



*Charybdis
Storm*

L.G. Dalton

A storm in uncharted seas is just one obstacle a band of intrepid misfits has to overcome. The one person who understands the phenomenon has never been in space before. Drawing on experience and myth was never Sorrel's aim.

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“CAPTAIN, we are approaching the region marked as the *Sea of Charybdis*.” Chief Navigator Finnial, gruffed. The Lacusian’s voice was likened to a metal file moving against wood.

“Confound three hundred year old maps,” he muttered, frustrated with the incongruences.

Cartography performed wonders in making the ship’s old maps more readable. It was slow work, as the cartographer’s other duties took precedence.

Sabre Galasz, Captain of the *Sangreal*, smothered a grin. “She is an old ship, Finnial,” he remarked calmly.

The ship was ten kilometres in diameter, and an enclosed metal container. Sensors embedded in its outer skin sent images and data to on-board computers. He looked at the various screens ranged around the Command Centre. Some showed scenes outside the ship, and others showed different areas of the ship. Several showed pictorial scapes, and more displayed technical data. If he wanted pretty scenery, he needed to be in the Recreation Observatory. *Sangreal* was capable of housing twenty times the present crew. With such a minimal skeleton crew, everyone was working three positions and rotating shifts.

“True,” Finnial admitted. He studied his instruments and data block. “Odd. This region has a name.”

Sabre read the underlying message. Finnial was worried. He shrugged and pressed his intercom. When he confronted a problem he could not solve, he turned to the one person whose logic defied reasoning. Within moments the doors to the command centre swished open. “Doctor Delrio,” he greeted without looking away from his data pad. “Have you heard of the Sea of Charybdis?”

Major Sorrel Delrio, CMO, tilted her chestnut head. The name sounded Greek, ancient Greek. What did she know of ancient Greeks? Thermopylae, Athens, Troy, most of the great battles...she is an army surgeon. What of the people? Alexander, Hector, Helen of Troy... She could not think of Troy without Odysseus of the Trojan horse fame and his ten-year voyage home. Ahhh. “Charybdis was an ancient Greek sea monster able to swallow whole boats by creating a whirlpool whenever she drank of the sea. The area where she is believed to have lived lies between two landmasses. It has a whirlpool where ocean currents meet.”

Finnial tossed an exasperated look over his shoulder. He turned back to his instruments and data block. The good doctor delighted in testing him. Beside him, Shereen, the Eridian Chief Helm, checked her own instruments and data block.

“Course correction,” Shereen announced. “Deviation: point one seven degree.”

“Cause?” Sabre asked.

“Unknown,” Shereen replied.

The ship shivered. Sorrel swayed, gripping the Captain’s chair to keep her balance. Her cornflower eyes were worried. “Sabre, space is your territory not mine, but I swear if I was home, I would be preparing for a storm.” Another shiver racked the ship, turning to shudders. Screens around the centre flickered. “Make it a full blown cyclone, minus the soaking.

Oomph!” She landed in Sabre’s lap. She looked at him, invitation glinting in her eyes.

“Finnial, Shereen?” Sabre queried, setting Sorrel back on her feet. He pointed to a spare seat and then glared her into sitting in it. This was no time for flirting.

Sorrel sat down, with a pout. The dumb imbecile could not recognise an opportunity when it hit him in the face.

“We are caught in a stellar wind channel,” Finnial replied. “Speed is reaching seven hundred and thirty seven kilometres an hour and increasing exponentially.”

“I have an image,” Shereen commented. “Three currents each moving in a clockwise directions.”

“Source of currents... Captain, we have entered a region bordered by three nebulae.” The disbelief in Finnial’s voice and set of his shoulders was a wonder to behold. He grunted as a shudder knocked him into his console. “Nebulae range from five hundred to one thousand six hundred light years distant.”

“Course?”

“Holding true with difficulty,” Shereen replied.

“Listen!” Sorrel interjected.

The four of them listened intently. The whispery flute song of wind gave way to the feathery drumroll of talcum powder.

Sorrel reached for the data block inset in her chair’s arm. She disliked storms at anytime and this was her first stellar storm. “How do I get an image on this thing?” Technology and she were on poor speaking terms at the best of times. Alien gizmos irritated her unless they were for medical use.

Sabre reached over to her pad. His long fingers danced across the screen, skimming icons and bringing the image into technicolour life.

Sorrel studied the small screen. It was a beautiful scene; full of swirling patterns and colours. Lavenders, pinks, and magentas dominated blues and greens one second and reversed the next. Lightning arced and raced over and around the ship. Her brow

creased, eyes narrowed, and mouth twisted in concentration. “We are at the edge of the stream?” Sorrel asked. The little dot blinking at her suggested they were. She wanted confirmation.

“Yes. Course is straight ahead.” Finnial gruffed. The schematics appeared on Sorrel’s data pad. Beside him, Shereen sighed. The doctor’s dislike of non-medical technology was reaching legendary proportions.

“No. Go with the stream.”

“Why?” Sabre asked.

“Straight ahead will take us into the eye. The down draft will suck us into heavens know where.” She sketched the scenario on the data pad with the stylus.

“There is no down draft. No vortex.” Shereen negated. “The current is flat.”

Sorrel cocked her head listening to the growing storm. A quick flick from one screen to another confirmed her suspicions. “I wouldn’t call ten thousand kilometres flat.”

“I said flat not thin,” Shereen retorted.

“What is this ‘eye?’” Sabre asked. It was best to ignore the running battle the two women engaged in whenever they met. They appeared to enjoy the highhanded and snide insults. He admitted he never heard the jibing become hurtful or personal.

“The centre of the storm. It is an area of little wind. Most damage occurs on the other side of the eye when the winds come from the opposite direction.”

“And by keeping to the edge of the storm?”

“We go with the current instead of against it, saving energy, resources, and no damage. There is a point where we can exit the current with little effort and still maintain course.”

Shereen and Finnial looked at each other and gave their own version of a shoulder shrug. They turned to their data blocks and set to work. They disliked it when a non-space traveller showed a flash of knowledge and understanding they lacked. The doctor was good at it.

Sorrel cocked her head, listening to muted sounds. “I think we are in more than a space dust current.”

Sabre shot her with annoyance. His data stream showed him the same. “Why do you say that?” Her data pad was unchanged from her last investigation.

“Sabre, sound may not be heard in a vacuum, but it travels in waves. When those waves strike an object they become detectable.”

“And?”

Sorrel sighed. “Close your eyes and listen, Sabre. Listen to others breathing, the rustle of fabric against itself, the tap and scratch of a stylus. Isolate each sound as you identify them. Then listen to the ship. Hear the whish of doors, the thrum of the engines, and the sound of its skin being caressed by wind or peppered by dust.”

“And then?”

“Allow your self to experience the sensations: the buffeting winds, the sting of sand grains, the throb of bruising. Become one with the ship. Hear what she hears, see what she sees, feel what she feels.”

Shereen’s soft curse startled them all. The helmswoman seldom delved into crudity. Elegant fingers skimmed across data screens. “Proto-planetary disc.”

Finnial’s fingers flew across the panel before him. Screens popped up and fuzzy images appeared. “Course correction entered.”

“How far into the field are we?” Sabre asked.

“Point five of a light year,” Shereen answered.

“There is a band of space debris...” Finnial gasped. The edge of his console bit hard into his stomach. He grabbed the side and held on.

The ship rocked. All of them flopped about in their seats. Harnesses slid smoothly over shoulders and around thighs and hips, holding them secure in their seats. Sorrel oofed and

grunted with each impact, grimacing in tune with the biting harness. “What size are those rocks?”

“They range in diameter. Between five centimetres and three kilometres.”

“Repulsion field is holding,” Shereen reported. “Damage to the ship is negligible.”

“And if that hits?” Sorrel asked showing the largest chunk of rock tumbling merrily along to a song only it could hear. She did not care how big it was supposed to be, it was still too big, and the ship too damn sluggish. Her hands gripped the chair’s armrests, the knuckles turning white. She breathed deeply and slowly.

Shereen’s slender fingers flew across her panel. “Engineering is going to love me,” she muttered. Sabre cocked his head putting Sorrel’s instruction into action. He conceded to her assessment. The engines groaned and grated, but responded to her demands. The ship quickened and dodged the tumbling space rock, the wash nudging it into colliding with a smaller rock.

All of them yelped as the straps bit in, holding them in place. The ride out of the debris ring churned Sorrel’s stomach. Being tossed around was disorientating. Sustaining concussion was a possibility. She disliked flying at the best of times. The best part of the *Sangreal* was not being aware of flying until she was called to the Command Centre. In Sickbay she forgot she was not on Earth.

“Present position is now on the edge of the current, relative to the second nebulae.” Finnial gulped, breathed deep, and promised himself to wreak retribution upon Shereen in the future. He worked at his panel on the proposed trajectory.

“Exit co-ordinates? I need time and distance to get exit speed.” Shereen was calm. It was the only warning she was giving.

“And braking,” Sorrel added. “I want to get to wherever we are going ASAP, not overshoot it.”

“Sorrel,” Sabre calmed. “Shereen knows what to do.”

Shereen sniffed. The speed she gained would put them well along the original trajectory. The engines were gathering power ready for her demands. She nodded as the course appeared on her screen. She could control the exit with ease. The corridor was wide, long, and free of space debris. The dark matter would assist in braking. She entered the data and hit the command.

Sorrel cursed silently. The force pushing her into her chair’s back threatened to crush ribs, collapse lungs to paper-thin flatness, force blood from eyes and brain matter from ears. She knew twenty-six ways to kill with a single touch. With Shereen she would find a few more. She would enjoy prolonging the agony of healing in the future. What was that ungodly screeching?

“Exit achieved.” Finnial’s gruff was music to Sorrel’s battered eardrums. “Original trajectory maintained. Speed steadily decreasing to cruising speed.”

“Status?” Sabre queried.

“Main engines steady. Life support systems normal. Cryogenics stable.” Shereen was serene. A warm sense of appreciation and congratulation embraced her. She understood what Sorrel had tried to explain. There was a presence embodied in the *Sangreal*.

“Thank you, God,” Sorrel murmured. She fervently hoped she never had to experience Charybdis or a relative again.

The End

Author Note

I wrote this short story for inaugural Arts Alliance of Pine Rivers On Line Writers Competition. The theme was 'A Storm at Sea'. I thought this title was open to interpretation so I set my sea in space.

Charybdis Storm is an introduction to a new series of novels I am developing.

About the Author

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