

THE SAPPHIRE SAGA | BOOK 2

THE SAPPHIRE SONG

ROBERT L. FULLER

AUTHOR OF *THE SAPPHIRE SWORD*



PROLOGUE

The lone robed figure glided over a floor of polished stone, its surface reflective as a mirror and smooth as glass, as if the figure hovered in midair above a ceiling far below, where stars winked and flickered like living things beyond an enormous translucent dome.

At the end of the vast chamber lay a terraced platform where a single throne stood, hewn from the very stone from which it rose.

Upon the throne sat a creature who watched silently as the visitor approached, observing every detail with its myriad eyes. When the figure finally reached the foot of the lowest step, then dropped to its knees as protocol demanded, the creature lifted a single, welcoming appendage.

“Rise, Kato, and speak swiftly. I grow impatient for news.”

The visitor nodded and stood to his feet, clasping hands behind his back. “The rumors are true, my liege.”

The creature grunted cynically. “I know of more rumors than you can imagine, Kato. And were a fraction true, I’d surrender my crown here and now. To which rumors do you refer?”

“The sword has been found.”

Though the words were simple enough, the patterns of sound that flowed from Kato’s mouth seemed to dance about as phantoms, refusing to be heard. The creature waited in silence as the news finally

crystallized within his network of brains. “Are you certain of this?” he asked. “Peddle falsities at your peril.”

Kato spoke without flinching. “As certain as one can be of such things, my liege. Rumors are still rumors.”

“But you trust your sources?”

“With my very life.”

The creature slowly leaned backward, resting his head against the cold stone surface of his throne. He closed all of his eyes but one, which turned upward to the skylight far above, where the slivered crescent of their closest moon glowed amber.

“Then the prophecies are true,” he said, hardly loud enough for the other to hear. “And the tide is already turning.”

“What are we to do, sire?” Kato asked.

But the creature on the throne made no move to answer.

In a bold breach of decorum, Kato spoke his mind. “I suggest we seize it before others of lesser ilk. We must take it for ourselves if we ever hope to restore our former glory.”

“Yes,” the creature rasped. “Indeed we must. But make no mistake that even now, half the galaxy is already searching.”

“We must be first then,” Kato said. “Every last scout and ranger must be deployed at once.”

The creature nodded slowly, never looking down from the endless expanse above them. “Have you ever wondered how it will end, Kato?” he asked, his voice deep and velvet as a long-sought dream. “What will become of us all?”

Kato didn’t answer—just raised his eyes to the heavens as well.



CHAPTER ONE

Being an alien wasn't always easy; then again, it had its perks. When you're an alien, you can do things humans can't—like breathe water, shape-shift, or even fly, depending on your species. And that's to say nothing of your expanded culinary horizons. Earthlings might love their pizza and tacos and chocolate-covered everything. But you've never really lived if you haven't had a fresh-baked Negnod dipped in Flazarian eye butter. Talk about heaven!

Then again, humans *did* have bacon, which has yet to be dethroned as the top universal breakfast meat, according to intergalactic polls.

The hard part of being an alien was finding out you actually *were* one.

Imagine living your whole life as a human, walking around on Earth like everyone else. Reading books. Eating cheeseburgers. Studying astrophysics. Then all of a sudden you learn from a talking dog that you aren't human at all, and that you actually hail from a planet on the far side of the Milky Way galaxy.

On any normal day, for any normal person, this would have been shocking news indeed. But the O'Ryan children learned of their alien heritage on a rocket ship barreling away from Earth, not knowing if they would ever see their father again, much less the planet, which was being swiftly swallowed in pestilential darkness.

Just your normal, hum-drum, run-of-the-mill moment of eureka.

Scout O’Ryan still wasn’t used to the absolute craziness of their new existence. Most of her childhood was spent exploring the mountain behind her house with her brothers, searching for wild cherries to snack on or wilder insects to catalogue and collect. She missed lazy evenings reading by the fire, listening to the flames crackle and pop against piñon logs, sipping a giant mug of hot chocolate with so much whipped cream and extra cocoa she’d be sick by bedtime, with no regret at all. She missed leaning against her father’s shoulder as he read books on the couch, his socked feet propped up on an ottoman, chuckling at something on the page. Their day-to-day lives were altogether simple and contained and predictable.

But those days were long gone.

And outer space was their home now.

Of course venturing beyond Earth into realms too numerous and dazzling to describe had obvious benefits. Planets so large and lovely they looked like pearls shining in the cosmos. Sparkling star clusters like diamonds flung wide. And great clouds of glowing gas called nebulae that proved space wasn’t so dark and cold and lonely as it seemed, even if it had the tendency to try to kill you.

The problem was just how endless everything was. How empty. Traversing the stars, she sometimes felt like an ant crossing a vast desert at midnight, with no end in sight.

But at least they had the *Nautilus*, the most amazing spaceship in the galaxy.

Scout leaned her head against the cool glass wall of the rollervator as it sped along its track, zooming past windows full of stars. She’d discovered the perfect remedy for annoying brothers or boredom was a quick ride on the ship’s transportation system all by herself. She’d hop on board, ask for a grand tour, and plop down on the best seat at the very front, where she could feel like she was flying. Sometimes she could ride the rollervator for hours, alone with her thoughts as she watched the wonders of the *Nautilus* glide by all around her. There

were so many things to see and do on the ship, but she'd hardly experienced half of them even months after leaving Earth.

There was the petting zoo with all its crazy creatures, both cute and terrifying. She'd gone there almost every day at first until a ferret-like creature covered in bright green fur tried to build a nest in her hair. Getting the smell out had taken three days' worth of vigorous shampooing.

The ship also had botanical gardens with dazzling fruits. Museums with the coolest exhibits imaginable. And even an exercise gym where you could fly around in zero gravity, kicking from wall to wall to maintain your muscle tone. Scout much preferred the ice cream parlor to the gym, though, and seeing how many scoops of double-chocolate-fudge she could stack onto a cone before they started falling. The boys loved the arcade, which had the best games from a hundred different worlds. But Scout's favorite spot on the ship, by far, was her room.

"Okay," she said to the rollervator. "Please take me to my kingdom now."

The transparent pod knew exactly what she meant, diverting down a central tunnel along the belly of the ship until it reached the primary living quarters and slowed to a stop.

An oval door retracted, and Scout hopped out.

"Thanks for the tour," she said, then turned to enter their living quarters as the rollervator zoomed away.

Her bedroom was a disaster. The floor was a minefield of crumpled papers, stuffed animals, stale pastry crusts hard as rocks, and half-empty cups of aging hot chocolate so filled with mold blooms they looked like science experiments. Dad chided her for being so messy, but she knew he was even messier in his workshop.

"It's the plight of being creative!" she'd told him once, though he still begged her to clean up so as to avoid an outbreak of malaria.

She smiled at the memory, wholly unbothered by the carnage at her feet, then lifted a latch to the back door and stepped outside. She

basked in simulated sunlight as soothing as any ray she'd ever felt back on Earth. The air was filled with an array of intoxicating perfumes, lilac and lavender and lily.

With plush green grass cool beneath her feet, she strolled forward to a low knoll where a chair waited beside a large wooden chest and handcrafted easel.

She sat down in the chair and ran her hand over the top of the chest, its dark-grained surface covered in a beautiful array of intricate carvings. It was a gift from her father, built and carved in gratitude for saving his life. Mountains and forests and creatures of all sorts were etched into the wood, complete with a sun shining at its center, sending out beams of wooden light in all directions.

Carved into the center of the sun itself was the Sapphire Sword. Her heart fluttered.

The memory of what had happened back on Earth was still so fresh and so surprising, her mind had yet to comprehend it. But for now, the sight of that shining weapon, even in wood, filled her with wonder.

Her hand instinctively drifted to her dagger sheathed at her side. Running her fingers over its hilt, she remembered how the weapon had joined with her brothers', fusing together to form the sword itself. But there was far more at play than some mystical weapon. For when the blade finally appeared, defeating the pestilence, she had seen something—*someone*—in the very heart of the sword. And that someone had spoken to them. The words had never left her head.

Do not be afraid.

From the sword itself, like a cascade, flowed a peace indescribable. Like nothing she had ever felt before. Washing away doubt and fear and dread with endless waves of hope. She had never wanted the moment to end.

None of them had spoken much about what happened that day—as if they thought speaking of the sword, or what they saw, might diminish its memory. It all felt like a glorious, luminous dream.

With a sigh, she gripped the lid with both hands and lifted it upward, where it locked into place, fully ajar, revealing an astounding array of painting supplies. Tube after tube of oil paint, bouquets of brushes bound together with bright golden ribbon, palette knives gleaming silver in the sun, and a wooden palette with perfectly placed finger holes. Bright white terry cloths, all folded and stacked for ready use. Sea sponges and clusters of sharpened pencils. The chest held tiny shelves filled with tiny vials of different powders and liquids, all sealed with cork or wax. On the underside of the lid, held secure by a crisscross of leather straps, were several blank white canvases of various sizes and one half-finished painting, which she retrieved and placed upon the easel.

After several minutes of gazing at the painting—a vibrant blue sky with mountains beneath, jagged along the skyline like a great serrated blade—she took up the palette, unscrewed the lids to her favorite tubes of paint, and squirted out a rainbow of tiny blobs.

With tongue clenched gently between her teeth, she dipped her paintbrush in a dollop of pure white oil paint, filling the bristles with the glistening hue, then lifted the brush to the canvas and began to paint a succession of swirls, billowing outward in concentric circles of increasing size. When she lowered her brush, the cloud she'd created proved more realistic than any she had made before, a cottony plume of cumulus perfection.

Her stomach tingled with nervous delight, for she knew what was about to happen.

Gazing beyond the canvas she saw mountains hazed purple in the distance, their peaks and slopes identical to what she'd painted just that morning. The sky's blue matched so precisely with the blue she'd laid down herself, it was hard to tell where the canvas ended and the heavens began.

Looking up into the empty blue sky above her, a wisp of white suddenly appeared, swirling round like cotton candy, larger and larger

until it coalesced into a billowing cloud of brilliant white. It was the exact same shape and shade of the one she'd just painted, like a mile-high ball of cotton.

With a smile of pure delight, she reloaded her brush and painted a second cloud. And just as before, a cloud of identical shape but vastly different scale appeared overhead. Once the sky was strewn with the perfect ratio of cumulus, stratus, and cirrus clouds, she dropped the brush in a jar of turpentine and swished the bristles clean.

For the next hour she added detail after detail and layer upon layer to the scene. A deep, primeval forest of spruces and pines. A stream gurgling along the forest's edge. Then an ancient live oak, with ponderous limbs extending out like elephant trunks shrouded in leaves, which she painted one by one, like emeralds set in a woody crown.

When she felt the scene was complete and leaned back in her chair, goose bumps swept over every inch of her skin.

The meadow had transformed all around her, mimicking her every brushstroke, her every choice of color and shade. She knew it wasn't real. Merely a holographic projection. But it remained a kaleidoscope of such beauty her eyes began to mist. For she knew who had made such a miracle possible.

It was all Robin Hood's doing—their canine, shape-shifting space-guide who had watched over her family for years on end, protecting, observing, learning everything he could. He knew how much Scout loved to paint and had designed and constructed her personalized living quarters long before she ever arrived.

The boys bragged that their rooms were better, that hers was just a big frilly girl's room. But she knew nothing could compare to what she'd discovered outside her bedroom window, as if the meadow had been waiting for her there her whole life.

She wanted nothing more at that moment than to hug her beloved dog as hard as she could, bury her face in his fur, and beg him to come back to life and be with them forever.

But it seemed that even in a world of miracles and wonder, some things simply weren't meant to be.

Scout could hardly think of that day without feeling torn to pieces. Earth was saved. Darkness was vanquished. But Robin Hood was gone, having given his life to save them. Then, right as they rocketed away from Earth after seeing it saved from certain doom, their father let them in on a little secret. Something she was not prepared for. At all. In any way, shape, form, or fashion.

Her mother was alive.

Even as he tried his best to explain, his face grew splotchy-red with guilt as the truth poured out like an avalanche. Her mom hadn't died of a mysterious illness when Scout was just an infant. She wasn't buried in the local cemetery and had certainly not donated her organs to science. This lifelong, so-called fact that had left a void in her heart larger than a black hole was totally and completely made-up.

Scout's heart had pounded so loudly in her ears it was all she could do to hear what he was saying. She would never, ever, *ever* forget the moment when her dad began to weep.

"I'm sorry," he stammered like a little boy. "I'm so sorry. But you have to understand why I couldn't tell the truth."

Slugger, Flint, and Scout were too stunned to speak.

Their father saw the look of betrayal on their faces. "It was for your protection. Please believe me!"

Our protection? she thought. *Protection?* How was it protection to rob a little girl of her mother? How was it protection to force her to grow up in a house of stinky boys year after year without a mom's shoulder to cry on? She'd been a half-orphan for as long as she could hold a memory, only to find out she'd never been an orphan at all, that her mother was actually out there, alive and well. Which almost made it worse.

Why hadn't she returned?

Dad explained things as best he could. Mom had done what was

necessary for their survival. A secret threat had been reported, looming and unavoidable, spelling their certain demise if no action was taken. In a millisecond decision, the woman had vanished without a trace, effectively diverting enemy attention and saving their lives.

At the telling of the tale, Scout's heart felt squeezed into jelly. She was beyond elated at the news, but simultaneously dismayed. Why didn't their mother at least leave notes for them? Something they could hold and cherish and keep?

Regardless of their poor father's pleas, Scout wept and wept.

But if her mother was alive, why did she cry?

Wasn't that *good* news?

A billion times yes!

The revelation was like a sunbeam breaking through a lifetime of gray and gloom, shining on the heart of a daughter who had never heard her mother's voice, at least that she could remember.

But now she had an aching hope—a desperate dream—where before she had only cold resolve that her mom was gone. Knowing her mother *might* still be out there was almost too much to bear—as the chance of not ever finding her would break her heart all over again, never to be mended.

"Daddy," she whimpered, falling into his arms. "If she's alive... why didn't she come back?"

Her sobbing shook her whole body, as if she might crack in two.

"Children," the man said, beckoning them closer until he had all three pulled tight, wrapped in his arms. "I don't expect you to comprehend everything all at once. But *this* you must understand." He looked down into their watching faces. "I will not rest...I will not stop...I will not give up until I find your mother. Even if I have to scour the entire universe to do so. Even if it takes my whole life...to my very last breath...I will not stop looking."

They saw the fire in his eyes and knew he meant every single word.

And thus their new quest began.

But it had proven much harder than they could have imagined, for the galaxy is a very, very, very large place, and they had set out with only a handful of tenuous guesses on where to even begin. The situation was baffling to Scout at first. Didn't her father know everything? Didn't he *come* from the stars and therefore know exactly where to look? But as time crept by without so much as a hint or a clue, she began to realize how much he *didn't* know.

They were flying blind into an endless abyss.

And her mother might be lost forever.

Though Scout had every possible comfort she could imagine on the ship, her heart had felt increasingly squeezed, bit by bit, with every day of disappointment. She now felt as if a thousand pounds pressed down upon her shoulders. She couldn't keep this up for much longer without losing her mind, it seemed.

With a heavy sigh she reached in her pocket and pulled out the old photograph her dad had given her. It was frayed on the edges and faded on its face, but it was as precious to her as all the stars in the universe. Running a delicate finger over the glossy surface, she looked into her mother's sky-blue eyes, over her jet-black tresses, at her smile that could shame the sun. Her mother hadn't been fond of the picture, Scout's dad had explained, because she'd just woken up from a fitful sleep and felt as large and unappealing as a beached whale. Her belly was so enormous it almost burst through her tattered pajamas.

"That's you," Dad had said, pointing to her mother's distended stomach. "She was ready to pop!"

The picture was taken two days before Scout was born and less than a year before her mother vanished.

Scout propped the picture up on the base of the easel and clutched her favorite brush. She mixed a series of paints until she reached the perfect color, which she tapped with her brush and brought to the canvas with a trembling hand. How or why she never thought of

painting her mother into the scene was beyond her. But within a minute, the addition was complete. She slowly lowered her brush.

With just a few deftly placed lines of paint, a woman in a white cotton dress with black hair and a heart-shaped face stood amid the daisies she'd painted the week before. She wore a wide-brimmed straw hat with purple ribbon tied loosely as a band and carried a small wicker basket over the crook of an arm.

Terrified of what she would or wouldn't see, Scout couldn't bring herself to peek around the edge of the canvas. But in the end, she swallowed, girded her courage, and slowly leaned to the left until her eyes could see the full scope of the meadow below.

Down near the main curve of the stream where the daisies grew thick and tall, a figure now stood in a creamy white cotton dress, carrying a basket with a cluster of freshly cut flowers. Though Scout had not painted her as such, she stood facing the stream and the darkened woods beyond.

"Mom," she whispered in disbelief. The brush fell from her weakened fingers and landed in the grass at her feet. "Momma?"

The figure in the distance did not respond to Scout's call, though she did sway slowly, almost imperceptibly, from side to side as if moving in rhythm with a silent song.

Scout rose to her feet and brandished all the courage she could muster before starting down the meadow's incline toward the woman by the water.

When she came within ten feet of her mother's miraculous form, she stopped and spoke in a wavering voice. "Momma?" But the woman seemed unable to hear her. When she drew within three feet, arms outstretched for the embrace Scout had dreamed of her whole life, the woman stepped just out of reach. No matter how many times Scout tried, the woman remained untouchable.

"Momma, please," she begged.

In a cruel moment of clarity, Scout remembered this was not her

mother at all, but a digital projection, a holograph so vivid as to be virtually indistinguishable from the real thing.

I just want to see her face, Scout thought to herself as the woman proceeded with her work of picking flowers and placing them carefully in her basket, always facing away from her daughter.

Tears ran in glistening lines down Scout's cheeks. She knew it wasn't real, but it hurt just as keenly.

"Scout!" A voice echoed down from the clouds overhead, hidden behind the projection screen. "Scout, are you there?"

Her father.

"Yes, Daddy," she answered, wiping her face with her hands. "I'm here."

"Excellent! I need you to join me in the main hangar bay in twenty minutes."

"What's in the hangar bay?" she asked, though she knew he'd been working on something there for months.

"A special surprise you won't want to miss!" the man said. "Don't be late!"

"Scout's honor," she mumbled. She took a final look at her fabricated mother, then slowly turned away.