

Dark Space: Colonizers of the Universe

By Evan Louis French

1)

Deep in the history of the universe, in the far expanse of dark space, the aquamarine colored planetoid size starship, Ox 73, operated undetected for 50,000 years. The ship was one of a hundred such ships sent out to colonize the universe with humanoid species. The original humanoids determined that the survival of a species depended upon colonization of many galaxies. A single world, solar system, or galaxy in the overall scheme of the universe was small and fleeting in time. These original humanoids called themselves Oxenians and all humanoids are descendants of that parent species. Oxenians skin color was an orange-yellow at birth which turned orange in adulthood and orange-red in old age. Eye color ranged from yellow, orange, red, and brown. All males were naturally bald, but females had a variety of hair color. Most men and women were of similar athletic build, almost three meters tall with elongated heads. Their lifespan was 250 years. Ox 73 possessed a population of one million, and colonies were established using a combination of the Ox 73 crew which naturally expanded due to child birth aboard the ship. Some crew members chose to colonize specific planets. The second method occurred by genetic altered birth. A separate section of the ship raised humanoids adapted for specific planets, so as to be suited to the environmental conditions found on those planets.

Not all colonies succeeded due to numerous reasons. Some colonies failed due to internal strife, but unexpected causes from environmental conditions were a common reason. While the humanoid colonies were meant to get along with indigenous species, that didn't always happen. Sometimes the humanoid colonies wiped out the indigenous cultures, but sometimes the indigenous species wiped out the colonies. For that reason, most colonies settled planets that had not yet evolved intelligent species capable of building a technological civilization. All colonies started with 1000 members and sufficient supplies and technology which used properly enabled an advanced civilization within a couple of thousand years. The population would grow large enough to support continuous development until it built its own starships. That was the true goal of all the colonies. The colonies that went according to plan retained the knowledge of their origins as descendants of those from the stars, but those which failed either died out or struggled thousands of years and drifted into primitive behavior. Ox 73 became mythology and some of those colonies never attained interstellar status. Ox 73 operated primarily in dark space composed of dark energy and matter which gave it advantages over operations in normal space. Travel in dark space was faster, used less energy, and concealed their presence, and for that reason, it was a closely guarded secret, even from any of those people who became colonizers. The ship could easily be outfitted for conquest, but Oxenians were colonizers, not warriors.

2)

An explosion rocked the starship Ox 73 as it dropped out of dark space. Dark space, the mysterious part of the universe containing dark energy and matter, enabled Ox 73 to travel undetected and at greater than light speed. Dark space and normal space interact, but dark space is more ethereal than normal space. In dark space, Ox 73 converted dark energy and matter into resources that the ship and its crew used to sustain operations over extended periods. In normal space the resources would have been depleted much faster. Chief Commander Bayes questioned, "Was that an attack on our starboard?"

"Yes sir." Nim the flight control operator responded.

"But how is that possible?" The crew all knew something terrible was wrong, because most all space faring species used normal space. Dark space allowed Ox 73 to exploit the enigma of dark energy and matter. If another species had tracked them through dark space, then it could endanger their entire mission. "Status." Bayes requested.

"Minimal damage but we're surrounded by a fleet. The ships are an eclectic group." Loch, communication chief, said, "The attacking fleet is transmitting."

Bayes responded, "Let's see." The transmission is converted to a universal augments which allowed visual and audio in real time.

"I'm Lord Admiral Mentor Wain of the 4th Raider Fleet. I demand your immediate surrender. Your crew will be treated well. I can assure you of that."

Mentor Wain wore an unusual uniform that made him look flamboyant. His humanoid head was topped with a gold crown, form fitted to his forehead, completely covering his hair, if he had any. His face was very angular with sharp features. His eyes were bright crimson and he had dark brown skin. His shoulders were broad and strong and he exuded confidence and control. Mentor Wain's command over the 4th Raider Fleet was a dictatorship. The title of Lord Admiral was not common among raider fleets. The raider fleets cooperated with each other as much as they warred among themselves. The original raider fleets originated outside the galactic cluster, Zobar, where the current conflict erupted. Their home galaxy, Fider 1, was home to a space faring species called Walwars. They were the original raiders, but they forcedly conscripted other species to fill their ranks. Mentor's ancestors had been forced into service long ago. All raider fleets were designed for a specific purpose, to plunder and pillage. The starships that made up the fleets were varied due to captured vessels of their victims. The raiders did not settle planets, they conquered and exploited. Mentor's ship was a large warship called the Opulent. Fifty thousand people of various species made up the crew, a crew large enough to run full operations at all times. Mentor, though a dictator, had many advisors and support personnel. His fleet contained 4000 ships of all different makes and models, acquired from several galaxies. Most of the ships were of moderate size, containing crews of 3000 to 5000 people. A few ships were nearly as large as Mentor's, and the remainder were smaller ships with single pilots or crews less than 100. A single fleet possessed sufficient combat power to conquer entire solar systems. Each ship had a commander, and all raider commanders were strong and harsh.

Strict and brutal acts of discipline held crews intact, but opportunistic crew members would lead rebellions, coups, and mutinies trying to seize command. If successful, the crew would submit to the new leader; but if unsuccessful, the mutineers would be tortured and humiliated in front of the entire fleet. During active wars and raids, mutinies were few, but many during long voyages to new systems and galaxies when boredom ruled.

Chief Bayes Euler had been elected as leader of Ox 73 one and a half years before the raider attack. Each leader served a single two-year term. Bayes, a steady fellow, acted reserved in his personal life, but the crew respected his leadership skills, refined during his years as Chief Communication Officer. Bayes possessed the typical orange skin color of a middle aged humanoid aboard the Ox. Bayes had a rounded face with piercing yellow eyes and a small flat nose and thin lips which he habitually held tight when under stress.

Bayes responded to Mentor's demand for surrender. "This is Chief Commander Bayes Euler and Ox 73 is on a peaceful mission of colonization to ensure the survival of humanoids across the universe. As a humanoid yourself, you should appreciate this. Obviously, you are a descendant of our efforts. I respectfully request you withdraw your fleet."

Mentor laughed at the very idea that he would voluntarily withdraw his fleet. Even if he wanted to, his crew would immediately mutiny. He retorted, "You're an idealist. No species is immune to extinction. You will surrender now or be compelled." In reality, Mentor was merely stalling as his forces prepared to attack and board the Ox.

"You do realize that we can leap to dark space and you cannot do anything to stop us. I implore you to let us proceed unmolested." Mentor eyed Bayes. "It's a bluff. If you could leap to dark space right now, you would."

3)

Mentor called Bayes bluff. Ordinarily, Ox 73 could immediately jump to dark space leaving a normal space starship unable to attack or pursue, but the AI override system had been damaged by the initial attack. Ox 73 dropped from dark space to pick up and release probes and the autonomous system continued standard procedures which Mentor planned to exploit. Aboard Ox 73, the technicians had already begun manual override procedures which took 20 minutes under ideal conditions, but with the impending attack by the raiders, time was of the essence.

"How long until the probe hatches are closed?" Caturin, chief of security asked Tarhan, lead technician.

"The system is fried. Give us all the time you can." He responded.

"Great! Okay. You heard him." Caturin said. Her security unit had trained for this type of attack, but they were untested in actual combat. Ox 73 had few internal problems. This would be the

first attack ever on the ship, and a group of violent raiders were about to board by the probe hatches with unknown armor and weaponry. Lucky for them, the raiders wanted to take the ship intact, so the weapons would be low destruction types. A raider ship broke from formation and established a tractor beam on the probe hatches, then a group of infantry raiders entered the Ox from the tractor beam. The hatches were large enough to permit 20 raiders at a time.

When the raiders finally attacked, 43 of the 75 hatches had been manually closed, but a large number of raiders made it through and established a foothold. Caturin ordered. "Fire at will. Don't allow them to press forward." If the raiders cleared the probe hatches and entered the probe staging area, then it would allow them to bring thousands of troops aboard. The security forces and raiders exchanged fire, but the raiders heavy infantry shields gave them a distinct advantage. Caturin saw her security forces waver, but she led them into the thick of the fight. Over her voice comm she called. "Bring up reinforcements now and push the raiders out of hatches 57-61." Then she snapped to Tarhan, "Get those hatches on manual override now." The raiders began to release their foothold on the ship. Caturin immediately noticed their weakened resolve. She shouted. "All units forward. No quarter." Everyone knew it meant to show no mercy. They pressed forward with the weight of an iron fist, and crushed all opposition. The battle cost the Ox security force 500 people and 1100 injured. The raiders retreated with a loss of 98 dead and 4 captured. The probe hatches were secured and Ox 73 leaped to dark space. Technically, Ox 73 won the battle, but Caturin knew it was at a heavy cost. A few victories like that and the Raider Fleet would win the bigger war.

4)

Mentor Wain sat in his personal quarters waiting for a report on the captured probes. His quarters were extensive and luxurious. Precious metals from numerous worlds that had been plundered embellished the walls. On those walls hung trophies of all kinds, including heads of intelligent species that the raiders decimated. His favorite trophies were artworks of those species, and he prided himself on knowing everything about them; which species produced them, relevant time period, major artists, and particular cultural meanings the art had for each species. He presented himself as a cultured and enlightened leader, but he acted like a despot. Mentor's advisors sat with him, they ate from a huge collection of foods and drinks from the last planet plundered. Mentor spoke of his newest art collection rather than the battle with Ox 73. The advisors would listen to the report before making any suggestions, if they deemed them necessary. Most of these type sessions were to feed Mentor's ego.

Vetter, an aquatic species which resembled a squid, entered the quarters. "Initial analysis of the captured probes show they were built of normal matter, but the energy signature is unique." Vetter, the lead engineer aboard the Opulent blurted out.

"Dark energy?" Mentor questioned. He knew dark energy and matter existed, but the initial engagement with the Ox 73 provided the first proof that ships could operate within it. His curiosity was practical as well as theoretical. Raiding planets from dark space would make the 4th Raider Fleet the ultimate war machine.

"No Sir. It's a unique signature, but normal energy. The technology is more advanced than anything we have."

"Good. Reverse engineer it and integrate it with our weapons."

"My engineering team works on it as we speak. I think we can use it to track Ox 73, but it will require effort. Too bad they escaped." Vetter noted.

"It's of little concern now. My primary interest succeeded. We determined that the mythical ship, Ox 73, does in fact exist and operates in dark space and normal space. That alone ensured our efforts here are worthwhile. Furthermore, my infantry breached the ship and gained visual knowledge of the interior. Finally, we captured probes which may provide new knowledge."

Mentor congratulated himself. Then he added, "If you can find a way to track the Ox, then you will be rewarded greater than you can imagine. Otherwise, we will need to wait for my contact aboard the Ox to feed us a location. I prefer to track them rather than depend upon spies." The advisors concurred but offered no extra advice.

5)

Bayes ordered a meeting of major personnel to the planning center located directly above the flight control room. The planning center contained comm stations to access information, but otherwise it was a rounded room with a table for members to sit and talk or argue various operational issues. The architecture of the Ox favored utility and efficiency in work areas, but personal quarters varied greatly.

Bayes asked. "Caturin. Can you explain how we were detected?"

"My security team and I believe the 4th Raider Fleet must have stumbled upon our probes by accident. They probably waited for whoever came along to retrieve them. Then, they attacked. Obviously, Mentor Wain is just an opportunistic fleet commander." Caturin responded.

"Likely. It is convenient that the first attack damaged the very system we needed to leap back to dark space." Distal Arrand, chief of colonization, said. As the oldest member of Ox's officers, he spoke up without shame and stated his opinions freely. Distal had a long standing conflict with security due to his belief that all colonies should be outfitted with dark space technology. He thought the security measures used to guard dark space technology from colonies put them at risk against indigenous species. In meetings, security received his contempt.

Bayes asked. "You have a different theory?"

"I do. It makes more sense to me that a spy fed information to the raiders." Distal suggested.

Caturin retorted. " Our crew is loyal. I find it unlikely we have been betrayed. It was most likely coincidence that the override system failed. "

"Have the prisoners talked?" Bayes asked, he sensed a disagreement about to boil over into a heated argument. He tried to steer the discussion while letting opinions flow freely. He won support from personnel numerous times by the simple tactic of redirection.

" Not yet, but we may be able to offer something in exchange for information. They appear to all have an opportunistic streak. We can turn that to our advantage." Caturin said.

"It's unlikely a foot soldier involved in the first attack would have information about a spy." Distal remarked.

"Forever the optimist." Caturin said emphasizing the sarcasm. "But the information they have may prove they just happened upon our probes and took advantage."

Distal huffed. "If the system failure was coincidence, then I suppose the probes being detected by the raiders involved the incompetence of security. Probe stealth falls under security." He directed blame directly at Caturin, and the implication meant she might be a spy.

Caturin stood up and her orange skin turned red in anger. "My security team repulsed the raiders and ensured the safety of the Ox, first and foremost. A probe detected in normal space represents one of our greatest threats. It always has, and my security team followed the same procedures that have been in place 50,000 years."

Bayes interjected. "Caturin is correct. I reviewed security procedures after the battle and she and her team did their duty."

Caturin added. "And let's remember. A lot of good people died protecting our ship. The raiders are the enemy, not members of our crew."

Distal gazed at Caturin but sat silent.

Tarhan spoke to break the tension between Caturin and Distal. "Don't forget. The raiders devastated the probe hatches during the battle. They also captured probes."

Distal smirked. "Basically, we gave them advanced technology, but we begrudge our own colonies dark space technology." He looked at the frowns around the room, and decided not to say anything else. He knew he made his point, but Bayes already decided Caturin faultless. Distal always blamed others for things that happened. It didn't matter who was at fault, if he disliked someone, they got blamed.

"It appears we need to review all of our policies and procedures. I expect we will encounter the raiders again if we're not careful." Bayes recommended. "I want to see what you all come up

with by this time tomorrow." As the crew got up to leave, Bayes waved Caturin over. He did not get up. She came forward and stood rigidly. She felt nervous but tried not to show him. He rarely called someone to stay after a meeting and she thought he might discipline her for her outburst at Distal, not to mention the heavy casualties during the battle. Showing emotion on duty by a security team member looked weak in the eyes of other crew members, so she felt embarrassed. She concealed her thoughts and concerns and waited for disciplinary action. If he demoted her, she could kiss her career goodbye. Bayes stared at her for a long moment. Then he said, "Maybe Distal is right." Her heart dropped and she started to say something, but he continued, "I mean about the issue of a spy. It worries me that treachery aboard the ship is possible, but we need to consider who might do such a thing."

"Yes Sir."

"I have every confidence in you. You're smart, dedicated, and properly trained. I prefer you figure this out discreetly. If others suspect a spy aboard, it might affect morale." Bayes explained his reasoning.

Caturin left the room relieved in one sense but with a heavy burden placed on her. Not only did she need to review and update security procedures, upgrade defense and weapons systems, and coordinate with technicians to carry out new processes; but she now needed to investigate a possible spy or spy ring.

6)

The next day all team leaders submitted reviews of policies and procedures to Bayes. In fact, the submissions only included summaries of the timeframe to complete actual reviews. Bayes, like all leaders, asked for things in short order that any reasonable person knew was impossible. The summaries sufficed to satisfy his request while the real work of review and change would take months in a best case scenario. Ox 73 flew through dark space in the galactic cluster of Zobar. The cluster contained 53 galaxies, and Ox 73 had just started operations in the cluster when the raiders attacked. The standard procedures for operations in new galaxies included sending the first wave of probes to make general assessments. Ox 73 spent 100 years in each galaxy to colonize specific planets. During that time, they released and picked up probes every few months, but after the raider attack, the first priority was devising new probe release and pickup procedures. Tarhan and Caturin coordinated over new probe procedures. They determined that probes needed new stealth technology to avoid raiders. The upgraded versions took two months to complete, but they doubted it would be enough. Bayes approved test launching a batch to determine if raiders detected them. The launch site typically occurred in normal space within a sector of a galaxy, but Caturin feared dropping into normal space in the galaxy. If the raiders detected changes in normal space where they dropped out, then any stealth added to the probes would be of no consequence. She thought it better to leave the galaxy and release them in intergalactic normal space, with detection risks diminished. Probe pickup could be done within the galaxy as long as pickup locations varied and the probe stealth worked. Distal found himself busy with new colonization procedures. He also needed,

much to his displeasure, to coordinate with Caturin on new security policies for colonies. The raiders augmented the risk to colonizers. The Oxiens faced risks courageously when colonizing new planets, and they knew that not all colonies succeeded. The new risk posed by the raiders increased the stakes, but did not deter them. Colonization was Ox 73's primary mission and all crew members agreed it must continue despite the threat of the raiders. While they all agreed on colonization, two main factions existed. The one upheld the long standing policy of keeping dark space technology a secret from new colonies. The other believed all colonies should be given dark space technology. Each side had many reasons why their view was correct. Caturin got to hear it all while coordinating with all the different teams while reviewing and updating procedures. This position allowed her to discreetly investigate possible spies which their prisoners had confirmed.

Caturin reported daily to Bayes. On the eve before releasing the upgraded probes, she reported to him. "Sir. The probes will be ready by morning."

"Good. Do you have any new information about the spy issue?"

"Unfortunately no. The crew is pretty much divided on the dark space issue and we failed to find hard evidence that any crew member communicated with the raiders either before or after the attack."

Bayes asked. "Do you think the prisoners misled us about a spy?"

"I'm not so sure anymore. I'm open to either possibility. I think the dark space issue is the only real motive for betrayal. If the raiders acquire the technology, then giving it to our colonies is a foregone conclusion."

"And what's your stance on dark space?" Bayes asked directly and expected an answer even though the question was about a personal political belief.

Caturin could easily dodge the question by saying it was her job as security chief was to enforce policy independent of her beliefs, but that was the easy way. She replied, "Personally, I think all colonies should have the technology. It confers many benefits."

"I'm surprised to hear you agree with Distal on dark space issues." It was not a secret on Ox 73 that Distal spoke vehemently in favor of giving all colonies access to dark space technology. He was the de facto leader, and his supporters generally loved him or, at least, agreed with him on most issues.

She smiled. "Even Distal can be right about some things."

"I suppose. Keep me posted if you learn anything new."

Sensing he was about to conclude the meeting, Caturin decided to press her luck. She asked, "Where do you stand?"

"I'm a politician. I go where the currents carry me." Bayes answered, then excused her.

As she left, a feeling of disgust filled her mind. His answer indicated a willingness to bend moral values to suit circumstances, and if anyone was capable of sending communications without being detected, Bayes background as communication chief was one. If she reported her investigation directly only to him, then he could stay one step ahead. But Caturin felt conflicted about Bayes. She respected his leadership, but she couldn't rule him out as the possible spy. The claws of paranoia gripped her, pulling her deeper into self-doubt. She felt strongly that Bayes had the ability to carry out spy operations undetected, but she resented Distal's attacks on her and wished it was him. In truth, she knew that Distal did not have the technical experience to carry out a spy operation of that sort without help. That worried her more than anything, what if more than one person committed treason by spying and sabotage?

7)

Ships flying in normal space traveled between galaxies in fleets because of the risks to single ships. An interstellar journey in normal space lasted a few days or weeks depending on the class of starship, but an intergalactic journey across normal space took months for even the largest class of starships. Most space faring species believed intergalactic travel as excessive and remained stuck in a local galaxy. A few bold species ventured out and settled galactic clusters, but only a small handful braved the rigors of deep space and pressed into distant galaxies and clusters which might take several years to reach. Once there, an exploring species faced unknown dangers and possibly hostile species. Raider Fleets, led by daring and adventurous leaders, exploited the vacuum left by more cautious space farers. They raided their home galaxy about 3,000 years ago, then the neighboring galaxies. As Ox 73 moved slowly, galaxy to galaxy, colonizing; the raiders spread like a disease, making havoc. In 3,000 years the raiders had covered and raped, murdered and plundered as many galaxies as Ox 73 had colonized in 10,000 years. Many Ox colonies had been raided and decimated, but others had never seen the raiders, fortunately. Mentor came from a raided colony. At least he descended from one. He was born and raised on a raider ship, much like the one he now commanded. When he turned ten, he traveled to a different fleet as part of an exchange. What his original fleet got in exchange was unknown to him, probably a few barrels of whiskey. Raiders commonly traded children for commodities, and the children found themselves at the mercy of people who cared little for them. If the children showed some useful aptitude, then they survived. If not, then those children never saw adulthood. Mentor's brutal upbringing fueled his desire to command. He seized every opportunity to reach a little higher, and by age 32 he took control of the 4th Raider Fleet during a bloody coup. Then he murdered his closest ally who he feared might try to share his power. After seizing power, Mentor received an encoded message from an unknown source, reporting the location where a colonization ship would drop from dark space and release probes being sent to the Zobar cluster. This was his first contact with the spy

aboard Ox 73. Unlike an ordinary leader, Mentor kept the information secret, and arranged a small two-person ship to scout the location.

A ship operating in dark space would possess technology Mentor could only imagine. His copilot swore loyalty to him alone, which ensured the mission remained solely under Mentor's control. They arrived at the location early and waited. After three hours, a large aquamarine planetoid emerged from the darkness of space.

The copilot gasped. "Is that a ship?"

Mentor exhaled loudly. "It's true." They watched as the ship released probes and then jumped back to the darkness of space, inaccessible to Mentor's scanners. He ordered the copilot, "Tag all of the probes with trackers. I want to know their every move. That planetoid ship will pick them up at some point."

"Trackers engaged." The copilot said. "We made a large discovery. How did you know to look here?"

Mentor should have smiled at their success, but he shouted in rage. "It's my discovery, and you won't acquire the knowledge you seek." Before the copilot could explain or defend himself, Mentor shot him in the gut, the blast ripped him in half.

8) Walwars are an amphibian species. Noon Abet commanded a small ship for the 9th Raider Fleet. He and all his crew were an amphibian species, but not Walwars. Commander Noon hated the Walwars which dominated most raider fleets, so when he learned that the Zobar cluster had several raider fleets where Walwars were a minority; he set out across intergalactic space in his ship. His fearlessness inspired his crew of fifteen, and they all agreed with the crossing. Bold ventures and calculated risks have benefited many restless souls, and Commander Noon's luck flew him straight across dark space to the precise location where Ox 73 dropped out of dark space into intergalactic normal space to release probes. Noon had no idea what the planetoid like ship was or that the 4th Fleet had battled it a few months ago. Raiders only shared information when necessary. He watched Ox 73 release probes, then leap back to dark space. Noon ordered his tactical officer Gen Lim, "Tag those probes with trackers." "It's done." Gen replied. "Now get me the raider fleets online." "Okay. Your patched through." The 3rd, 4th, and 15th fleets responded immediately. Noon began with a standard formal address. "This is Commander Noon, formerly of the 9th Raider Fleet, I have information I wish to exchange."

Kup of the 15th Raider Fleet responded first. "Our sensors indicate you are a lone ship." All raider ships were outfitted with IDs which enabled them to communicate easily, but also gave their location away to other raiders. "Perhaps I will just take your ship and your information." Noon laughed. "You might take my ship but you will not acquire the information. I assure you, the information is worth more." "If I take your ship, I will skin you alive and any crew member who does not give me what I want." "I might believe you if you were the only raider fleet nearby,

but I think you're foolish to try and intimidate me when both the 3rd and 4th fleets are more powerful than you. Maybe they would like to be included in these negotiations." Noon responded. He knew it was common practice for fleet commanders to bully anyone they considered weaker. He also shrewdly guessed the weakest of the three fleet commanders would speak first and demand something for nothing. Mentor laughed. "I like this amphibian. What do you want?" Noon answered without hesitation. "Second in command of your fleet." Uko, the commander of the 3rd Raider Fleet balked. "No information is worth second in command of my fleet. Uko out." He ended his transmission.

Kup said, "I agree with Uko, but I'm willing to hear what you have and make a counteroffer." "No counteroffer. I want second in command or I don't give you anything." Noon demanded. "You're a fool. I'm out." Kup ended his transmission. Mentor eyed him, thinking deeply about the possibilities. It crossed his mind that he may have discovered Ox 73. Perhaps the ship received more damage during the battle than Mentor realized, and maybe it sat in normal space, a ripe plum ready to be picked. If Noon had valuable information sufficient to warrant his demand, then Mentor felt ready to take the chance. "Commander Noon. I will give you what you request, but if you bluff me or waste my time, then rest assured; I will skin you alive and feed your entire crew to the yiken." The yiken was an imaginary creature often invoked by raiders when making threats. "It's worth what I ask. Stand by while I transmit the information. I will form a junction with your fleet in 29 hours. I want to inspect my new ship." The second in command always chose their own ship from one in the fleet, besides the flagship which the Fleet Commander used.

9) A boy, no older than eight, kicked the ball into the crowd of children. Immediately, one of the other children grabbed the ball and ran, the others pursued. With the ball in his hand, he tumbled to the ground. Someone had tackled him. He rolled over, stunned to see a starship overhead. He read books about men from outer space, but his world, just entered manned flight. It would be more than 50 years before they launched their first rockets into space, if they got the chance. The excited boy yelled. "Look! Aliens! I knew they were real."

All the children pinched themselves, happy to witness the historic event. Then an explosion rocked the ground. The stunned children staggered around, dismayed by shock. In the distance, the downtown area of their hometown erupted into flames. The children ran, gripped in fear. The aliens did not come in peace. Their home world, Millden, crumbled under the onslaught of the 4th Raider Fleet. Raids followed simple principles.

For pre-space age planets, the raider fleet struck military strongholds, communication centers, and administrative capitals first. Since Millden possessed aircraft, primitive combustion engine types, the raiders hit their airports and aircraft carriers in the first set of strikes. The primitive planes and weapons would not stand up long if they got airborne, but no reason to take any chances. The raiders admired courage, but not foolish risktaking. After crushing military air resistance, the raiders landed and let the infantry do its job of dismantling ground troops and vehicles. Millden's best armored tanks fell before the heavily armored infantry raiders. A single raider could beat ten tanks in a battle. The fleet pillaged, plundered, murdered and raped. When they tired, they took their captives and goods they acquired and left Millden.

The aftermath of a scorched planet, the survivors would spend centuries digging themselves out of the remains. Maybe, if disease didn't ravage the remaining survivors, in a few hundred years they might become industrialized again.

Mentor never bothered to go on raids anymore, but he enjoyed watching from his ship, high in orbit over Millden. Noon led the ground forces.

After the raid, he and Mentor dined with the leaders of all the raider ships. The food included all types of Millden delicacies. The feasts and parties continued for a week after the raid.

The 4th Raider Fleet would raid and party while awaiting the probes to complete their missions. Mentor knew that once the probes started to converge on a particular point in space, then the Ox would arrive for pick up. He didn't need his spy on Ox to send information now that he could track the probes again. He knew his spy might be under scrutiny since the first encounter. His spy had communicated with him and sabotaged the override system for that battle, but now he only hoped the spy would act as saboteur for the next battle. Either way, Mentor felt more sure of himself now than ever. The luck that he, of all raider fleets, received the initial contact with the spy, and then his wisdom to exploit Noon's luck. Pursuing this line of thought gave Mentor the idea to notify the other raider fleets in the galaxy. He dispatched Noon to personally negotiate the terms of the alliance he envisioned.

10)

Noon made contact with the 3rd Raider Fleet first, but terms could not be negotiated; he left immediately to meet with the 15th Fleet Commander Kup. His ship formed a tractor beam connector and Commander Noon boarded. Commander Kup sent his second in command, Captain Hu, to meet him. It was standard procedure for a second in command from one fleet to gain access to the Fleet Commander by his second in command.

Captain Hu admired Commander Noon's audacity. "Your crossing intergalactic space in a single, small crew starship impressed everyone in the 15th Fleet, otherwise, Commander Kup would not have allowed you aboard after the demand you made."

"Oh. You're talking about the attempt to become second in command of one of the raider fleets."

"Yes. I thought it was foolhardy, but it worked for you."

"A strategy proves itself by effectiveness." Noon inflected.

"Of course it does, but you were lucky that Commander Mentor happened to be in the galaxy and close by. He is an eccentric." Hu baited Noon.

"I don't know about the eccentric part, but it wasn't luck. I counted on Commander Mentor being in the galaxy and shrewd enough to recognize a good deal"

"Are you implying Commander Kup is not capable, because that would be a fatal mistake?"

"On the contrary, I'm here to obtain an alliance with the him. I count on him recognizing a good deal." Noon replied as they entered the great chamber where Commander Kup conducted all negotiations.

Commander Kup responded. "You count on much." Then he motioned for Hu to leave.

"Tell me. What is this deal?"

Noon responded, "This is related to the information I first possessed."

"You're still playing that hand?"

"Not me. Commander Mentor sent me with a raiding opportunity for the combined fleet." Noon activated a holographic video of Ox 73. The video showed Ox 73 in the various encounters with both Noon and Mentor.

"What kind of hoax is this? Do you really expect me to believe a planetoid ship operating in dark space exists in the Zobar galaxy? Or do you want to lure me into a trap and take my fleet?"

"It's true. Imagine the power of our fleets outfitted with dark space technology."

"It would take many fleets to defeat that ship." Kup remarked.

"No. We have an advantage over the Ox 73. It is not a war ship. It specializes in colonization, and practically retreated at first opportunity."

"I see. Commander Mentor wishes to lay siege to the ship and plunder its technology which can then be adapted for war."

"Yes. The 4th and 15th fleets will split the technology aboard the ship."

"And the 3rd Fleet? " Kup inquired.

"No."

"And who gets the ship?"

"It's only fair the 4th fleet gets it after you take half the operable technology that can be removed. A finder's fee." Noon elaborated.

"How will we keep the ship from jumping to dark space during the siege?"

"Commander Mentor has a plan already in place for the siege. He only needs help in executing the siege and ultimate raid."

Kup stared for a long moment. He smiled but the smile conveyed something sinister. He finally answered. "I agree to Commander Mentor's terms, but if the siege fails; the 3rd Fleet will be compensated." He didn't say how it would be compensated, but Noon understood the implication. He knew a threat when he heard one. Noon felt no sense of worry, during his short service under Mentor had taught him one valuable lesson: Mentor always had a plan for everything, even what most considered the unexpected.

11)

Caturin invited Tarhan to dinner at her place. They ate a stew of plants grown in the fully automated growth chamber. The plant species came from their home planet, a place they had never seen and never would. They treated Ox 73 as their home world. Maybe some of their descendants would chose life on a colony, but they wanted to serve Ox 73. "I never thought I would end up investigating a possible spy." Caturin confided in Tarhan, her closest friend among the officers.

"Do we even know if a spy or spy ring exists on Ox? I mean, misdirection by an enemy instills doubt and confusion. Maybe the prisoners are playing on our fears." Tarhan drank a sip of Lio wine, the favorite drink of the working class, even though he was a high ranking officer. Caturin drank Bilu wine which is the favorite drink of officers. The chief difference between the working class and officers was access to dark space technology secrets. The working class only interfaced with normal space technology.

"Maybe. But I can't put the coincidence of the attack on Ox and the override system failure occurring simultaneously out of my head."

"In battle, things go wrong."

"Since when did you become an expert on war?" Caturin chided him.

"Since the raiders attacked us. Look, I know you have doubts, but don't let them get you down. If a spy sent a message to the raiders before the battle to alert our location, then they cannot play that hand again. I am personally monitoring all comm signals. You can trust me to keep you in the know. If anyone sends any communication outside of internal operations, then I will report to you immediately."

"Thanks Tarhan. I need allies like you." She smiled.

"Don't worry." Tarhan reassured her. "Would you be willing to share who you most suspect? I mean, if you can." After saying the words, he felt self-conscious.

"I really can't say, but if you promise.... I suppose I could bounce some ideas off you."

"Go for it."

"We all know the dark space debate is a possible motive, and half the ship supports it. We can rule out any non-specialist aboard. It has to be someone with a motive, access, and skill."

"That narrows it down to maybe 2% of the crew. That's 20,000 people!"

"Now you see my problem."

"I do. More than likely, you will need to find a connection that directly links to evidence. It might prove impossible if the spy or spies go dormant."

"That's my view." Caturin said. "So you're not going to name any names?" Tarhan pressed with a sly smile.

"No. Security clearance and all. You know the score. I trust you, but I need to be cautious."

12)

The 4th and 15th Raider Fleets lurked in normal space, stealth systems on maximum. Ox 73 dropped from dark space into normal space unaware of the impending danger. The raider fleets encompassed Ox 73, locking tractor beams to establish a foothold on the probe hatches.

"Override system is closing the probe hatches." Tarhan said.

"Good. We may lose a few probes, but the raiders have been foiled this round." Bayes smiled, then ordered the helmsman, "Leap to dark space."

"Sir. The dark space drive failed. We can't make the jump." Helmsman Foit said.

"I'm on it." Tarhan said as he ran towards the engineering shuttle that carried him to the dark space drive. His technicians scrambled to restart the drive, but with no success. Tarhan reported. "Chief Bayes. This may take days to sort out."

"Understood." Bayes knew the dark space drive possessed technical complexity greater than most any technology in the universe. If it failed, it was sabotage, no doubt about it, and finding the cause would be difficult. He turned his attention to the immediate problem. "Caturin. You must repulse all boarding raiders."

"Understood. I expect an attack at the probe hatches. They already know the basic layout there, but we need to get reinforcements to the colonization hatches. They may try to attack there. If you're thinking a saboteur damaged the dark space drive, then the saboteur will also try to help them gain access." Caturin responded.

"Understood. I'm sending reinforcements to all ports." Bayes said.

The tractor beams hooked on the probe hatches. The first set of outer locks broke, and the raiders blasted the second set. The Ox Security Force waited, hoping the recent upgrades to their personal shields would protect them. The raiders used plasmatic blasters that burned through all but the most durable shielding. The second set of locks broke. The final set of locks separated the raiders and Ox security. The final set of locks broke. The hatches exploded forward into the front line of security officers. Caturin stood in the front line, leading from the front to inspire her officers. A piece of the hatch flew a centimeter by her face and struck an officer in the line behind her. His shield held, but a raider blast followed. His shield cracked. He upped the power and it refused. Caturin charged forward, and all her officers followed. The raiders had expected a repeat of the last battle, but their front already crumbled under the security counterattack. They fell back across the tractor beam connector onto their ships. A group of technicians scrambled to close the hatches with temporary shielding, but the raiders had only begun. The ships disengaged the tractor beams and fired plasmatic missiles into the temporary shielding. The shielding collapsed, killing 82 technicians still working there. The raiders did not want to damage the ship too much, but they were prepared to do as much damage as necessary. The second round of fire from the raiders were large ship size blasters that ripped a hole in the hatches. The security force evacuated the remaining technicians and injured security officers, then braced for the next attack. Caturin ordered her forces back to regroup as the raiders successfully boarded.

Among the raiders was Commander Noon and Captain Hu. They led raiders into the main probe staging area. Hu ordered a group of raiders to start taking probes back to his ship.

"Don't be a fool, Hu. We need every raider for this mission." Noon scolded.

"This is a joint strike and raid, and I plan to raid." Hu retorted.

The momentary lapse in raider momentum provided Caturin the opportunity to regain the initiative. She yelled. "Attack." She blasted her way forward and her forces followed. She shot Captain Hu in the face. His shielding cracked, but before he refused it, she fired a group of shots and his shielding crashed. His head splattered on Noon's shielding. He fired back, making a fighting retreat. He and his raiders fled back to their ships. The battle ended and the technicians repaired the hatches with more shielding. Caturin placed a regiment of security officers to guard the hatches.

Noon stormed into Mentor's private chamber. He had requested a private meeting, and his temper flared in his skull. Mentor looked up and noticed the fury in his face. Noon spoke first, a definite breach of etiquette. "Captain Hu and his raiders from the 15th fleet cost us the battle. They are undisciplined and useless!"

Ignoring the breach of etiquette, Mentor responded. "Captain Hu is no longer a concern. As for the battle, you did as I asked of you. Don't you agree?"

"Yes. You asked me to attack the probe hatches, but I assumed you meant to take the probe hatches as a foothold."

"That's what I like about you, Noon. I ask for something and you try to deliver more. If you succeeded in gaining a foothold, then I would have been very happy. You failed to accomplish your goal, so don't be too hard on yourself. You display courage and might in battle. I wish all my raiders acted like you."

Noon accepted the praise from a leader he intensely admired, but he did not comprehend Mentor's thinking. He asked, "Then what was the point of the attack?"

"I wanted to gauge their combat adaptations since our first encounter. This information is pertinent to my overall scheme of war against the Ox." He paused, looking upward for dramatic effect, something that emphasized his flamboyance. He continued looking up and finished talking, "The 15th Fleet will serve its purpose."

They continued to talk strategy until Commander Kup transmitted. "Commander Mentor." He refused to call him Lord Admiral. "Our long-range sensors indicate the 3rd Fleet sits within striking distance of our position. Those buzzards think they can gain something from our efforts." Kup hated the 3rd Fleet which contained and was commanded by birdlike species. Kup, a rat like species, disliked all intelligent bird species.

"Not to worry. I have a group of stealth fighters keeping an eye on them." Mentor said.

"Our sensors do not detect any....." Kup began.

Mentor interrupted. "I outfitted the fighters with stealth technology from the captured probes, so you cannot detect them, nor can the 3rd Fleet."

Kup banged his fist into a raider standing next to him. He swore in a language neither Mentor nor Noon understood. Then he said, "And you failed to mention the stealth technology?"

"Our agreement was for half of the new spoils minus the ship. I never agreed to give you plunder from a previous raid."

"Very well, but I don't like surprises. I want to be informed if you have any other secret technology." Kup grunted.

"Of course. No more surprises."

"One more thing, I want Commander Noon reprimanded and I want to administer 50 lashes for leading my raiders in a half-baked raid. I lost my second in command."

Mentor made a motion with his hand to convey control. "The fortunes and misfortunes of war decided your man's fate. There will be no lashes."

Kup hit the raider next to him again, this time knocking him to the floor. "End transmission." He ordered.

Mentor smiled at Noon.

Noon said. "I didn't know you had outfitted fighters with probe stealth technology."

"I was bluffing that old windbag."

"But the 3rd Fleet is out there."

"I plan to deal with them on my own terms. When they play their hand, I will be ready." Mentor explained vaguely, but Noon accepted the notion that Mentor was already a few steps ahead.

14)

The 3rd Raider Fleet sat poised, ready to strike. Commander Uko sat at his command chair, motionless. Lethargy gripped his mind and body, but only a few of the top raiders knew the extent of his malady. A rare disease that only bird species developed, racked his mind, alternating between normal behavior to lethargy, sometimes multiple times a day. Uko retained command solely because his brother, Gorbin, led Uko's personal guards, but unknown to Corporal Gorbin, Captain Visar planned to take control. Gorbin ordered 20 heavily armed guards, personally loyal to him, to keep Uko secure at all times. Gorbin held actual command, and managed Uko. The crew despised Gorbin who repeatedly sexually assaulted his crew mates. One night, a young crew member drank too much. Gorbin sodomized him in front of the crew which was considered an act of dominance, an acceptable way to assert power among lower species, but not against a crew. The act cemented hatred for Gorbin, except his personal guards. Visar exploited this fact. During Uko's morning bout of lethargy, Captain Visar ordered a small ship to attack the flagship where Commander Uko sat. The ship attacked, but Uko did not counterattack. Instead Corporal Gorbin transmitted, "What's happening? Is your ship's weapons malfunctioning?"

" This is Sergeant Hegg. I'm taking command of the 3rd Fleet. Give me the command codes for all the ships and I will spare your life. "

"You must be a fool. You have a single ship. I will blast you into nanoshards." Gorbin roared.

" Why do you respond for the commander? Put Commander Uko on. " Hegg demanded.

"He rests now. I'm acting on behalf of Commander Uko."

" That is unacceptable. I made a direct challenge to him. Wake him immediately! "

"You dare challenge my authority?" Gorbin replied.

At this, Captain Visar intervened. "Gorbin. Is there a reason for you delaying?" This necessary pretext sparked the chain of events to seize command. "If Commander Uko cannot respond, then, rightfully, command belongs to me."

" Commander Uko will respond in his own good time. " Gorbin said and ended the transmission. I'm the meantime, Visar had already sent a regiment of special attack forces to seize the command center where Uko sat, unaware of the danger. Gorbin rose and came over to Uko. Now, in the command chair, Uko whisked away to a designated protection area. Visar's regiment attacked the command center door, but the reinforced shields held.

Gorbin ordered, "Attack Hegg's ship." Good to his word, the ship exploded into nanoshards.

Hegg had expected Visar to keep it from happening, but Hegg was merely a pawn to initiate the right of command, the true plan all along. The other ship leaders began calling for Commander Uko to show himself. Gorbin defied their calls. He knew he only had to wait for Uko to temporarily regain his senses and approve his actions. The door shields could hold until then. Gorbin smiled. Crisis averted or so he thought.

Captain Visar and a group of armed officers came from the same direction Uko went. Except this time, Gorbin's personal guards were not in sight. Commander Uko followed Captain Visar. Before Gorbin reached his weapon, Visar shot him dead. Visar and his elite officers had waited, hidden in the very place meant to protect Uko. The plan went off without a hitch. Visar transmitted from the command center of the flagship, Hailstorm, with Uko standing beside him and Gorbin dead at his feet. "Attention all ships of the 3rd Fleet, I am now Commander Visar of the 3rd Fleet." Everyone saw Uko beside him, pliant, and Gorbin dead. No one contested the new commander.

"Can you get the dark drive fixed before the raiders make a full breach?" Bayes asked Tarhan. Everyone accepted the fact that given enough time, the raiders continued pressure would breach the Ox, and a bloody battle must follow.

Tarhan sighed. "I truly wish I had a definite yes, but....."

Distal interrupted, "No. Your incompetence and foot dragging will cost us."

"Sir. We have two options if the dark drive cannot be repaired before a full scale breach. We can fight or surrender. If we surrender, we can assume the worst. If we fight, we have a chance. I believe we need to take the offensive and assault their fleet instead of waiting for them to board us." Caturin said.

"You suggest an aggressive campaign, but I will not approve it. We are colonizers, and I only support a defensive approach." Bayes clarified his position. "I expect you will ready the security forces in the event Tarhan doesn't succeed in the repairs."

Distal huffs. "You put our very fate in the hands of two people who don't have our best interest at heart. They are most likely conspiring with the raiders. I saw them entering Caturin's personal quarters. Or maybe it's only an affair."

"I talked to you about the personal attacks before this meeting." Bayes scolded Distal. "We need to focus on fixing the dark drive and reinforcing security. Then we need to address the spy issue which Distal is so fond of."

"I don't want to suggest the idea, but our only viable option may require us to leave the Zobar cluster." Caturin said.

"That violates our mission. We haven't colonized any planets in this cluster." Distal retorted. "As Chief Colonizer, I will not approve."

Tarhan started, "No. Distal, she is right. We have discretion to choose where we put colonies. If safety dictates, it would be wise...."

But Distal interrupted him again. "Perhaps, but it's a cowardly act."

Bayes spoke before an argument broke, "How long would it take to get to the closest galaxy outside the Zobar cluster?"

Tarhan answered. "Four months at top speed in dark space. The raiders would take several years to reach the same location if they traveled nonstop."

"They are dependent upon raiding. It would take them decades." Caturin added.

"At least we have options. I'm not sure if leaving the Zobar cluster is my favorite idea, but I will consider it. For now, this is what I want. Fix the dark drive, escape to dark space, determine the spy if possible, and decide on long-term goals after we end this crisis. I don't plan to surrender without a fight, but I prefer to run if possible." Bayes said.

16)

Attacks on Ox continued, but the reinforced shields held. Commander Kup grew increasingly wary about the 3rd Fleet, lurking nearby; but Mentor stood resolutely, undeterred in his personal plans, despite lack of progress or the position of the 3rd Fleet. On the Ox, a funk set in and the crew went about daily routines almost like normal, as if the raiders were not there.

Distal sat drinking with his friend, Rona Purla, who worked as a technician on the dark drive. "How much progress has been achieved in repairs?"

"Not much." Rona replied. She liked being seen with Distal in the pub. She never stood out in a crowd, so his position of influence gave her more clout than she possessed on her own. "But you never know when a breakthrough will occur."

"Perhaps the wrong person is in charge?" Distal smiled.

"I thought the same thing. A lot of people are complaining. Tarhan is not a good leader, but even him, given enough time will fix the problem."

"Yes. I recognized his lack of competence. Do you think you could fix the dark drive if you were in charge?"

"Yes, if I were inclined." She smiled. Distal looked like a smile tried to form, which indicated he was happy with her answer, because he never smiled.

"Then it's high time we do something to resolve this issue. Come!" Distal got up and walked out the pub with Rona in tow. She always followed, never led. They went to Bayes quarters.

Bayes spoke. "Enter." He looked shocked to see them. "Has there been a breakthrough?" Distal never made contact with Bayes unless he had good reason.

"I'll say. This is Rona..."

"I know her. She was promoted to dark drive operations recently. At your behest, if I remember correctly." Bayes commented.

Both Distal and Rona looked surprised that Bayes would know about a middle ranking promotion. She defended the promotion. "I earned the position through dedication and hard work. Distal pointed it out to my supervisor, but I...."

Bayes interrupted. "I'm sure you did. No need to explain. So what is this about?" Bayes looked at Rona as if expecting an answer from her, but she hesitated.

Distal spoke up. "She can fix the dark drive if she were in charge. Meanwhile, Tarhan has failed and will continue to fail."

" That's a bold claim. Are you willing to stake your career on it? "

"Yes. Some things are more important than careers."

" I suppose. What do you suggest? "

"Put Rona in charge." Distal retorted.

"What about Tarhan?" Bayes inquired, thinking seriously about removing Tarhan. He knew he had to consider a change of leadership. He heard other reports of technicians complaining. Complaining didn't bother him, but lack of progress combined with complaining did.

"Demote him and take him off dark drive operations."

" Then I assume you are recommending Rona for the position. " Bayes asked.

"She can do what needs to be done."

" Okay. I will draft the change effectively immediately. Don't let me down, Rona. "

"I won't sir. Thank you Chief Commander Bayes." Rona replied.

"And one more thing." Distal, unsatisfied with the achievement, said, "Caturin should be forced to resign. The ship came under danger under her watch."

" Absolutely not. She defended the Ox with courage and skill. I don't want to hear anything more about her performance. " Bayes ended the conversation.

17)

The captured probes proved useful to Mentor. His technicians successfully augmented their weapons with the captured technology. Captain Noon began a new attack on the Ox probe hatch.

"The shields failed." Officer Lor Brent said.

"Modulate the....." Caturin ordered, but it was too late.

"The raiders breached the probe hatch." Lor said. "I'm modulating the shields in all the other areas."

The front line, led by Caturin braced for battle. The raiders fired and advanced directly at the line of officers. The raiders blasted through the shields with the upgraded weapons. Caturin ordered an immediate retreat to a defensive position in the corridor outside the probe hatch area.

Noon ordered the raiders. "Press the attack. Their shields failed. I want control over the corridor." Noon began ordering more raiders from his ship into the probe hatch area. He intended to control the flagship of the fleet as a reward for taking the Ox, with Mentor taking the Ox as his new ship. However, Noon realized that only gaining control of the probe hatch gave him little leverage. He needed to control at least one other area to pose a true threat.

Caturin had already reformed her front line within the wide corridor. She brought a heavy mobile shield forward to protect the line while she ordered a defensive barrier to be erected between the corridor and probe hatch. She said. "We've lost the probe hatch. We need to stop their advance into the corridor."

"The defensive barrier won't reach here for at least four minutes." Lor responded.

"We need to hold this position until then, no matter the cost." Caturin said. The corridor connected to a network of smaller corridors which in turn connected to other vital areas, including the colonization hatches and a regional medical center and command node for the section. If raiders gained control of the corridor, then the entire section would fall easily. Her forces were too small for a full blown breach.

Noon pressed his raiders forward. "Take the corridor and the ship falls." The raiders knew great rewards would follow. A group of raiders sprinted into the front line.

Caturin and Lor fought alongside the security forces up front. The raiders' weapons tore through the security shields. Officers fell to the right and left of Caturin, but she held her ground. She knew that losing the corridor would give the raiders access to all the adjacent areas. It was something she would never allow. Caturin shouted. "Hold firm. Give them time to get the barrier in place." She noticed the barrier coming forward, but most of the security forces began to waver. Time was running out. Taking a localized explosive unit, LEU, from her belt, she moved into the thick of the raiders and tossed it. The LEU didn't reach far before it detonated violently. The blast ripped through the raiders forcing them back, and in that moment she accepted the blast would kill her too. Her shield collapsed and the explosion knocked her backwards. Moments later, the security forces erected the barrier and reinforced it with a shield.

18)

Caturin awoke and spoke, "I can't see." She paused and then said, "And I can't move."

Tarhan answered. "You're in the hospital. I came by to check on you. The doctor said you would probably wake around now. I'm glad to see you."

" My eyes. "

"The blast took your eyes. The doctor said you would be able to see after a few hours of adjusting to the ocular implants." Tarhan answered.

"Do you want to talk with the doctor?"

" Not now. I can't move either. "

"I'm sorry. The blast damaged your spine, too. It was severe. The doctor said it will take six months for the regenerative medicine to heal your spine completely."

" The battle. What happened? " "After you set off the explosion, Lor pulled you to safety and the crew got the barrier and reinforced shields up. You saved the day."

" And the raiders? "

"They still have control of the probe hatch area. They took everything in the area."

" How long before we regain control? "

Tarhan answered. "I'm not sure, but Lor told me last night that he fears they may breach the barrier if a counterattack isn't approved."

" Who is in charge? "

"Bayes. He refused to promote someone. Most of the top security officers were killed in the battle. And you know Bayes. He is defensive only." Tarhan explained.

"How long have I been out? Someone needs to command the security forces directly."

" Thirty-six hours. "

"Have you made any progress on the dark drive?"

" No. Caturin, I'm not in charge of that anymore? " Tarhan said.

"What?" The shock of that affected Caturin more than anything. She said. "What are you talking about?"

" Distal organized my oust and installed Rona. "

"Rona. She's a follower. And Bayes went along with it. I expect that from Distal, but not Bayes."

" If it is any consolation, Bayes defended you. " Tarhan said. "I still have connections. Vey Miles is working on a theory of mine about the cause of the dark drive problem."

"I want to talk to Bayes. He needs to promote Lor to Chief of Security. I trust him. Saving me isn't the first time he acted with courage and the heart of a warrior. We need someone who can take the offensive. I went along with not attacking the raiders' ships, but we cannot permit them to remain aboard the Ox. I respect Bayes, but he needs to step up or step aside."

19)

Caturin requested a meeting with Bayes, but he let several hours pass before he bothered to come see her. By that time, her ocular implants began to work. She saw, but only with concentration and blurred vision. It would take several days for the implants to mimic real vision. She saw Bayes enter her hospital room. He sat down in the chair by her bed.

Caturin said "Finally found your way here."

He had been stalling, but he felt it more prudent to lie. "The demands of the job....."

She interrupted. "I understand, but this is a professional matter. Technically, I'm still Security Chief. That is until you fire me or appoint someone else."

" I would never fire you, but under the circumstances it may require me to appoint someone else. Distal is advocating for someone. "

"Don't tell me. He wants to gain control over security. You must not allow him to gain another foothold in his quest for more political power." Caturin said.

"What do you suggest?"

" Appoint Lor Brent to Security Chief and let him make a counterattack and retake the probe hatch area. " Caturin demanded.

"I don't want to take an aggressive stance." Bayes retorted.

"You must. If a spy and saboteur is aboard, they will sabotage the barrier and reinforced shields. If that happens, then you might as well kiss the Ox goodbye. And you know the raiders will kill all of us. Is that what you want?"

" No. Of course I don't. You're right, but I don't want to set a precedent for aggressive behavior. "

Caturin responded. "Defending the Ox, even by offensive action, is not aggressive. It's the right thing to do."

20)

Captain Noon having left the Ox and visiting Mentor in person, flush with the successful attack, said, "I'm certain your spy will aid us, now that I captured their probe hatch."

Mentor replied. "How so?"

" The spy can sabotage the barrier and reinforced shields. Then my raiders will spread like wildfire across that ship. "

"I expect that too, but don't think it's in the bag. I offer this advice, since I put you in charge, beware of the low hanging fruit. The spy may have been captured. If so, then any information received should be considered suspect."

" Then I shouldn't take advantage? "

"I'm not saying that. War is full of risk. Seize the initiative when you can, don't let setbacks discourage your efforts."

"Point taken. I also wanted to update you on what technology was captured. We acquired several new probes in the hatch, apparently they are developing systems that would have increased stealth capabilities." Noon reported.

"No doubt to evade our sensors."

" That is my belief. We also obtained weapons and shield generators from their dead officers. The weapons use a completely different way of generating plasma blasts than our weapons. Once we upgrade ours, we will have the most advanced weapons of all raider fleets. "

"Did Commander Kup get any of the weapons?" " No. His raiders were too busy getting the larger systems which we managed to retrieve half. I thought you would want to keep the weapons in case we need an advantage. " Noon said.

"Good. You think several steps ahead. If all my top ship commanders did the same, I would rule the Zobar cluster in short order." Mentor commented.

At the same time, aboard the Ox, Caturin suggested to Lor, "The spy can be an advantage to us now."

" How? We don't even know who the spy is. Or how many, for that matter. "

"True. However, I noticed the raiders take every opportunity to attack us, so we can use that as an advantage. Suppose we sabotage the barrier and reinforced shields at the probe hatch area. We lure them to attack us and drive them from the Ox, once and for all."

" You think Bayes will approve? "

"Yes. He wants them off the Ox as much as anyone."

Lor set the plan in motion. The battle lasted only a few minutes, and just as Caturin had predicted, the area was re-secured.

21)

Vey Miles entered Rona's office. "I found the trouble with the dark drive. A series of nano couplings were off. Someone had....."

Rona said. "How did you find them? That's like a needle in a haystack." The nano couplings were small and numerous, within a cubic meter, hundreds of billions of nano coupling series could be found, and the dark drive was a spherical shaped system with a 50 kilometer diameter. Nearly every cubic meter contained nano coupling series.

Vey intended to point out that the series had been manually turned off which explained why the self-repair system did not detect and correct it, but Rona had interrupted him. " Using a search algorithm devised by Tarhan. It's really quite brilliant. "

Rona started to say something, but Distal entered. Vey thought it was unusual for a chief of one kind of operations to enter another's office when an obvious meeting was in progress, but he didn't say anything. Distal spoke, "What's this I heard you say about Tarhan?" He looked directly at Vey, ignoring Rona as if she were not in the room.

Vey did not play games. He focused on work and problem solving. He knew posturing when he saw it, but he refused to be dragged into the fray. Vey waited for Rona to speak. She said. "Vey, using Tarhan's algorithm, found the offline nano couplings."

Distal frowned ever so slightly, but Vey noticed it.

"What does that mean?" Distal asked.

"It means we can fix the dark drive now." Vey answered.

"How long will it take?" Distal asked.

"I estimate it will take 80 hours, give or take." Vey smiled. "My crew began fixing it immediately, and then I came to report."

" Thank you, Vey. You may return to your duty. " Rona said. He left.

Distal said. "Time is running out now. We must sabotage another area to give the raiders access."

" We might get caught. " Rona replied, the harsh reality setting in. She had always assumed they would succeed.

"We risked that from the beginning. We can still succeed. Don't give up now."

" Where will we sabotage now? "

"My area, the colonization hatches. I will contact Mentor by an encrypted message. Maybe no one will detect it while concentration is focused on the nano couplings in the dark drive." Distal elaborated on his plan.

22)

Rona reported the find to Bayes who immediately requested Vey, Rona, and Tarhan come to his quarters. The three of them arrived at the same time and waited for a few minutes. Tarhan and Vey talked, but they were careful not to discuss the dark drive problem since Tarhan was officially taken off that task. Rona remained silent, and cast her gaze down when Tarhan looked her way. If he despised what Distal and Rona did to him, he didn't show it.

Finally, Bayes waved them inside. "I'm pleased to hear the news about the dark drive." Bayes spoke.

"Thank you, sir." Rona and Vey said. Tarhan stood silent. Vey had already informed Tarhan, but, technically, he didn't know anything.

Bayes noticed Tarhan's silence and said, "Vey determined the dark drive problem cause, and began fixing it."

" That is wonderful news. " Tarhan said.

"He determined the cause using your algorithm. I thought you might like to know."

" Indeed sir. I'm glad I could be useful. " Tarhan said.

"Vey. Effective immediately, you are promoted to the rank of lieutenant. "

"Thank you Chief Bayes." Vey stood up straighter.

" But, I'm at a crossroads about you two, Rona and Tarhan. It's my own fault, so I hope you both accept my proposal. " Bayes said.

"What are you offering?" Tarhan asked.

"You will serve as co-chiefs of Technicians. Of course, Tarhan will be the senior officer."

Rona finally spoke. "It's fair."

Tarhan said. "I agree too."

" Okay. Get back to work. "

They left together and Caturin and Lor entered. Caturin sat in an autonomous wheelchair. She would need it until the new spinal prosthetic and regenerative medicine enabled her to walk again. Her official position was still Chief of Security, but she could only consult in her current state. Lor possessed the title of interim Chief of Security. Fortunately, they worked together harmoniously.

Bayes asked. "How are you?"

Caturin said. "Getting around."

" What did you want to see me about? " Bayes asked.

"We intercepted an encrypted message to the raiders. We failed to block it from reaching them." Lor spoke up.

Bayes rarely expressed anger, but his skin turned very red, red as fiery sunrise. "Who sent it?"

Caturin said, "Distal, and it contained classified information as well as a plan to enable the raiders access to the Ox."

Bayes banged his comm station. Caturin almost blinked. She had never seen him act physical in any aggressive way. "Is he in custody?"

" Not yet. My officers are monitoring him without his knowledge. The transmission contained information that only a very knowledgeable technician possesses. Distal had help, and we are trying to ascertain who." Lor explained.

"Rona. It has to be." Bayes shook his head in disgust. "Very well. Carry on and keep me posted."

23)

"I received a message from my spy aboard the Ox. He plans to sabotage the shields at the colonization hatches. We will board there undetected and launch our attack by complete surprise." Mentor advised Noon and Kup over dinner. He never ate alone.

"I'm not sure your spy can be trusted. Look what happened last time." Kup replied.

"Ox security forces obviously engineered that trap. I have assurance this time." Mentor said.

"What assurances?" "The message contained specifications on their dark space technology. My engineers confirmed its authenticity. It will take years to fully understand how it all works."

"I want a copy to have my engineers double check it and I will lead the attack this time. Noon's failure proved him incompetent to lead my raiders." Kup demanded.

"You'll have your chance to prove yourself, but Captain Noon will lead the attack. As for the copy of the specifications, I will forward it to you along with my engineer's assessment." Mentor commented. Noon listened to the back and forth. Mentor had already discussed his plans with Noon before Kup arrived aboard the Opulent.

Kup sat silent, weighed his options, then changed the subject. "I still have concerns about the 3rd Fleet. It unsettles me how they remain close but take no action. I tried to contact Commander Uko, but he refused to respond."

"Hmm." Mentor acted unconcerned.

"Have you established contact with Uko?"

"No." Mentor replied.

"And yet you sit there, unconcerned?" Kup questioned, dissatisfied with Mentor's one word replies. "Have you anything to say?"

"I told you they are being monitored. I do not fear Commander Uko, never have." Mentor responded to imply Kup feared him which would make Kup appear weak.

Kup knew he either had to admit he feared Uko or drop the subject, so he dropped it. "I do not fear Commander Uko or any other commander for that matter."

"Good. Then we will prepare for the attack on Ox soon. Have your raiders stand by. Noon will give the go ahead when the time is right." Mentor commented.

24)

Rona and Distal went to the colonization hatches and began to disable the shields. Distal needed Rona for her specialized knowledge. It drove him to recruit her long ago to his cause. He manipulated her easily and now she fully implicated herself in the treasonous activity. The Ox might fall prey to a group of amoral opportunists, but she accepted that risk to gain the full admiration of a single person. As they worked, Distal asked. "How long before the dark drive is repaired?"

" I don't know. An hour after Bayes reinstated Tarhan, he took over. He said it was his right as senior officer, even though we are co chiefs. I saw him talking to Caturin right before. They think they have everything under control, but soon they will both get what's coming to them. " She talked as she began the coding to disable the shields and open a stealth tractor beam directly to the raiders.

Distal watched over her shoulder. He said, "Yes. Soon it will all be over."

Just as he finished his sentence, Lor and a group of security officers came from a concealed position. "I'm afraid that will not happen. You're both under arrest." Lor said. "Take them to the holding cells."

Rona confessed to everything without any pressure. She felt relieved.

Distal blamed his actions on others. He refused to take any blame. When Bayes asked him why he did it, Distal said, "You refused to promote sensible sharing of the dark space technology with colonies, so in a way, you made me take that course of action."

" You failed, Distal, and everything you worked for is wasted. You could have continued advocating for sharing dark drive technology, but no. You betrayed us. " Bayes scolded.

"Advocating. I advocated my whole career and nothing."

" You're a fool Distal. Your years of advocacy won many supporters. Caturin believes in sharing dark drive technology, but not by treason. I just wanted you to know. Think about that. " Bayes said, then walked out. Distal sulked.

25)

Kup waited for Noon to give the order and sat impatiently in his command chair watching the Ox on his screen, when suddenly it leaped to dark space. Kup shouted, "Put Mentor on right now."

Mentor came on the screen. "I know you're upset....."

" Upset. I demand compensation! " Kup said.

"Commander Kup. The 3rd Fleet is approaching." The helm operator said.

"I knew the 3rd Fleet would try to pull something. Now do you believe me?" Kup shouted at Mentor.

"You're correct, but you missed a subtle difference, they are under my command." Mentor replied. Then he said to the 3rd Fleet, "Commander Visar are you ready?"

" Yes Lord Admiral Mentor. I have command of the 3rd Fleet and it is at your disposal. "

"What treachery is this?" Kup said.

"Uko is no longer in charge of the 3rd Fleet. If you surrender and pledge allegiance to me and the Grand Fleet, I will permit you to remain in command of the 15th Fleet and make you fourth in command of the Grand Fleet." Mentor explained.

"I serve under none." Kup replied. "15th Fleet, form attack pattern Beta Niner" Kup's flagship maneuvered into a direct assault position to the Opulent while his other ships moved in a defensive position to cover him. It was a bold move and a gamble. If he attacked Mentor and defeated him, then the rest of the fleet might waver, allowing him time to escape. Kup knew the combined 3rd and 4th Fleets would beat him in an all-out battle, so this was his only hope. Kup fired upon the Opulent, but Mentor anticipated the reckless attempt to seize the initiative. The Opulent flanked left and moved into firing range. The blast connected, but Kup's shields held. Noon broke through the defensive line and came up in the rear of Kup's ship, barraged the ship with a series of blasts meant to weaken the shields. It worked and the Opulent blasted through, disabling the ship. Kup surrendered without putting up any more resistance. Noon boarded his ship and Kup committed suicide rather than be taken by Noon. Mentor felt somewhat disappointed that he didn't get to explain to Kup how he had planned to take control of his fleet all along. Mentor thought capturing the Ox was only partially feasible, but gaining control over the 3rd and 15th Fleet by shady deals and subterfuge were extremely plausible and intellectually pleasing to him. He still planned to continue his campaign against the Ox, but with the new title of Lord Admiral of the Grand Fleet.

In dark space, the crew began repairs and upgrades to Ox. The future looked less certain to them now that the raiders lurked in their horizon. Bayes announced his retirement from public life after his term. Caturin won the election to Chief Commander of Ox by a landslide. Her injuries healed but she had recurring pain. She maintained Lor as Chief of Security, Vey became Chief of Technicians and Tarhan became Chief of Colonization. Distal and Rona received the punishment of exile for high treason. Caturin exiled them on a planet with limited resources and technology, enough to survive. Distal never knew that under Caturin's leadership, all new colonies received basic dark space technology to help protect them from the raiders.