

# The Sylvian Gambit

...Barry Kirwan

“Most people back home are calling you a traitor, Venyova.”

It was the first human sentence I'd heard in twenty years. Maybe Kozalsky was right, but my riposte was instant. Not surprising after living so long amongst telepaths.

“Why hide behind a pluralism?” I said. “What do you think?” As if I needed to read this particular mind.

Kozalsky pursed his lips, scrunching his pencil moustache up under a bulbous nose. He leaned forward, the way a torturer does to make sure his victim understands what is about to happen, burying the desk mike beneath a sweat-streaked forearm. “If it was up to me, you'd be undergoing intensive interrogation right now. Centauri-style, followed by vivisection to check the little bastards haven't messed with your brain.” His chair strained as he reclined, a twisted smirk receding from my sight, reminding me of a lifetime ago when my platoon starburst away from an op gone bad in the Crab nebula. I'd forgotten just how ugly humanity was.

I didn't blink. “Let's get to business, shall we?”

He snorted, bloodshot eyes flicking for a moment to a hidden camera somewhere behind my left shoulder. “Okay, Venyova, you say the Sylvians can't be killed. What do you mean, exactly?”

I sighed, in the vain hope it meant he wouldn't ask me again. “I'm here to show you that's exactly what I mean. They can't be killed. Not by weapons, whether blade, bullet, pulse laser, atomics, toxins or nano-invasion.” I let it hang. So did he, as if the recording device needed time to assimilate the information. I waited until he was about to speak, then cut in, aiming an index between his eyes. “And after that demonstration, you will leave this system and never return. Any presence will be treated as hostile.”

The blood deluged into his face. “Is that a threat?”

I faked a smile, and spread my hands across the desk. It was my turn to lean forward, no intention of obscuring the microphone. “A consequence.”

That was three hours ago. Since then I'd been locked in a holding cell, awaiting the Sylvian arrival—no—dreading it. This was all my idea, my gambit, and the Sylvians' future depended on it. I pushed the thought aside, the way I'd learned since my platoon drag-chuted onto Sylvian territory in that doomed raid two decades ago. I

was the only survivor. It had been the first and last human mission into the Sylvian system. I'd been left for dead—residual mission loss. Back then it had just been routine exploration of a ten cent E-Class planet, no big gig by anyone's standards.

But that was before a Sphericon Command stealth-probe revealed the planet's treasure: the crust hid teratons of Nutritium, the lifeblood of warp engines. Same old, same old, my grandpa would have said: oil, uranium, dark matter, nutritium. Money doesn't make the world go round, fuel does.

And now a Sphericon tactical fleet lazed barely a million miles from the planet's surface. Humanity had come a long way, literally hundreds of light years, since first venturing into space four centuries ago, spreading like a virus, dragging its dark baggage along with it: heavily-armed kids with Faster-Than-Light travel. I tried not to get morose. It wouldn't help the Sylvians.

The silence in the small chamber made me feel like my head was being held underwater. Stark lights stabbed down from the ceiling grill, etching a sharp chequerboard pattern on the floor. I sat alone, a piece on a chessboard—a rook at least, I hoped.

There was that coin-like smell of deep-space ships which no FTL-deployed foot-soldier ever forgot. It brought back memories and emotions I now better understood. What I'd believed twenty years ago was conviction in 'The Sphericon Cause' was nothing more than a young man's ideals undercut by subconscious fears, ion-charged by testosterone. During my brief stint as a Sphericon lieutenant, I'd killed many aliens on numerous worlds, all in the name of peace.

I remembered my first encounter with the Sylvians. The terrain was like holos I'd seen of old Earth's rainforests, steam hanging in the air as a blood-orange sun scythed through oar-straight redwoods. We kept stumbling in the marshmallow-soft undergrowth, weighed down by our twenty kilo backpacks, armed to the eyebrows. So damned quiet! No birds, no insects, not even a breeze. Like someone had turned off the sound. And then noise erupted, wave upon wave of staccato hammering and shrill screams, weapons falling to the ground as everyone's hands clamped over their ears, to no avail, since the din was inside our brains.

The whole platoon was going crazy—literally—some tore at their faces, writhing and thrashing on the ground. I'd once watched a Trojan virus eviscerate a Level 5 android, and I imagined this was what was happening to my brain—I thought it was going to liquefy. We assumed it was an attack, though all they were trying to do was say hello. *Telepathy*. All the theory, all the sci-fi; nothing had prepared us for this neurological onslaught. They watched us dying, the way a fish might watch a man drown, uncomprehending. As the clamour inside my head reached fever pitch, I tore a shred-grenade from my belt, activating it with my thumbprint. Just as I was about to hurl it in the direction of their smiling, pig-like faces, something condensed out of the cacophony, and in a sudden cadence, I *understood*.

Telepathy isn't like talking, or hearing a voice inside your head; it's so much more direct. I couldn't kill them, any more than I could have chewed off my own arm.

*Traitor*, he'd called me, more or less. If Kozalsky had known what I'd done next, back in the Sylvian glade that day, he'd have killed me in that room right there and then, with his bare hands.

After I'd been knocked out by the percussive wave, the Sylvians learned how to filter out ninety-nine per cent of their baseline level of telepathic chatter, so they didn't fry my brain. They looked after me all these years, became family, and although their minds were vastly superior, I vowed to protect them from the enemy I knew would one day come back, first to annex their resources, and later, once they sensed the Sylvians' real treasure, to plunder their minds.

I snapped back on course; I had to focus on the task. For sure I was being scanned. They'd taken plenty of samples—blood, saliva, psyscan, and DNA—as soon as I'd come on board via the space shuttle. That was an experience in itself, acting as if shuttle travel was ordinary—necessary, even.

That had been the tipping point in the arguments around my plan: the Sylvians knew humans could lie, whereas they could not, no telepath could. But they needed that edge in order not to be enslaved by humanity. After all, honesty doesn't require stupidity as a companion.

The door hissed open, revealing a woman in her mid-forties. I'd tried to prepare myself for this, knowing they might try it, but still my heart skittered down a schizophrenic wormhole: elation at seeing her again, and a crushing depression at knowing how it would end. I kept my face as stable as I could.

"Greta," I said.

She stood outside, all meekness, though if true to form it would fade by the second or third sentence. "Yuri. Can I come in?" she said, poker-faced.

Her looks hadn't depreciated: tangled cedar-brown curls tumbling onto sleek shoulders, a nose as straight and unwavering as her mind, green eyes locked onto target. I swallowed. The Sylvians had worried about this more than anything else. I'd forgotten how the way she said my name affected me, that lightness in my head and stomach, like I was standing on the edge, ready to fall.

"Sure," I said, though I remained sitting, unable to take my eyes off her, not surprising after twenty years without seeing a human female.

"You look well." She hovered just out of reach. The door swished closed millimetres behind her, rippling her dress.

I couldn't stand it any longer—I'd had twenty years to reflect on the human mode of communication, laden with pathos and indirectness. I rose to embrace her.

She slapped me in the face so hard it knocked me back down onto the bench.

"You bastard! You never even *tried* to come back, did you?"

I barely felt the stinging redness I knew must be flaring across my cheek. "I forgot how much I loved you." As the words came out, tears threatened hot pursuit. So much time without the ravages of human-to-human interaction had left me naked, unprepared—an emotional two-year old in a forty-five year old body, with the responsibility of a whole alien race sitting square on my shoulders. I had to pull myself together. I folded my arms. "I assume High Command sent you, to—"

She cut in, hands on hips. "To question you, yes; to get the truth out of you, yes; to see if you were lying. Of course they did!" Her arms dropped and she stormed up and down the tiny cell. "You think that's why I came?"

Her face was a portrait of incredulity. It had always been this way with her. Trying to argue with Greta was like opposing a meteor storm. But I knew she hated herself for

it. As always, I waited, watched the show. After all, beautiful-when-angry was a taste I'd acquired long ago with Greta, my first and only wife.

"You think I came wormholing all this way, not seeing my kids and ... and my *husband* for six months, for these Sphericon assholes, or for the good of humanity? And you, all we got was a one-liner eight months ago when a recon mission disappeared in this system. *Don't come back*. And even when Sphericon tried to contact you—even when *I* tried to contact you—you never replied. And then three days ago we get this ridiculous message from you about the local inhabitants' immortality."

Her voice, her gesticulations wound down. We both knew we didn't have much time.

"How old?" I said, with a calmness born of fatigue or remorse, I didn't know which.

She closed on me, her face in front of mine. I inhaled a wisp of Orion Mist. I used to buy it for her.

"What?" she said. Her eyes flicked down to my left hand. The ring was still there.

"Your kids. How old are they?"

She sealed her lips, not wanting to reply, but that was the one unbroken rule in our short-lived marriage—no question left unanswered.

"Eight and nine. Boy and girl. They're already drafted into Sphericon Academy, on Betel 5."

I bit my lip, hard; she'd waited a decade after I'd been declared MIA. And even now, she'd left them for half a year for this brief encounter. I risked standing up, placed a hand on her shoulder, felt the tremor underneath. Twenty years of confused emotions and forlorn passions engulfed us in a violent embrace. But she pushed me away, holding me back with out-stretched arms.

"No, Yuri." That same stern look, the one that only served to turn me on more. "We're being watched, remember?"

I eased back, gathered myself. Of course we were being watched, recorded: every detail, every word, every pheromone. I lowered myself onto the bench, and gestured her to join me. I tried to smile, to laugh, the way the Sylvians do when they're not sure how else to react.

"The Sylvian ship is approaching our docking bay, Sir."

Commodore Gunter Borstad occupied the helm of the Alliance flagship, *Retribution*. He controlled his crew so tight they stood to attention even when he was off-bridge; he checked every now and again. His crest of silver hair and sideburns accented his authority. He didn't acknowledge the Lieutenant who had just informed him of the vessel's arrival. Instead he scrutinised the ship's holo-image in front of him as it morphed through different sensor modes. He settled on one that showed the lone Sylvian sitting inside the small craft.

"No weapons, Sir. Not much of anything: primitive, pre-warp, limited range."

Gunter didn't like it one bit. It didn't add up. How could they be sitting on the largest nutritium find in three centuries and still be using base rocket fuel? His instincts

told him to blow the ship to hell, go to full-scale deployment now, and if they resisted, dispatch the nuclear drones to firestorm the atmosphere and leave it fallow for a decade. They didn't need it right away, after all. But they couldn't let it fall into rogue hands, either; it would destabilise the quadrant's economy.

The Sphericon maxim *Control Breeds Peace* had seen two centuries of unprecedented expansion and prosperity for humanity as it carved its way outward into the galaxy. Humanity's monopoly on warp drive technology and nutritium ore had turned the principle into a reality.

He drummed his fingers. He'd seen classified files on the Fringes, dark enemies on the far side of the Ant Nebula. They had FTL, too. War was only a matter of time. And time, in this case, was only a matter of fuel.

Gunter zoomed in on the Sylvian, who reminded him of a cartoon pig, except for the turquoise skin. No clothes, apparently. The Sylvian barely moved. As the craft swung around, Gunter focused on its human-like eyes. But no sooner had he done so, than he was taken aback as the Sylvian seemed to look up and stare directly back at him. Gunter recoiled a millimetre, and with a flick of a finger zoomed out, shifting the picture to normal mode, showing a silver-hulled ship with small cockpit windows. He cleared his throat.

"Bring our guest aboard." He heard more than a few of his bridge crew pause their tapping at control panels. But he would play this one not just by the holo but to the letter. If there was going to be a War—a straightforward incursion probably—and at the moment he saw no other course—then it would be because he decided it, and not because of some diplomatic incident or misunderstanding, or unguarded insult by someone under his command. First, they would demonstrate the universal constant of mortality, and then proceed with the peacemaking operation on the planet. The aliens would be neutralised, one way or another. The dead are always peaceful.

We sat on the bench, her head leaning on my shoulder, my eyes closed so I could better savour her scent and sense the warmth from her body, and listen to her long breaths. But time was slipping past. The Sylvian ambassador must be aboard by now, and Greta remained the biggest danger, the most random variable in this whole operation.

"Why didn't you come back, Yuri?" Her voice was soft, purged of anger.

I thought of all the reasons I'd prepared: no ship; the rest of the squad dead. But the real reason, one that I'd never voiced before, came out unbidden.

"The Sylvians are the most precious race in the galaxy. It was like finding a puppy in the middle of an asteroid field. While we say we search for peace, they're peaceful to the core. I have to protect them. At any cost. Most of all from us." I expected an argument. None came.

"You finally found your cause celebre. Something worth dying for."

"Living for." I could actually feel time slipping through our interlaced fingers—something the Sylvians had taught me, though I still didn't understand how it worked.

"My own holy grail, tele-transportation, still eludes me," she said, conversationally.

I tensed. I didn't want to discuss her work.

"What?" She never missed any of my movements or moods.

"Nothing, there's just a lot riding on my shoulders right now."

She sat up and faced me, eyes narrowing. I knew she was about to launch the perfect shield-penetrating question. I'd once told the Sylvians I'd kill her if I really had to. They had replied, or more accurately transmitted, nothing: a rare gap in their almost constant telepathic streaming. But their eyes had told me what I'd needed to hear.

Greta touched my face. "But if they really can't be killed, why do they need you to protect them?"

And there it hung. The earlier hour-long interrogation hadn't arrived at this simple question. It was all the worse coming from her, because she knew what made me tick. She stared hard at me, her eyes narrowing. She drew back. She knew I was lying.

"You haven't changed, Yuri."

I had to think fast.

Gunter waited on the bridge for the Sylvian to be brought to him. He stood on a raised dais, although when the Sylvian entered, he realised it was unnecessary: the creature was barely a metre tall. When it walked, it bobbed up and down like a child's toy. It had a blank expression on its face, as if oblivious or uncaring of what was going on around it. But Gunter detected something else that he knew few others would perceive. The Sylvian had the smell of death about it—not a real odour, for there was none he could detect—but he knew for certain that this alien perceived it was about to die. Gunter's chest expanded. It was going to be a glorious day. First the alien's death, which would end this farce, followed by a level three execution—a good old-fashioned spacing—of the traitor Venyova, and then the conquest of the Sylvian planet itself.

"You remember our honeymoon, Greta? We danced on Ganymede Prime beach after the show, and I told you something important?"

Her frown faltered. She saw through my façade as I'd hoped, ignoring what the cameras would replay later—my smiling face—and deciphered my desperation. I'd told her two things that night. One was that I loved her more than anything. But then I'd told her something else, and I had joked that it was the most important thing in the world.

At our reception there'd been a magician performing stunning tricks—making a fire-swan appear out of nowhere, for one. After the show, Greta had begged him to explain them, even just one. He'd replied that a magician's oath never to reveal the secret of the magic was far more serious than a marriage vow. Magic was a lie, of course, but, he'd added, where would we be without such a lie? It was like love. Sometimes one must just accept the lie, the magic, and not look too deeply. I'd said

later that night that he was right—the magic, the lie, was more important than reality. I prayed she remembered.

Her regard softened, and she gazed at me as if I was vanishing before her eyes. She recalled perfectly, I was sure, she always did. Of course, it must have stung because I was placing her second. She knew she would lose me again, that I wouldn't return with her. Couldn't. Tears welled up in her eyes, like morning dew on emeralds.

"I remember you said you loved me more than anything else in the galaxy," she said. "That's all I ever needed to remember."

Her complicity, her blind faith in my lie, almost undid me. My lips started to quiver, so I kissed her hard. She let me. We remained there, as pathetically close as two humans could be, light years apart compared to the Sylvians, but I didn't care. I could almost have confessed there and then, sold them out, for Greta. But I didn't.

The doors swished apart, and a polite coughing outside suggested our time was over. It was then I knew that the Sylvian was already onboard, and about to die.

Gunter watched his second in command, Colonel Abraham Larkin, prepare the weapons: knife, laser axe, maser, a nano-charge, and a hypo of Toxin delta-six-tau sat on the metal table next to the nuclear disaggregation chamber. The assembly ritual seemed to have gained the Sylvian's attention. Upright, it waddled over to watch. Larkin more than once glanced up at the Commodore, as if he hoped the Sylvian would be restrained in some way, but Gunter remained statue-like, only his eyes moving, surveying the scene.

At last, Larkin saluted. "All present and correct, Sir." As he began to leave the table, the Sylvian picked up the gleaming knife with three stubby fingers and a thumb. Immediately several grey-suited guards unholstered and levelled pistols at the creature, who seemed not to notice. Gunter flexed his right hand at the wrist, enough to prevent any of them firing. He stared in morbid fascination at what the Sylvian did next. It dragged the knife's serrated edge across its upper arm. Gunter heard the soft ripping of flesh, but no blood appeared. It then raised the knife to its eye and looked at it point-on, then slowly inserted it into its left eye, all the way up to the black hilt. Gunter's mouth opened a fraction. Larkin hesitated next to the Sylvian, who turned to look at him, the knife sticking out of its head. There were gasps from the bridge officers and guards alike, and one or two lay down their pistols in favour of heavier weapons. Eyes flashed from the creature to Gunter.

A voice splintered the shocked, silent scene. "I see you've started without me." Venyova coolly walked over to the Sylvian, and gently retracted the knife, dropping it onto the metal table where it rattled into stillness. He patted the Sylvian on the shoulder. Gunter felt a chill run down his spine as the Sylvian glanced first at Venyova, then directly at him, with a perfectly healthy pair of blue eyes.

An hour passed. I'd witnessed them try thirty killing and disintegration techniques, the scientists in their jade green uniforms clearly as baffled as they were excited by this aberration of the laws of nature. Greta turned away each time, despite the Sylvian's survival rate. I envied her.

I tried to act relaxed, but my insides churned at each 'death'. At one point when Larkin himself tried to decapitate the Sylvian with a laser, I squeezed Greta's hand so hard she uttered a muffled cry, burying her face in my shoulder. My stomach felt like it was being sucked in by a black hole. I knew what this was costing the Sylvians. Rising to my feet, I slapped my thighs for effect.

"Enough. You've seen enough. We're here to make a point, not to satisfy idle curiosity."

Commodore Borstad scrutinised me. The scientists looked up to him in supplication. That did it, luckily; he clearly despised them as he did any non-soldier. He held up his hand and the scientists, heads down, trundled off with their trolleys of recording devices into an adjoining room.

I raised my head to Borstad, but I didn't relax yet, though I dared to hope I'd pulled it off.

"Are we agreed, Commodore? They cannot be killed. Invasion would be folly. They are no threat to you, and—"

"The domes, what are they?"

It was the first time I had heard him speak, his voice quieter than I'd expected; he obviously never had to shout—rather, people had to listen. "Excuse me?" I said.

"We detected large domes evenly spaced around the planet. Our sensors can't penetrate them. You say the Sylvians are no threat. How do I know? What is in the domes?"

My heart raced, my brain scurrying for an answer that would carry enough truth to be able to stare him straight in the eye.

"They have religious significance." It floated in the air as he considered it, never taking his gaze off me. I had no desire to play poker with this man. Eventually, he appeared to reach a conclusion.

"Reassuring that immortal creatures worship something."

I managed not to sigh with relief, sketched a smile across my face, and glanced at Greta.

"Then again," he said, "humility can be a weakness."

My smile collapsed, as I realised he was about to up the stakes. I noticed the Sylvian studying him, turning its head from side to side. I knew it was reading his mind, but I had no idea what it could fathom there. I was not, after all, telepathic, or at best, maybe half-telepathic—I could receive basic messages from the Sylvians, but transmission was another matter. The Sylvian turned to face me, and an image unfolded in my head of Sylvia as a charred, pock-marked planet, then, as quickly, the image dissolved. Borstad descended from the dais.

"It seems to me," he said, "that an immortal race can still be subjugated." He approached the Sylvian, squatting down so he was eye-level with him. "I don't think your species has the killer instinct. In which case we can rule you, study you, and maybe unlock your secrets." He stood up, and addressed me. "Your demonstration has

been interesting, Venyova, but irrelevant. Unless you can demonstrate they can fight, your little side show is over.”

The Sylvian turned to transmit to me but I held up a hand. I knew they would want time to consider this, to reflect in their species-wide democratic way, but we would lose this once-only window—Borstad would send for reinforcements, a full-scale invasion and occupation fleet. Even if I could persuade the Sylvians to fight—which was unlikely—the loss of life on both sides would be devastating. I faced off the Commodore, going for the big bluff.

“Of course they can kill. Pick a target.” I stood hands on hips, facing him, aware several of his guards had levelled their weapons at the back of my head.

His eyes showed no hint of ego; instead, a gravitas borne of countless battles, sending more men and aliens to their death than anyone should have to. I felt my resolve evaporating, but had no other choice than to play it out.

“The killer instinct,” he said, to the Sylvian more than to me, “isn’t just about being able to kill. It’s about being prepared to go all the way in battle. To sacrifice everything in order to win.” Without unlocking his eyes from mine, he pointed with his right hand to Greta. “Kill her.”

I blinked. My hands dropped to my sides and I swivelled to Greta, who leapt up from her seat.

“Now wait just a goddamned minute,” she said, “I’m here as an observer. I’m here to help you!” Her voice was shaky. She looked to him, then to me, then to the Sylvian, her face shifting from angry to scared to unbelieving. I walked over to the Sylvian, closed my eyes and nodded slowly—my way of asking him to probe my mind.

“Yuri—what the hell are you doing?”

I opened my eyes and hurried back to Greta, my heart pounding with the risk I was about to take. I grabbed her flailing wrists and held them firm. I pulled her toward me, so I could whisper two short words. Her body trembled, and then she shoved me away. As soon as I released her, she hit me with a full blow to the chin that knocked me to the floor. I tasted blood. I stared at the floor centimetres beneath my nose.

“You bastard! I never should have—”

But the rest was lost in a scream as she went nova, erupting in white-hot flame. While the rest of the bridge crew shielded their eyes, still trying to watch the human torch, I kept my head down, eyes locked shut. The Sylvian transmitted a cocoon to dampen my emotions: telepathic morphine. I knew I would pay for this later. Abruptly the noise like a jet engine, and the incandescent light, were gone. I didn’t need to look. Not even ash would remain. I stayed on the ground, unable to find the strength to rise. To my surprise, Borstad’s hand appeared close to me. I took it and clambered to my feet.

“I underestimated you,” he said, and then added to the Sylvian, “both of you.”

I could find no words, wanting to throw up, but my stomach was empty. My legs threatened to give way; as if they were disgusted with what I had just allowed to happen and wanted nothing more to do with me. I glanced at the spot where Greta had stood, alive, vital, thirty seconds before, consoling myself that maybe, just maybe ...

I heard stirring behind me. I turned to see the Sylvian staring at Larkin, who was staggering away from him, eyes wide. Borstad spun around to see his second in

command raise his hands to his ears, and begin shouting, then screaming. Borstad whirled back to me, but I was just as surprised.

“Stop this, stop it now!” he commanded the Sylvian, his hands curling into fists. He then rushed toward Larkin, who had snatched up the knife, and seized his arm at the elbow before Larkin could plunge the blade into his own heart. They crashed to the floor, gasping, and then Larkin lapsed into unconsciousness. Two soldiers appeared at Borstad’s side to help him up, but he brushed them off. He got to his feet, dusted down his cobalt blue tunic, and tossed the knife onto the table. He towered over the small, innocuous-looking Sylvian, who stared upwards at him with the bland expression of one of those old-fashioned stuffed toys on ancient Earth.

“Alright,” he said, “you’ve made your—”

“Sir!” shrieked the Lieutenant at the front of the bridge. “Sir, the *Invincible* is heading towards us, gun ports open. She’s ... she’s targeting us!”

Borstad touched what must have been a sub dermal device behind his right ear to confirm. “Shields to maximum. Hail them!”

I watched the Sylvian, but it was fixed on Borstad. I’d lost control. The final round was just the two of them.

“Sir, no reply. They’re arming imploders! Our defence grid has primed all weapons!”

“Hold fire, until I give my order!” He wheeled on the Sylvian. “Stop it, damn you! My brother commands that ship. If he opens fire, I’ll have to destroy his vessel. My brother, and five hundred crew! You’ve made your point! Desist!”

The Sylvian closed his eyes and bowed his head. Borstad’s eyes glazed and he swayed a little.

“Sir! Sir, your orders, Sir!”

I strode past them both, stepping over Larkin’s body, to the Lieutenant’s station. “Stand down,” I said, my only authority vested in the calmness of my voice. He hesitated, finger poised above a red control.

“Stand down,” Borstad echoed. I turned to see him back in charge of his senses. But there was a stoop that had not been there before, his head bowed. The Lieutenant complied, just as the *Invincible* veered away from us. Borstad collected himself, and then crouched down to speak directly to the Sylvian.

“Very well. You win. We won’t be back. I’ll make sure of it. And you keep up your end of the bargain.”

The Sylvian nodded, turned, and waddled toward the exit corridor, several guards trailing after him at a respectful distance.

“Follow him Venyova. Leave now while you can. We will not meet again.”

“Wait. What did you agree?”

He walked to his command chair and sank into it. “The Sylvian agreed not to allow any non-human race to pass through this system.”

He avoided looking directly at me. His expression reminded me of my first real communication with the Sylvians—he was changed, resolved. He would go back and give a stern message to Sphericon High Command. They would be displeased, but would in the end accept his recommendation, for a while, anyway. He would resign afterward, or be retired, his fighting days over. But I knew humanity’s memory span. This small victory meant we’d earned a couple of decades, maybe a little more, then

they'd be back. But we could prepare. And in that moment I realised that I belonged with the Sylvians—it had been too long: when I thought 'we', I was with them, not my own race. I was indeed a traitor. I could never go back. I'd be executed within a month, if I was lucky. But this time I'd leave properly.

I stood to attention, facing Borstad, and saluted. It was then he looked at me, as if for the first time. He gave me a short salute. "Too bad about your wife."

My legs buckled. I had to be helped off the bridge by two soldiers who escorted me back to my transport. They set it to autopilot for me, on Borstad's orders I guessed—I was in no state. All I could think about was her. My mind filled with every detail I ever knew, my memory in cascade mode—the Sylvians needed it to reassemble her; they already had a good template. But fear that she was lost tore at me the way Chrysthian leaches rip the skin off their victims. I free-recalled everything I'd ever known about her, all the little habits, the nuances, the speech patterns, the seeming detritus of relationships that's really the enduring cement of love and the basis of character. It was her only chance—my memories held her blueprint. *Read my mind*, I thought, my forehead furrowing as I strained to transmit to the Sylvians in the central dome. *Read my mind!*

I lay on the warm rock by the steamfall in Harram Glade on Sylvia. Greta lay in my arms, my chest still damp from her tears.

"I'll never be able to leave—never see my children again, will I?"

She was right. There was nothing I could say. *We'll have our own.*

"I figured it out," she said, as if from far across the galaxy. "Tele-transportation. I was getting close on Helicon IV. The de-molecularisation was the easy part. But getting things back into the same order; that was plain intractable, no matter how much we programmed the subspace nano-builders. So, I figured maybe what we needed was a self-organising cohesion, a guiding mind." She pushed herself up onto her elbow, her still-singed hair refracting the light—they'd been a millisecond late pulling her out. "Telepathy. A thousand, or a million Sylvian minds focus to bring cohesion back to the atoms, to form the molecules, the DNA, the organs, everything."

I nodded absently.

"So, they can die."

"Everyone's mortal." The words were acid in my mouth.

"How many Sylvians really died up in that spaceship, on that bridge? How many were transported each millisecond to pull this off? How many died for peace?"

I pulled her head back onto my chest. I never like anyone to see me sad, least of all her. "Way too many."

She lay silent for a while, then levered herself up again. "Wait a minute—how did they reassemble me?"

I stroked her cheek. "It was risky. I didn't know if they could pull it off—they didn't either. But they'd studied me for years, so they knew the basics, and some of them up on the bridge were there to encode further detail, just in case ... Anyway, in some

senses they already knew you very well, from my thoughts. And ...” I couldn’t say the rest. I’d never stopped loving her, and they’d empathised with that longing, that need. Love had created the cohesive force necessary. *Wrap an equation around that.*

She squeezed my hand, reminding me how intelligent she was, and that intuition isn’t such a poor relation to telepathy.

“I’m guessing they can only teleport organic material, right? Otherwise they could have ejected the ships from the system, or transported a bomb onto their bridge.”

I nodded. “And not much of that at one time, either.” They’d never explained that part to me; said the knowledge was sacred.

As we lay there, drinking each other in and making up for two lost decades, my mind grew troubled. The Sylvians had surprised me, in two ways. They had transported more onto that bridge from the planet’s surface—from the domes to be precise—than was necessary for the immortality show. Others had gone up and down to read the scientists’ minds and download their brains of all their technological knowledge, including propulsion and weapons.

That had been shock enough, if it hadn’t been coupled with the second observation. On the bridge, when the Sylvian controlled Larkin’s mind, then those of the *Invincible*’s command crew, I’d picked up some of the telepathic storm-front. Of course, no humans had actually died, so in practice the Sylvian pacifism I’d known since arriving was still intact. But in Sylvian law, inevitably for a telepathic race, thought was just as much fact as action. And I’d seen not just determination or even brinkmanship, but the seeds of a sense of real power, of destructiveness, and—the word kept coming back to me—of bloodlust. This encounter had changed them.

They’d never known a serious predator before, and they’d proven to be a quick study. On impulse, I opened my mind to hear the Sylvians’ thoughts. I waited several minutes, but they weren’t transmitting to me. I felt a chill, and pulled Greta closer.

### **‘The Sylvian Gambit’ was selected by David Kernot:**

*While I was reading Barry Kirwan’s The Sylvian Gambit, I initially thought it was going to be your stock standard space opera, but then I discovered I could not have been any more wrong. This is an excellent piece of writing. It’s a story about trust, about love. The setting is indeed space opera, but it’s concerned with mankind’s arrogance, and in many ways highlights our predictability. It begs the question: what would a planet do, when confronted by a hostile race? What strategy would it adopt to increase its chance for survival? I found this a quite enjoyable tale, and one with subtle undercurrents.*