this place. Something was emerging from the chambers.

“What is happening to him now?” said Azrnoth-zin.

“The humanoid is experiencing extreme neural overload,” stated the metallic matter-of-factly. “The seizures have been growing progressively more intense and lasting longer the closer he gets to what is considered his normal levels of basic metabolic function.” The metallic performed more adjustments on the monitor. Ridley resumed floating in the suspension, the turbulence from his seizures causing his body to rock from the rebounding eddies.

“Will he survive?”

“At this time, that is difficult to ascertain. As you will recall, he had no life signs when he was brought on board. Our medical database has very little information on the rate of human tissue degradation following trauma. The other unknown is that these tubes were designed for Delfinian reorganization, not Earth human.”

He was staring at a dark and barren landscape, the only light being the diffuse glow from two distant moons. He felt the chill of cold desolation. He saw a figure, alien to him, hunched over something. In two large claws with three digits ending in rapier-like nails, it grasped an object of prey. The alien-being squatted on powerful segmented appendages. It was tall. A creature like that shouldn't be that tall. And it was - feeding. Its oblong head looked up at him revealing large yellow serpent-like eyes and a mouthful of bloodstained silvery fangs.

He could not pull his gaze away from what the creature was feeding upon. The body was mutilated, but the face appeared to be humanoid. The creature opened its mouth and emitted a scream that chilled him deeper than the barren landscape. The hideous creature bounded toward him.

Ridley's body was shaken with another full-body convulsion causing the bluish liquid to swirl and roll inside of the chamber. The metallic attempted to dampen the seizures by performing another series of adjustments to the chamber's controls. Ridley's convulsions escalated. His body slammed against the inside of the cylinder.

“The humanoid will experience complete neural shutdown in ninety-six seconds,” said the metallic.

“Terminate neural reorganization,” said Azrnoth-zin. “We will just have to wait and see the residual effects of the damage once he comes out of stasis.”

“The Reorganization procedure cannot be terminated at this time due to the time lock placed on the chamber at the initialization of the process. The procedure will not be completed for thirty-two hours, seventeen minutes and nine seconds.”

“What? There is no manual override on the cylinder for this procedure?” said Azrnoth-zin.

“It was a pre-existing program, used for severe trauma to Delfinian brains. Apparently, the human brain withstands much less than we anticipated. Neural disintegration in twenty-two seconds.”

Azrnoth-zin ran over to the far wall, activated a disc on the wall, and a small plasma pistol appeared from behind a panel. He checked the charge, then ran back to the chamber. He fired a short blast into the control unit residing above the cylinder. Instantly, a white gas erupted from the cylinder as the glass door slid back. The bluish

ooze erupted forth, spilling onto the metal decking. Azrnoth-zin dodged the viscous fluid and moved quickly to the other side of the chamber.

“Ten seconds to neural disintegration,” said the metallic.

Azrnoth-zin ripped the leads from Ridley’s head and then went after the leads still attached to his torso. The remainder of the fluid drained out of the cylinder, exposing the deathly white form of Ridley curled in a fetal position, convulsing slightly. Azrnoth-zin looked up at the overhead monitor. The time on the display read 0:00.04.

“His core temperature must be raised or he will terminate from hypothermia,” said Azrnoth-zin.

Ridley’s body was covered in a gelatinous, blue ooze. Azrnoth-zin and the metallic transferred Ridley’s stiff, inert form with considerable difficulty to another reorganization chamber. Immediately, the metallic adjusted the controls to increase the core body temperature. Ridley’s uncontrollable shivering subsided after several minutes.

Ridley saw himself swimming upward from a deep well. It must be a well. Only a well could be this dark and cold. He could see a circle of light above him, but it still appeared a long way off. Somewhere overhead, he was aware of voices, but he could not understand the context of the conversation. How had he come to be in this cold dark well? Damn. There was going to be hell to pay when Uncle Jake found out he’d fallen into a well. Jake had warned him time and again about stepping too close to holes in the ground. He desperately wanted to reach the surface. His lungs felt as if they were full of cold, foul tasting water. He still had no feeling in his arms or legs.

A face appeared above him leaning over the edge, peering down at him. He could not tell who it was but the face seemed vaguely familiar. Jake? The circle of light and the face grew larger. His vision cleared slightly. He recognized deep cerulean eyes, like two large beacons guiding him to the surface. He felt the overwhelming sensation of suffocation from the fluid trapped in his lungs. The icy grip of the water pulled him downward into the blackness.

Ridley vomited violently, ejecting thick bluish-white fluid from his mouth. Azrnoth-zin was not fast enough to get out of the way and ended up wearing the slimy effluent down the front of his tunic. Ridley wretched again, but not before Azrnoth-zin turned him on his side. Another fit of coughing and the last of the cryo-fluid was forced from his lungs. The spasms gave way to more uncontrollable shivering.

The chamber’s window slid into place and the metallic adjusted the environmental controls. The chamber slowly pressurized until ambient conditions were achieved.

“Core temperature is reaching ninety-six point two,” said the metallic.

“Continue to adjust the temperature and pressure,” said Azrnoth-zin, “until you have reached ninety-eight point six degrees.”

Several hours passed. Most of the severe spasms and shivering had dissipated, but Ridley’s gaze remained unfocused. The metallic continued to hover over its patient, monitoring life signs and relaying any significant changes in Ridley’s condition to the command center of the ship. Azrnoth-zin was completing the calculations on the next worm jump when the message came through from the med-surg section.

“Commander,” said the metallic over the com-link system. “The human’s vital functions appear to be stabilizing. Visual systems are becoming more utilized, heart rate is increasing, and voluntary movement appears to be occurring in the distal extremities.”

“I will be there momentarily,” said Azrnoth-zin.

When Azrnoth-zin walked into the med-surg section and gazed into the pod containing Ridley, he was not prepared for what he saw. Inside the pod, all of the color appeared to be washed out of Ridley’s face and body, giving him a gaunt, wraith-like countenance. Ridley’s eyes were milky and all around the sockets a purplish discoloration had set in. The wound sites were an angry pink and raised well above the skin. Ridley turned and faced Azrnoth-zin and attempted to mouth something.

Azrnoth-zin looked up at the monitor, then turned to the metallic. “Can we open the capsule now?”

“His life signs are stabilizing. Except for the continued erratic cortical impulses. Yes, I believe the human can be examined out of the chamber now.”

“The *human* has a name. He is called Ridley.”

“Ridley,” repeated the metallic. “I will correct.”

The metallic moved its mechanical hands deftly over the control panel and with a loud hiss, the transparent panel slid back. Ridley gasped as the ship’s air greeted his aching lungs. He flinched from the brightness of the light in the room.

“Ridley, it is I, Azrnoth-zin. Do not attempt to speak yet. You have experienced severe trauma. I believe you will survive. When you are feeling better, we will speak.”

“C-c-c-cold,” Ridley stammered. “C-c-can’t see.”

Azrnoth-zin nodded. “Rest now. We will increase the pod temperature to reduce the chill. Try to get some sleep. You have been through a great deal. Your vision and all of your other system’s functions will return soon.”

“Commander, I would like to begin infusion of nutrients with your permission. We would begin by re-establishing fluid balances based on the hu - Ridley’s physiology.”

“I will leave Ridley in your capable care,” said Azrnoth-zin. He turned and walked back to the command center of the ship. “Keep me apprised of any changes.”

Ridley awoke alone in a sterile room. He lay in a semi-recumbent position on a table and was covered by a fine transparent film that appeared to shimmer with his every movement. He touched the layer with his hand and felt warmth pulsating from it. To one side of the bed was a table containing various odd looking vials and objects. Something wasn’t right about the table, but Ridley’s addled brain could not register what it was. After several moments, he realized the table had no legs; it appeared to be floating - hovering next to the bed he was in. Ridley closed his eyes and drew several ragged breaths. Upon opening his eyes again, he saw the image was still there.

Ridley caught glimpses of quick, erratic movement in his peripheral vision. At first, he thought he was experiencing “floaters” and tried to blink them away. The objects were small and multicolored, shaped like oversized paramecia. They appeared to be moving across the walls of the infirmary only to dissolve into the wall itself. He squeezed his eyes shut, but upon opening them, the images scuttled around another section of the med-surg section.

He tried to shake his head but the attempt sent a white-hot pain through his skull behind his eyes. He lay there for what seemed an eternity, eyes closed, teeth clenched, until the sensation subsided.

Ridley's joints felt like they were encased in glue. Any effort to move his arms and legs resulted in spasms and the return of the headache from hell.

The airlock door slid open and the metallic unit floated into the infirmary. Ridley kept his eyes closed, fearing that opening them would bring on the stabbing pain behind his eyes. The metallic now hovered beside Ridley's bed.

"Can you hear me, Ridley?"

"I can hear you," Ridley said hoarsely. He opened up his eyes to a squint and gazed at the apparition suspended in the air. Ridley's eyes grew wide. He tried to back off the opposite side of the bed, disrupting the floating table. Vials clattered loudly to the floor.

"Do not be afraid," said the metallic. "No harm will come to you."

"Where am I?" said Ridley, his voice choked with fear.

"You are aboard the ship *Kren-dahl*. It is a light reconnaissance, long-range flyer."

"Who - what are you?"

"I am META IV, medical-surgical robotic. You have been in my care since your injury."

"What injury? I don't remember anything."

The metallic extended one of its multiaxial arms toward Ridley. In its fingers it held what appeared to be some type of hypodermic.

"It is time for your neural dampener. Please remain still while I administer the medication."

"I don't think so."

Ridley backed away from the metallic and tried to swing his legs to the other side of the bed. An exquisite wave of pain rolled over him. He cried out and lay on the side of the bed gasping.

META IV contacted Azrnoth-zin through the ship's com system.

"Commander, Ridley is conscious. His sympathetic nervous system responses are sending him into neural overload. I require your assistance."

Azrnoth-zin arrived in the infirmary quickly and assisted Ridley to the semi-recumbent position once more.

"Try not to move for a while," said Azrnoth-zin. "Your muscles have not been used in almost six weeks. You are still suffering the effects of prolonged cryo-sleep and trauma."

"Six weeks? Cryo-sleep? What in the hell are you talking about, Arn? And what's that oversized cuisinart doing with that needle?"

"META IV is responsible for saving your life. If it were not for this med-surg unit, your life functions would have ceased weeks ago back on the volcano."

Ridley's eyes wandered from the metallic back to Azrnoth-zin, registering a combination of confusion, fear and pain. The metallic continued to hover with only slight shifts in movement, accompanied by a quiet whirring sound with each subtle change.

Azrnoth-zin drew a deep breath. “For all purposes, you were left for dead back on the crater. You were shot three times by Jenks’ agents and the soldiers.”

“Shot? I was dead?”

“Please try not to speak until I have finished,” said Azrnoth-zin. “I will answer all of your questions then.”

Azrnoth-zin continued. “The first projectile almost severed a large artery next to your heart. You call it the aorta. The second projectile entered the nerve plexus in your right shoulder. The third shattered your large thigh bone that you refer to as the femur, severing the femoral artery.”

Ridley felt over those places on his chest, shoulder and thigh, feeling the raised, tender areas under his fingers. “How come I don’t remember any of this?”

“It is common following a serious trauma that no recollection of the injury exists. I was monitoring these events from my ship. When I saw you fall, I disengaged the auto drive and came back to retrieve you.”

Ridley closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Azrnoth-zin watched the rise and fall of his chest. If not for the deep furrow in his brow, he would have surmised that Ridley had drifted back into sleep, the events from the last few minutes too much for his already overtaxed system.

“Wait. I think I’m starting to remember. I remember you disappearing in a blue light. Then, I remember looking up at a similar blue light,” said Ridley.

Azrnoth-zin nodded. “What you saw was the molecular transfer beam. You were brought on board the *Kren-dahl* and immediately placed into the cryo-stasis chamber to prevent further tissue degradation. META IV went about the task of replicating your blood and serum types, then performed the repairs on your damaged tissue. Because your brain waves had ceased to function, it was necessary to have you undergo neural reorganization.”

“Neural reorganization? I’m sorry, Arn. But you lost me.”

“It is a procedure that re-establishes collateral pathways in the Delfinian nervous system following severe trauma. Encoded into the assimilation are motor and sensory programs as well as implantation of electrical signals to the frontal portion of the brain where memory and learning reside. Because the Delfinian brain processes almost three times faster than a human’s, you were at risk for sensory overload while the new pathways were being established. On several occasions over the past six weeks, you were close to termination.”

Ridley stared dumbly at Azrnoth-zin. “So, let me get this straight. I was basically dead until I went through this reorganization procedure?”

“Essentially, yes.”

Ridley winced and rubbed his temples in a vain attempt at ridding the gnawing pain within his skull. “So what is this? A post mortem hangover?”

“Unfortunately,” said Azrnoth-zin, “no other species has undergone the procedure. There are no records of outcomes following neural reorganization other than in Delfinians. It was . . . the only way to keep you alive.”

“I wish this ringing in my ears would quit,” said Ridley gently rocking in the bed. “Maybe staying dead wasn’t such a bad idea after all.”

Through blurred vision, Ridley thought he saw a shadow of sadness pass across the face of Azrnoth-zin.

“You should rest now, Ridley. And please cooperate with the META unit. It will help you recover your strength.”

“Please hold still and try to relax,” said the metallic.

“Yeah, right. Relax,” said Ridley tersely.

META IV moved in close and Ridley felt a pressure against the base of his skull. The room began to spin and then went to black.