

A STAR CROSS NOVEL

# STAR CROSS



GALAXY IN PERIL



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# **The Star Cross: Galaxy in Peril**

*(The Star Cross, Book 3)*

**By**

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Books in The Star Cross Series

*The Star Cross* (Book 1)

*The Star Cross: The Dark Invaders* (Book 2)

*The Star Cross: Galaxy in Peril* (Book 3)

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# The Star Cross: Galaxy in Peril

## Chapter One

For six months now the black fleets had been rampaging through Enlightened World space, targeting the smaller colonies guarded by the Protector Worlds, defeating defending fleet after fleet. Already several hundred billion Enlightened World inhabitants were rumored as having been harvested by the deadly beams of the Destroyers of Worlds' motherships.

Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell was determined not to allow that to happen here, as he studied the tactical display in front of him with deep concern. A Destroyers of Worlds' fleet was inbound toward Bascom Six, which his homeworld orbited. Bascom was a K-type star and Bascom Six a large gas giant. Around it circled a series of moons, both large and small. Two of those moons were planet-sized, inhabited, and the center of Bascom civilization. The Bascoms had spread out over twenty star systems with major bases and scientific outposts in sixty others. Nearly four hundred years ago they had reached Protector World status.

"Forty minutes until they drop from hyperspace," Subcommander Orphren reported as he eyed the red threat icons on the tactical display. "All our outlying fleets have been recalled, but most will not arrive before the enemy."

The Lakiams had furnished the Bascoms with the means to detect the black ships in hyperspace. The black ships' hyperdrives gave off a specific radiation signature, which was possible to detect.

Admiral Lorell turned toward Subcommander Orphren. The Bascoms were of feline descent. Their eyes resembled a cat's, and they had a thin layer of fur covering their body. Their hands possessed retractable claws, which could be extended in battle. Unlike the Visth, they had not totally given up their aggressive ways. "We are a Protector World. Too many of our fleets have been sent to defend those Enlightened Worlds and colonies under our protection. Now we face the very enemy we had hoped to defend them from."

Subcommander Orphren narrowed his eyes. "We have no reports of the Destroyers of Worlds attacking a Protector World before. Why would they do this and risk serious damage to their fleet?"

Admiral Lorell raised his right hand, touching the long whiskers on his

face. “I believe it’s obvious. If they destroy our fleets here and harvest our worlds, then all the Enlightened Worlds we’re responsible for will become easy targets.”

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Subcommander Orphren’s gaze shifted to the numerous large viewscreens on the front wall of the Command Center. He studied them for a long moment. Several Class One Orbital Defense Platforms were visible as well as one of the large Class One Command and Control Stations. In addition, numerous small defensive satellites, armed with dual energy beams, circled both inhabited worlds. In the past, these defenses alone would have been sufficient to thwart any attack against either of the twin moons. Now, with the advent of the Destroyers of Worlds, even these powerful defenses might not be enough.

Subcommander Orphren’s expression didn’t reveal his deep concern regarding the coming battle. Their fleet had none of the dark matter hypermissiles, such as the Lakiams possessed. However, the Bascoms did have numerous antimatter hypermissiles of the two-hundred-megaton range. From the reports he’d read of several hard-fought battles against Destroyers of Worlds’ fleets, sufficient antimatter missiles targeted on one small section of a black ship’s energy screen could cause a momentary weakness. The home fleet would have the advantage in numbers as well as the powerful defenses of the two moons orbiting the gas giant. Every missile launcher was ready, and the missile storage bays were crammed with antimatter missiles.

What frightened Subcommander Orphren most was that his family was on Debent, one of the two inhabited moons. His mate had only recently delivered two strong healthy cubs, giving Orphren five young ones. No way would he allow them to become food for the Destroyers of Worlds.

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“Two of our fleets will reach us before the Destroyers of Worlds arrive,” the communications officer reported. “Admiral Dubal and Admiral Wythe will both get here a few minutes before the enemy.”

Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell nodded his approval. The Bascom System held over twelve billion inhabitants. While most lived upon the two inhabited moons, a number of large asteroids had been hollowed out for additional living space. Also domed cities had been built on many of the other planets as well as on their moons. A robust mining industry encompassed the system. Asteroids, moons, and even some of the comets in the outer halo had mining

operations ongoing.

“What’s the current situation on all intrasystem traffic?” The Bascom System normally had hundreds of ships of all types moving about.

“All ships capable of entering hyperspace are on their way to Andros,” answered Subcommander Orphren. Andros was the Bascoms’ largest colony world with over three billion inhabitants. “All nonhyperspace-capable ships are moving deeper into the system to avoid entanglement in any combat.”

“What’s the situation on Debent and Glasht?” The two inhabited moons circled the massive gas giant, which gave off enough heat to help warm both worlds.

“People are making their way into the deep shelters, and the government has relocated to the underground Command Center. Everyone who can’t make it to the shelters has been told to remain in their homes until the emergency is over.”

Everything that could be done to protect the civilian population had been attended to. For months the military and civilian engineers had been building deep underground shelters, capable of protecting millions of the twin moons’ inhabitants. The Destroyers of Worlds’ deadly harvesting rays were believed incapable of reaching the people hidden in the shelters. All across the system, preparations were being undertaken. On the asteroids with ongoing mining operations, the crews were evacuated to the deepest levels. Emergency supplies had been stored in the lower levels just in case the Destroyers of Worlds put in an appearance. In the domed cities on the moons and planets, inhabitants were prepared to wait out the attack in underground bunkers.

“Do we have the makeup of the incoming fleet?”

“Yes, Fleet Admiral,” the sensor operator replied. “Latest sensor readings indicate 620 of their small spindle-shaped cruisers and two motherships.”

“We’ll have them greatly outnumbered,” Subcommander Orphren said with obvious relief in his voice. “We’ll have a four-to-one advantage, plus the orbiting defenses.”

“Assuming our other two fleets get here in time,” Fleet Admiral Lorell was quick to point out. “Sensors, have we detected Admiral Dubal’s and Admiral Wythe’s fleets?”

“Yes, Fleet Admiral,” the sensor operator reported. “They are close and should exit hyperspace in twelve and sixteen minutes respectively.”



Fleet Admiral Lorell spent several moments studying his fleet formation on the nearby tactical display. The fleet was positioned two million kilometers from the twin moons. He would meet the Destroyers of Worlds in open space, and, if the battle went against him, he would withdraw to the twin worlds to allow their powerful defensive grids to support his fleet. Each moon had twenty of the Class One Orbital Defense Platforms as well as one of the large Class One Command and Control Stations. In addition, hundreds of dual energy beam satellites were in orbit.

Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell had his fleet aligned in a giant cylindrical formation with his battleships on the inside screened by the battlecruisers which made up the outer defenses. Bascom battleships were 1,200 meters in length and wedge-shaped. The battlecruisers were one thousand meters in length and of a narrower and slimmer wedge. The fleet's primary weapons were force beams, energy projectors, and their powerful hyperspace antimatter missiles.

Over the next twenty minutes, the two reinforcing fleets arrived and took up their positions in the massive formation. Once the combined fleet completely formed up, it moved farther away from the twin moons.

Crews on all the ships and the orbiting defensive stations waited expectantly for the arrival of the Destroyers of Worlds. Only once had the deadly enemy been defeated; the Bascoms were hoping to repeat that success.

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"All ships are in position and ready for combat," reported Subcommander Orphren.

He could see his home planet of Debent on one of the viewscreens. The world was blue-white and covered with large oceans. It was a beautiful world and one that someday would become an Enlightened World. He tried to spot his home city of Lanoor, near one of the deep blue oceans. Unfortunately a thick cloud layer covered the area. Letting out a long sigh, he returned his attention to the tactical display and the threatening red icons steadily drawing nearer.

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"Eight minutes until black fleet dropout," reported the sensor operator.

All the Destroyers of Worlds' ships were painted dark black, making them nearly invisible. They also deployed a sensor-dampening field, making their detection nearly impossible. However, the Lakiams had discovered the radiation signatures given off by the black ships' hyperdrives as well as their

sublight drives.

“Battleships are to coordinate their missile strikes with their supporting battlecruisers,” ordered Fleet Admiral Lorell as he thought over his strategy. “From Andock and Lakiam reports, forty antimatter strikes—on a small area of the Destroyers of Worlds’ defensive energy screens—overloads them.”

“I wonder what type of power systems the black ships use?” commented Subcommander Orphren. “From the reports I’ve seen, those screens are unbelievable.”

“If they are energy screens,” replied Fleet Admiral Lorell with a frown, “they absorb energy and seem to store it. The Andocks and Lakiams state, if we can rupture the energy absorption field, it will release all its stored-up energy. When that happens, the black ship beneath the shield is usually destroyed or at the very least heavily damaged.”

“Four minutes until black fleet dropout,” reported the sensor operator.

Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell looked about the Command Center of his flagship. He could sense the heightened anxiety in the room as the crew prepared for battle.

After hearing of the defeats of other Protector World fleets, the Bascoms had readjusted their defensive strategy. Realizing the black fleets could not be stopped without committing a major portion of their fleet, the Bascoms had pulled back large formations from some of the Enlightened Worlds they were supposed to defend. Only those close to the Bascom home worlds were still protected by large fleets. This had resulted in complaints from the affected Enlightened Worlds, which Bascom chose to ignore.

“Two minutes until black fleet dropout,” reported the sensor operator.

“All ships, prepare to fire,” ordered Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell over the ship-to-ship comm. He leaned forward in his command chair, keeping a sharp eye on the viewscreens as well as on the nearby tactical display. The two minutes passed, and red threat icons suddenly blossomed on the tactical display.

“Contacts!” called out the sensor operator excitedly. “Range is four million kilometers.”

Immediately the alarm klaxons sounded, and red lights flashed.

“Turn off those lights and alarms,” ordered Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell with a grimace. “We know they’re here. Let’s close the distance and not give them time to force us to react to them. I want to dictate the tone of this battle.” The hair on his neck stood up, and the adrenaline flowed. He had the

black fleet outnumbered. Time to move in for the kill.

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Vorn Prince Brollen gazed thoughtfully at the ship's primary viewscreen, showing a magnified view of the waiting enemy fleet. Prince Brollen stood upright, having a basic humanoid form with two legs and two arms. That was where the resemblance ended. Prince Brollen looked like a cross between a humanoid and a wasp. His head was covered with very short hair and was triangular in shape with two antennae. Brollen's eyes were multifaceted and could see in several different light wavelengths. He had small wasplike wings that normally stayed folded on his back. Prince Brollen's hands consisted of seven thin digits to manipulate equipment. But the most shocking aspect was that he was telepathic, as were all Vorn.

*The prey comes for us,* sent Military Commander Fraymot.

*It is as expected,* replied Prince Brollen, turning toward his new military commander. His former military commander had been deleted after his failure in the battle with food species 236.

*All ships have formed up around the Reaper and the Scythe,* reported the sensor operator. *The prey move toward us at a low speed.*

*The fleet is yours,* sent Prince Brollen to Military Commander Fraymot.

Fraymot stepped forward. *All ships, proceed forward at 10 percent sublight. We will let the prey come to meet us.*

Vorn could communicate telepathically over short distances in space, allowing a Vorn military commander to speak instantly with any or all of the ships in his fleet. It allowed for very efficient battle maneuvers as ships could move together as one.

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In space, the 620 spindle-shaped cruisers moved toward the enemy fleet. The Vorn were in a globular formation with the two motherships in the center where they would be protected.

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Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell watched the enemy uneasily. They seemed so sure of themselves. "Are we certain no other black fleet formations are showing on our sensors?" He didn't like what was seeing in the tactical display. The Destroyers of Worlds had never made such a tactical error before.

"Long-range sensors are clear," Subcommander Orphren replied as he walked over and gazed at the sensors set to detect Destroyers of Worlds'

ships in hyperspace. “There is only the one fleet.”

Fleet Admiral Lorell still couldn’t shake the feeling something was wrong. Rising from his command chair, he stepped over to one of the tactical displays, searching for any sign that something was amiss. “I don’t understand this. They must know—with our fleet and the defenses of the twin moons—that their fleet cannot defeat us.”

“They have never attacked a Protector World before,” Subcommander Orphren pointed out. “They may not be aware of our strength.”

“I don’t buy that,” Fleet Admiral Lorell replied as he returned to his command chair with a worried frown on his face. “They have been at this far too long to make such a mistake. No, we’re overlooking something.”

Subcommander Orphren studied the sensors again, shaking his head. “I just don’t see it.”

“Twelve minutes until engagement range,” reported the sensor operator.

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The massive cylindrical shape of the Bascoms’ fleet and the compact defensive globe of the black fleet moved steadily closer. The Bascoms were confident their superior numbers would force the black fleet to withdraw before they reached the twin moons. However, the black fleet did not intend to lose this battle. They had learned their lesson in the battle with food species 236.

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*We are nearly in engagement range,* sent Military Commander Fraymot.

*Our other fleets?*

*Undetected. There is no evidence this food species has noticed their presence.*

This satisfied Prince Brollen. Since the debacle with food species 236, modifying the hyperdrives on their ships had been necessary. The scientist caste had proclaimed that food species 236 had been tracking the Vorn fleet through a specific radiation signature given off by the drives. A masking field had been developed to hide the radiation signature, making the fleets once more undetectable. Prince Brollen had left the masking field off his fleet so the food species in this system would believe they had superior numbers and a chance of defeating the Vorn ships. It also forced them to focus on his fleet and to not look for others they might not detect.

*Our fleets are in position,* sent Military Commander Fraymot. *They*

*have not been detected.*

Prince Brollen nodded. *Commence the attack!*

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On board the Bascom flagship, alarms sounded, and red warning lights flashed. Weapons fire came from all around the fleet.

“Where’s that attack coming from?” demanded Fleet Admiral Lorell, his eyes narrowing sharply. He had been correct in suspecting something was amiss. “Use our viewscreens to search for additional enemy ships.” He suspected that somehow the Destroyers of Worlds had snuck other ships into the system.

“Contacts!” called out the sensor operator as the Bascom fleet came under heavy attack. “We have confirmation of two additional black fleets which have just entered weapons range.”

“Where and how many ships?” demanded Grand Admiral Lorell as his worst fears materialized. This explained why the first black fleet had been advancing with such confidence.

“Unknown,” reported the sensor operator, his hands flying over his console as he tried to estimate the number of ships in the two new black fleet formations. “We’re picking them up on countless viewscreens across the fleet. Astrometrics is tracking them whenever they fire a weapon. The black ships are using some type of masking field to shield the energy signatures of their subspace drives.”

The Bascom flagship shuddered violently from incoming weapons fire. Everything made sense now. Somehow the Destroyers of Worlds had discovered how their ships were being tracked and had implemented a countermeasure.

“Damage report!”

“Heavy damage to the outer hull,” reported the damage control officer. “We have several compartments open to space, and we’ve lost an energy projector. Damage control teams are responding.”

“It was only a glancing hit,” added Subcommander Orphren. “Otherwise their beams are going right through our shields!”

“Return fire!” ordered Fleet Admiral Lorell as he watched in horror while ship after Bascom ship was annihilated by some kind of black energy beam. “What type of weapon is that?” On one of the viewscreens, a Bascom battleship exploded violently as it was struck by one of the black beams. On another, a pair of battlecruisers were turned into twisted wreckage.

“It’s some type of exotic antimatter,” reported the sensor operator. “It’s of a nature I’ve never seen before.”

Fleet Admiral Lorell had heard rumors of the Destroyers of Worlds coming from another universe. He wondered if this antimatter weapon had originated from there. It would explain a great deal about the weapons the black ships used.

“Continue to hit them with our own antimatter missiles,” he ordered. He must act quickly while he still had the ships to inflict serious damage on the black ships. Looking at the carnage the enemy was inflicting on his fleet, he didn’t have long.

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In space, the battle intensified as the Bascom fleet launched their two-hundred-megaton antimatter missiles in sprint mode toward the black ships. Brilliant explosions littered space as the missiles found their targets. On several occasions black ship energy screens overloaded, bursting like a bubble, releasing gigatons of uncontrolled energy, which, in most cases, annihilated the black ship the shield protected. However, the three black ship fleets mercilessly played their deadly black antimatter rays across the Bascom cylinder-shaped formation, destroying ships with frightening regularity. The rays passed unhampered through Bascom energy screens, creating huge craters in the hulls of the targeted ships. Then the beam would race across the hull, opening the ship up to space until enough critical damage accrued for the ship to die a fiery death. Most of the time this only took a few seconds.

Throughout the Bascom fleet’s cylindrical formation, flares of bright light indicated the demise of countless ships and their crews. Space was becoming littered with the riddled and twisted remains of the Bascom fleet.

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“Pull us back to the twin moons,” ordered Grand Admiral Lorell, feeling desperate as two more of his battleships were annihilated. “How many of the black ships have we destroyed with our antimatter missiles?”

“Twenty-two,” reported Subcommander Orphren. “They’re still advancing.”

“Our own losses?”

“We’ve lost over four hundred ships. In some areas of our formation, the outer layer of the cylinder is completely gone.” Subcommander Orphren’s eyes were wide in shock.

“Continue to fire our antimatter missiles.”

“Missiles launching,” reported the tactical officer. “We’ve fired 18 percent of our missiles so far.”

They had no choice but to retreat. Lorell’s numerical advantage was gone. “Download all battle information to one of the observation ships. It’s to enter hyperspace and proceed to Lakiam immediately. They must know our long-range sensors are no longer effective.” This would bring consternation to all the Protector Worlds as the black fleets would no longer be detectable.

A general meeting of a number of Protector Worlds had been called a few months back. One decision made at the meeting was the need for the sharing of information. As a result, a number of observation ships, lightly armed warships, were left out of any battle so they could report on the tactics of the Destroyers of Worlds. The tactical information was delivered to the Lakiams—declared as the Information Center for the war against the black ships since they were the only ones to defeat a black fleet. The Lakiams had even destroyed one of the all-powerful motherships.

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Military Commander Fraymot watched as the enemy fleet withdrew. *All ships, launch the globes of annihilation.* Fraymot wanted to destroy as many of the enemy ships as possible before they could reach the defenses of the two moons—the Vorn’s primary targets in this system. There was no defense against the deadly spheres, and, once they touched a ship’s energy screen, the vessel was doomed.

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From the spindle-shaped ships, black spheres of antimatter energy shot out toward the retreating Bascom warships. In desperation the ships fired their energy projectors, trying to disrupt the deadly spheres. In a few instances, the black antimatter spheres exploded. However, in most cases, the spheres continued on, striking the energy shields of their targets.

Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell watched in anguish as hundreds of his remaining ships were struck by the deadly energy spheres.

“Those are the black antimatter spheres we were warned about,” said Subcommander Orphren in a strained voice. “Numerous ships are reporting a significant power drain on their shields.”

“Continue the withdrawal,” ordered Fleet Admiral Lorell, grim-faced. “Contact all tugs at the twin moons and have them pull the affected ships back to the defensive grids.” Fleet Admiral Lorell doubted if there would be time for this, but he had to try.

“Message sent,” reported Subcommander Orphren.

“Numerous ships report their energy shields are down,” added the communications officer.

“The black antimatter spheres have reached the ships’ hulls, and the power drain continues,” reported the sensor officer.

“A number of ships have lost all power and are totally defenseless,” reported Subcommander Orphren, his eyes wide with worry as he gazed in growing consternation at the tactical displays. “They’re requesting assistance.”

“Black ships are launching antimatter missiles,” warned the sensor officer. “They’re targeting the ships which have lost power.”

As he watched the viewscreens, Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell’s heart sank. Hundreds of Bascom vessels drifted powerless in the void. They would stand no chance against the black ships’ antimatter missiles. Even as he watched, brilliant explosions lit up space as ship after ship with its Bascom crews were ruthlessly destroyed.

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For several minutes the brutal carnage continued until finally the flagship and the rest of the surviving ships of the Bascom fleet reached the defensive grids of the twin moons. Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell divided his remaining fleet, sending equal components to each moon.

“What do we have left?” His fleet had been brutally savaged.

The sensor officer shook his head. “We have 212 battleships and 507 battlecruisers still operational.”

“We’ve lost Admiral Dubal,” reported Subcommander Orphren. “His flagship was incapacitated by one of the black energy spheres.”

Fleet Admiral Lorell took a deep breath. This was far worse than he had imagined. “Inform Admiral Wythe he has command of the forces protecting Glasht. We will take over the defense of Debent.”

The black ships were now revealed on the tactical display. “How are we detecting those ships?”

“Planetary telescopes and orbiting space camera systems,” reported the sensor officer. “We’re also adding information from the defensive platforms, the command station, plus our warships.”

Fleet Admiral Lorell nodded as he studied the tactical display and the three large black ship formations. Each contained over six hundred of the spindle-shaped cruisers and two of the large motherships. His hope of saving



the twin moons vanished. The defenses around Debent and Glasht would not be enough! This was the largest attack the black ships had made on any world.

“How soon before any additional fleet units can reach us?”

Subcommander Orphren slowly shook his head. “None within twelve hours. It will take over two days for the nearest Protector World to send aid, if they do. With three black fleets in this sector, all the nearby Protector Worlds may be hesitant to risk any of their fleet units.”

Subcommander Orphren was right. If the situation were reversed, the twin moons would be hesitant about sending any of their ships into danger. Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell wondered if any of his fleet or people would survive the next few hours.

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*The enemy has completed their retreat to their worlds, Military Commander Fraymot reported. Both moons have heavy defenses around them.*

*What are your plans to render those defenses harmless so we can harvest those worlds?* asked Prince Brollen. So far, Military Commander Fraymot had performed his duty admirably.

*We will assail the defenses and fleet guarding the nearer of the two inhabited moons,* answered Fraymot. *Once the fleet and the orbiting defenses have been annihilated, then we will proceed to the second moon.*

This satisfied Prince Brollen. It was both efficient and practical. After the disaster inflicted on his fleet by food species 236, he had been summoned to the Conclave Habitat for a personal meeting with Queen Alithe. It had been made very clear to him that continued failure would cause him to lose his status as one of Queen Alithe’s chosen ones. Brollen strongly suspected this had not disappointed Prince Ortumad as he wished to take Brollen’s place as one of the Queen’s favorites.

Prince Brollen turned his multifaceted eyes toward one of the large viewscreens in the Command Center, focusing on one of the two inhabited moons of food species 647. Already Brollen was curious as to how this particular food species would taste. He had a personal collection of food pellets from a number of the worlds his fleet had harvested. He was always seeking new and savory tastes for his inquisitive palate.

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The commander of the Command and Control Station responsible for

protecting Glasht listened as Admiral Wythe gave his orders. The fleet would further divide itself, forming up around the large defensive platforms and the Command and Control Station. The platforms and the station would coordinate antimatter missile strikes on the black fleets. That would allow for enough launchers to saturate the screens of the enemy ships to bring some of them down.

Commander Gunther stared at the numerous viewscreens in the Command Center. Messages had been sent, and the fleet units assigned to the various platforms moved into their positions. Admiral Wythe's flagship defended the port side of the Command and Control Station.

"All ships are in position," reported the sensor operator. "The black ships are nearing weapons range."

Commander Gunther looked about the Command Center. His people showed no fear at what was ahead of them. This was a good crew, and he had served with many of them for years. He had known a few of them since they had been cubs on Glasht.

"Prepare to fire. Antimatter missiles first, followed by our force beams. All weapons are to be focused on the same target area."

"Black ship targeted," reported Smurl, the tactical officer. "Targeting information has been sent to our supporting ships."

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The three black fleets approached the moon of Glasht. As soon as they neared weapons range, they split apart and surrounded the planet. Once the planet was englobed, the fleets surged forward, firing their black antimatter energy beams at the defending ships and the powerful defensive stations. In just a matter of a few moments two of the massive stations exploded, sending debris careening through space. Four nearby Bascom battlecruisers couldn't avoid the debris, and three of them were seriously damaged. Moments later black antimatter energy beams ended their existence.

From the defensive platforms and the Command and Control Station, hundreds of the two-hundred-megaton antimatter missiles were launched toward the black fleets. In addition, more missiles were fired by the surviving battleships and battlecruisers. Space exploded in brilliance as the missiles struck their targets. Black ship screens absorbed tremendous amounts of released antimatter energy as the warheads detonated. In a few instances, the shields became supersaturated with energy and burst like a bubble. In blinding flashes of light, the black ships were annihilated, leaving only a few

wisps of glowing gas behind.

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“We took out fourteen of the enemy,” reported the sensor operator to Commander Gunther.

A brilliant light flashed across one of the viewscreens in the front of the Command Center.

“Defense platform seventeen has been blown apart,” the sensor operator informed Gunther. “That’s six we’ve lost. Also a lot of our battlecruisers and battleships have been destroyed .”

Gunther took a deep breath. “Continue to fire. We must destroy enough of them to force the black ships to withdraw!” With a deep-throated growl, he watched the viewscreens as the battle increased in intensity.

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Admiral Wythe was thrown against the restraining harness of his command chair. It took him a moment to catch his breath. The lights in the Command Center seemed to flicker and then returned to normal.

“Heavy damage reported in Engineering and adjoining compartments,” reported Subcommander Marless. “We have numerous compartments open to space, and our fighting ability has been substantially reduced. Energy shield is down to 30 percent.”

Wythe looked at the viewscreens, which were still functioning. He stared in shock, his mind numb. Black ship antimatter rays were tearing apart the moon’s defenses. Even the powerful defensive platforms were being struck down by those deadly beams.

“Enemy is launching their black antimatter spheres,” warned Subcommander Marless. “Impact in twelve seconds.”

The two looked at one another meaningfully. They both knew what this meant.

“Fire as many missiles as we can in the time we have left,” ordered Admiral Wythe, accepting he wouldn’t survive this battle.

“Missiles firing,” reported the tactical officer. “We’ll launch as many as we can until we lose power.”

The lights in the Command Center suddenly dimmed and stayed dim. Admiral Wythe looked questioningly at the sensor operator.

“Black antimatter sphere has struck our energy screen.”

“We’re suffering a massive power loss,” reported Subcommander Marless. “Energy screen has failed, and the black sphere has reached our

hull.”

“Weapons are offline,” added the tactical officer. “We launched 38 percent of our missiles.”

A few moments later, the Command Center lights went out completely, and then, one by one, the consoles shut down, leaving the room in darkness.

Admiral Wythe could do nothing to prevent his ship’s destruction and the loss of his faithful crew. He wished he could have walked upon Glasht one last time.

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Prince Brollen nodded in satisfaction as the black antimatter spheres performed their gruesome work. The large defensive platforms died as their power was stolen. The same with the defending battleships and battlecruisers. On the primary viewscreen, the large command station blew apart, raining debris on the moon.

*All targets eliminated, reported Military Commander Fraymot. We are now targeting the orbital defensive satellites. They should be destroyed in the next few minutes, and then we can move to the secondary target.*

*How many cruisers did we lose?*

*Only eighteen, answered Fraymot. The antimatter warheads used against us are in the two-hundred-megaton range. They kept firing them at a small section of our defensive energy screens until they were overloaded. The resulting release of the absorbed energy destroyed our ships.*

Prince Brollen wasn’t concerned about the loss of ships. He had proven his point that one of the so-called Protector World systems could be destroyed, even with the advanced weapons they possessed. While the harvest of this galaxy would be more costly than those in the past, it could still be done with relatively few losses to the Vorn fleets. He had promised Queen Alithe that he would do this. It ensured the harvesting of this galaxy would continue at an accelerated rate. The Vorn race was hungry, and this galaxy would furnish sustenance for hundreds of years.

Focusing his multifaceted eyes on the primary viewscreen, he could see hundreds of small pinpricks of light as the defensive satellites were quickly eliminated. The moon below was now his for the taking, but first he must conquer the second one. The harvest of this system would be plentiful and would send a warning to all the other heavily armed worlds that it was useless to resist the Vorn. It would encourage them to return their fleets to their home systems, leaving numerous other worlds vulnerable to the Vorn

fleets.

*All targets eliminated. Proceeding to the secondary target,* sent Military Commander Fraymot.

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Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell gazed grimly at the black fleets now approaching Debent. If Admiral Wythe had failed to stop the advance of the fleets on Glasht, Lorell had very little chance to do so here, but he had to try.

“All ships and defensive platforms, stand by to launch antimatter hypermissiles,” he ordered. “We will launch at maximum range and continue to fire until our missile bays are empty. As previously discussed, we will limit our fire to a few black ship vessels. Once they are destroyed, we will move to secondary targets.”

Subcommander Orphren moved closer to the admiral where no one could overhear. “We don’t stand a chance, do we?”

Fleet Admiral Lorell looked long and hard at Subcommander Orphren and then let out a deep sigh of frustration. “I wish we did. Our people are depending on us to protect them, but we just don’t have the firepower!”

Subcommander Orphren nodded his understanding. His mate and cubs had been assigned to one of the deep shelters. Even if the fleet was defeated and the Destroyers of Worlds harvested the planet, there was a slim chance they would survive. Perhaps someday in the future, his male cubs would avenge his death.

“Enemy will be within weapons range in four minutes,” reported the sensor operator.

Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell leaned back in his command chair and closed his eyes. He took a deep, steadying breath as his greatest battle was about to begin.

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Prince Brollen watched the tactical display as his fleets moved closer to the second inhabited moon. Already he could imagine how this new food species would taste. Once he had demonstrated these so-called Protector Worlds could be destroyed with few losses, then other Protector Worlds would be attacked. That would allow the harvesting fleets to expand the harvest area and return to the Vorn Conclave Habitat and their other megastructures with full loads of food pellets. Their food shortage would end, and his status in the hierarchy would be assured.

*We have reports of other fleets inbound toward this system,* reported

Military Commander Fraymot.

*How soon before they arrive?* Prince Brollen knew that Military Commander Fraymot had left a number of the spindle-shaped cruisers on patrol duty to detect such fleets on their long-range sensors.

*Fourteen hours before the first can reach us. If they attack in small groups, they can easily be destroyed.*

*Very well, we will continue the attack. We should be finished with the harvesting of these worlds before their other ships can arrive. Once we have harvested the two moons, we will leave.*

Military Commander Fraymot turned toward the prince. *A large number of inhabitants are on the moons, asteroids, and other planets in the system.*

*We will leave those for now,* answered Prince Brollen. Normally he did not tell his subordinates the reasons for his actions, but this time he did. *They will tell others of how easy our victory was, forcing these Protector Worlds to pull their fleets from the weaker worlds they defend. Our harvesting fleets will then cull thousands of planets of different food species that will hopefully be palatable to our Queens and the rest of our kind.*

*Weapons range in twenty seconds,* reported the Vorn in front of the sensor screens.

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In space, the fleets drew nearer. The Bascom ships waited until the black ships entered weapons range and then let loose with every missile they could launch. Hundreds of antimatter missiles slammed into the hulls of the black ships. Thousands of megatons of antimatter energy were released, only to be absorbed by the powerful energy screens of the black ships. Missile after missile pounded the enemy's screens. Then, in ones and twos, the energy screens failed. They exploded in massive bursts of energy, creating small novalike explosions, which instantly annihilated the ships. For a few seconds the Bascoms in the defending fleet were elated as they saw black ships dying. But then the black ships returned fire. Only this time they attacked with both their black antimatter beams and their deadly black spheres.

Across the defensive grid, platforms were torn apart as the black beams ripped through their screens, blasting huge chasms in the hulls. Black ship antimatter missiles arrived as energy shields failed, leaving the massive structures vulnerable. In a matter of thirty seconds, fourteen of the twenty defending platforms died fiery deaths. Around them Bascom battleships and

battlecruisers exploded in flames like moths drawn to a fire. The black antimatter spheres attached themselves to energy screens, absorbing their energy, and then latched onto the hulls to finish their deadly work.

Several more of the defensive platforms lost their power and were instantly turned into drifting wreckage as antimatter missiles finished the work of the spheres. The Bascom antimatter missiles pummeling the black fleet lessened as the defenders were systematically eliminated.

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Deep below the surface of the planet, the leaders of the Bascom race watched in horror as bright flashes of light indicated the destruction of the defensive platforms and the fleet guarding their moon. In consternation and dread, they all understood what this meant. The Destroyers of Worlds would soon harvest the planet. Billions of innocent Bascom citizens would die. Only a few million hidden in the deepest of shelters might survive.

With growing understanding, the leaders of the Bascom moons knew the Destroyers of Worlds could not be stopped. In time the deadly enemy would harvest the inhabited planets of this galaxy, culling all of its intelligent life. When the black ships left, tens of thousands of broken and destroyed worlds would be left behind.

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In space, Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell watched in anguish as the Command and Control Station was ripped apart by the deadly black beams of the black ships. His fleet was mostly gone, and only a few ships besides his flagship still survived.

“Order the remaining observation ship to jump into hyperspace and proceed to Lakiam. There is nothing else it can learn here.”

In silence, Subcommander Orphren moved to carry out the order. His steps were leaden and his movements almost mechanical. His world was coming to an end.

Fleet Admiral Lorell watched the subcommander, understanding his detachment from what was going on around him. The battle was lost, and nothing could be done to save Debent. The flagship suddenly shook violently, and the lights faded. After a few moments, the lights died completely. Even the ventilation system grew quiet. Grand Fleet Admiral Lorell closed his eyes, waiting for the end.

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As the last defending ship died under the fire of the black antimatter

beams, Military Commander Fraymot turned toward the prince. *The battle is over. We have a few defensive satellites to eliminate, but the harvest can begin shortly.*

*You have done well,* sent Prince Brollen. *As soon as the satellites have been eliminated, move the fleets into position. I am anxious to taste this new food species.*

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A few minutes later the six motherships went into close orbit above the moon. From each ship fourteen large hatches slid open, and a black ray flashed forth to strike the surface of the moon below. As the black beams swept across the cities, all their inhabitants were transformed into a black ashy substance.

On board the mothership *Reaper*, the prince watched as the tractor beams inside the black rays brought the converted organic substance into the mothership and fed it to the converters. The converters classified the different organic substances and then changed them into appropriate food for each of the three castes.

The prince walked over and pressed a button on a small control panel. Instantly a receptacle slid open, and a gray pellet in the form of a small cube was ejected onto a tray. The prince took the pellet and popped it into his mouth, crunching the pellet with his mandibles and feeling the invigorating strength that instantly flowed through him. This pellet was made from the organic material of one of the civilized inhabitants of the moon they were culling. Gray pellets were for the Royal Caste and the other privileged; black pellets were for the Military Caste. Finally the brown pellets were for the Working Caste. Each cube would provide sustenance for a full day, or two days if necessary, without any hunger pangs.

With intense pleasure, Prince Brollen was surprised by how tasty this particular food pellet was. The Queens would truly enjoy such a delicacy. He would make a point of presenting a significant portion of these food pellets to Queen Alithe. He was certain when he returned to the Conclave Habitat that his future as one of the favorites of the Vorn Queen would be assured.

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On the surface of the moon, white spheres of energy from the orbiting motherships fell. Wherever a city had been harvested, the spheres exploded, wiping out nearly all signs of civilization. City after city died as all constructs that once showed a civilized society had existed on the moon were



systematically eliminated.

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A few hours later the same culling took place on Glasht as its inhabitants were harvested and turned into food pellets for the Vorn race. The same destruction from the white energy spheres was inflicted on Glasht, turning it into a nearly lifeless world. All visages of a civilized society were eliminated. The three Vorn fleets then formed up and entered hyperspace, leaving a shattered system behind. Very quickly word of what had been done would spread across this region of the galaxy. In a matter of a few short days, the Protector Worlds would know not even their home planets were safe from the Destroyers of Worlds.

## Chapter Two

Fleet Admiral Kurt Vickers was on board Newton Station, the large and completely rebuilt shipyard in orbit above the planet Newton. Six months had passed since destroying the Profiteer fleet around Earth and once more freeing the planet—six busy months both in the solar system and around Newton. In addition to expanding the station, new ship construction had begun in earnest.

“She’s quite a sight, isn’t she?” said Captain Randson as he critically studied the new battlecruiser about to exit the large construction bay. The ship was 1,000 meters long and 200 meters wide. It contained twenty decks, making the ship 170 meters thick.

“She’s more powerful than the *Aurelia*,” commented Colonel Hayworth, in charge of ship construction.

“She should be,” spoke up Lomatz, who could pass as Human, except for the pale yellow tint to his eyes. “We combined the technology from four Protector Worlds to build your new battlecruisers.” He paused, considering Fleet Admiral Vickers. “I still don’t understand why you insisted on installing that massive KEW cannon.”

The large cannon ran four hundred meters along the center of the ship and had a twelve-degree range of fire from the bow of the vessel.

*Star Cross* Chief Tactical Officer Lieutenant Evelyn Mays stood nearby, listening to the discussion. “That cannon can fire a round at nearly 60 percent of the speed of light with the new power systems we’ve installed. I’m not convinced even these Destroyers of Worlds’ ships could withstand such a blow to their shields if we had the right projectile.”

Lomatz went silent for a long moment and then responded. “I do have to admit, with all the research my people have done, there is no record of anyone using such a weapon against a black ship. It’s considered too primitive.”

“We need to find the right projectile,” said Captain Randson as he watched the battlecruiser slide past the large observation window where they all stood.

“I may have an idea on that,” said Lieutenant Mays with a sly smile on her face. “We use neutronium as the projectile.”

“Impossible,” said Lomatz, shaking his head in disbelief. “Neutronium has to come from the core of a neutron star, and, due to the intense gravity

and surface temperature there, it's impossible to mine. Even if you could, once it's removed from the star, it will expand and explode. It would destroy your mining crew and/or the ship instantly."

Lieutenant Mays's smile changed to a deep frown. "There must be a way. I've run the numbers. A projectile the size of a marble would generate the explosive force equivalent to all the energy Newton's sun puts out in one second. Such a projectile fired by our KEW cannon would be unstoppable by any conceivable energy shield. Even the ones used by the black ships."

"Let's say you could get this neutronium marble. It would crush your ship because it would weigh in excess of several billion tons," said Lomatz. "I'm afraid you will have to settle for something larger and less dense. Neutronium will not work."

Lieutenant Mays let out a deep sigh of disappointment. "I'm not giving up. We need a weapon that can easily destroy the black ships, and this would do it."

"Keep searching," Kurt said with a nod. Lieutenant Mays was a brilliant tactical officer. "Perhaps someday we'll find a way to get you the neutronium. For now, we must find the best substitute we can."

Lieutenant Mays nodded, but her mouth was pressed into a thin line.

Kurt knew she wouldn't give up on the neutronium idea.

"That makes the tenth new battlecruiser we've built," Colonel Hayward said with a pleased smile. "The new construction techniques and systems that Lomatz's people helped us to install have made a huge difference."

"What about our older ships? How is the conversion going with them?" asked Kurt. The four large repair bays on the station had been working around the clock, equipping various ships with the new weapons and power systems.

"The last of them will be changed over in six more weeks," reported Hayworth.

"What about the improvements in the construction bays?"

"We've finished the modifications to all four of the older ones, and the two newer construction bays are already in full operation."

Kurt nodded his approval. Over the last six months, the news coming in from the rest of the galaxy had been frightening. The Destroyers of Worlds had culled planet after planet across the galaxy. All Kurt's data came from Ambassador Marvin Tenner, stationed on Kubitz. The planet was, a treasure trove of information if you knew the right people and could afford to pay for

it. Currently Avery Dolman was making a small fortune off Newton's need to know.

"What about my new flagship?"

Colonel Hayward grinned. "The new *Star Cross*?"

"Yes." Kurt wanted a battleship as his command vessel.

"It's been moved to one of the repair bays for completion. All the primary systems are installed and functioning. We need to finish up the interior and perform a little additional work on the power systems. All that can be done in a repair bay while we build new battlecruisers in the six construction bays."

This sounded fine to Kurt as the new construction technologies in the bays resembled the same ones used at Kubitz in the massive shipyards that orbited the planet. Those new technologies gave Kurt the ability to build twelve new battlecruisers every six weeks. It thrilled Kurt to know that, within one year, he would have a fleet of over one hundred of the powerful vessels. If the Newton System could remain undetected by the Destroyers of Worlds, Kurt might just build a fleet powerful enough to give the black fleets pause, if and when they did show up.

Kurt faced Lomatz. "How do your people like living on the island?" The huge Newton island had been settled by twenty thousand members of Lomatz's race.

"Fine," answered Lomatz, folding his arms over his chest. "It's large enough for future expansion, and all our automated factories are up and running. My people couldn't be happier." Then he looked knowingly at Kurt. "I'm also sure your people are glad mine are on the island and not running loose on Newton."

"We must learn to trust one another first," Kurt replied evenly. "You have to admit the culture you're from is very different than ours."

"I'm not complaining," answered Lomatz. "I think it's a wise decision. However, keep in mind that my people are not Profiteers."

"I understand you're returning to Kubitz shortly," said Hayworth.

Lomatz shifted his gaze to the ship construction manager. "Yes, we've been here for several months, and I've still got a lucrative business to run back on Kubitz. Also a few more necessities must be picked up as well as several more automated factories. Governor Spalding and his people have submitted a list of additional factories they're interested in, particularly with all the people flooding Newton from Earth. We'll leave in a couple days."

Captain Randson shook his head. “I guess I’ll never understand how a place like Kubitz can exist. From what Grantz told me, it’s getting wilder and more dangerous every day.”

“Because of the Destroyers of Worlds,” said Kurt, recalling Ambassador Tenner’s last report. “Kubitz is the biggest exporter of defensive weapons systems in the galaxy, and—with the growing demands for these by both Protector Worlds and Enlightened Worlds—Kubitz is building a number of new construction facilities in orbit. Even the defenses around Kubitz and other Gothan Empire worlds have been substantially strengthened.”

“It’s grown nearly impossible for many clans to even purchase warships for raiding purposes,” added Lomatz. “The different worlds in the Gothan Empire have purchased nearly every ship being built in the Kubitz shipyards. Prices in the last six months have nearly tripled.”

“Tenner mentioned the slave market is still going strong, which indicates some raiding is still continuing,” said Kurt. Kurt wished there was something that could be done to shut that despicable market down.

Lomatz nodded. “Only in areas where no Destroyers of Worlds’ ships have been reported and only by the larger clans.”

“What happens if the black ships find the Gothan Empire?” asked Randson.

Lomatz went silent for a long moment and then answered. “Why do you think I brought my people here? At some point in time, the Destroyers of Worlds will come to the Gothan Empire. All the empire worlds are heavily defended and are protected by huge fleets. It will be a grand battle, but, in the end, the empire will fall, and all their worlds will be harvested, just as the Enlightened Worlds are now. There is no stopping the black ships.”

Everyone quieted after that pronouncement. The future of the galaxy was perilous. Rumors were spreading like wildfire of Protector World fleets being swept aside as if they were a minor hindrance. The civilized culture of most of the galaxy was in danger of collapsing. However, what concerned all of them the most was what would happen when the Destroyers of Worlds finally took the time to search the backwater area of the galaxy, which held Earth, Newton, and a few other civilized worlds.

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Several hours later Kurt was in a shuttle rapidly descending to the surface of Newton. His destination was the large spaceport outside the capital city. The porthole next to him displayed how close they were to one of the

orbiting defensive platforms. Each was two hundred meters across and forty meters thick. On top sat a pair of massive ion cannons, four direct energy cannons, and eight large energy projectors. Six pods contained eight hypermissiles, each with an automatic reloading system. Everything was computer-controlled, and a crew of twelve could operate the entire platform. The Class One Command and Control Station was ten times the size of the defensive platforms with the firepower of ten Lakiam battleships. Currently sixty-four of the Class One defensive platforms orbited Newton. The fourteen Class Twos and their Command and Control Station had been taken to Earth and put into orbit to protect the home planet.

“Damn, there are a lot of ships in orbit,” commented Captain Randson from where he sat in the copilot’s chair in front of Kurt.

Kurt had to grin. Those ships belonged to Earth, Newton, Julbian, Sertez, and Maldon, the latter three being the humanoid systems that had formed an alliance with Newton and Earth. All three had reached a similar technological development. Julbian had become a problem when Kurt had claimed jurisdiction over it at Kubitz. He had been forced to pay a large fee to register his claim, and, much to his surprise, he had found Lomatz had included two smaller regions of space in the contract also. When Newton ships had explored those two regions, they found the systems of Sertez and Maldon.

“Trade with our new friends is certainly growing,” said Kurt, pleased with the development.

As part of their agreement to form an alliance, Newton had provided the other planets with blueprints for improved hyperdrives to allow for quicker travel between all the alliance members. Of course none of the hyperdrives compared to the ones on the *Aurelia* or Kurt’s new ships. Also, as part of their agreement, Kurt had arranged for Lomatz to procure a few more Class Two Orbital Defense Platforms to protect their new allies from attack by the Profiteers. Both the Sertez and Maldon homeworlds were now protected by eight defensive platforms plus a Command and Control Station. Lomatz had informed Kurt immediately afterward that no more defensive platforms of any type were available from the empire. Demand for them was at an all-time high, and prices had skyrocketed. Lomatz had suggested using his large construction ships to possibly build more. He informed Kurt it would be time-consuming but possible.

As the shuttle descended through Newton’s thick and protective

atmosphere, Kurt thought over the events of the past six months. The two Lakiams, Mara and Tarnth, had stayed at Newton for two months, showing Kurt's people how to operate the Lakiam and Andock warships Lomatz had salvaged. Once Kurt was satisfied his people knew everything they needed to about the warships, he arranged for the two Lakiams to go to Kubitz, where they procured a ship to take them home. He had gone out of the way to ensure neither were aware of Earth's or Newton's exact location. However, if the Lakiams wanted to find either planet, they probably could. The locations were known on Kubitz, and that information could be bought for the right price.

The shuttle touched down, and Kurt and Andrew exited, stepping onto the tarmac of the spaceport. The midafternoon sun shone brightly in the sky with only a scattering of fleecy white clouds.

"Going home?" Kurt asked Andrew as they crossed the spaceport to the large terminal where vehicles waited.

"Yes," Andrew replied with a smile. "I promised Emily and Alexis that I would take them out to eat at the new Mexican restaurant at the Westside Mall."

Kurt laughed. Emily was Andrew's wife, and Alexis was his fourteen-year-old highly spirited daughter. "I suspect some shopping will be involved after the meal."

Andrew sighed, and his shoulders drooped slightly. "I'm sure, but I've been gone for three days, and I promised I would do whatever they wanted when I got back. What about you? How's Keera adjusting to her brother and Meesa getting married?"

"It was actually a relief," answered Kurt as they entered the terminal. "Meesa's doing a good job keeping Dalen out of trouble. He's been made foreman in charge of a large group of construction robots, building new homes. The money's good, and he seems satisfied with his new life."

"A big change from Kubitz."

"Yeah, at least here he's not working for any of the Profiteers."

Reaching the far side of the terminal, they went their separate ways, getting into awaiting vehicles. Before Kurt could go home, he had a short meeting with Governor Spalding.

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As the car drove through the city, Kurt couldn't help marveling at all the changes that had come about over the last year. Towering skyscrapers

reached toward the clouds. Huge apartment complexes, shopping centers, video theaters, and everything else one could imagine in a large Earth city were present in Newton's capital. The city was more modern than any found on the home planet. The capital city's population was rapidly nearing one and a half million. Even more satisfying, with the purchase of the automated factories from Kubitz, Newton was now self-sufficient. Anything made on Earth could be produced by the new factories, once they were programmed.

Reaching the Government Center, the large complex of buildings where the government was located, Kurt exited the hydrogen-powered vehicle and made his way into the largest structure.

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It didn't take Kurt long to reach Governor Spalding's office. Once there he was quickly ushered into the governor's office by his secretary.

"Fleet Admiral Vickers," said Spalding, rising from his chair and walking around his desk to shake the admiral's hand. "I was hoping you would have time to stop by."

"I'm available anytime you need me," Kurt replied with a smile. He had known Governor Spalding for years, and the two of them had grown quite close.

"Have a seat, Admiral," Spalding said, returning to his own comfortable chair. "I wanted to speak to you about the latest message Marvin Tenner sent from Kubitz."

Kurt raised his eyebrows. Since resigning his commission to become Newton's ambassador to Kubitz, Marvin now reported directly to the governor. "What's going on? Has Grantz gotten into more trouble?" Grantz was the Marsten Profiteer who had signed a very lucrative contract to work for Newton and Kurt. Grantz had been useful in a number of delicate situations on Kubitz. However, Grantz had an overwhelming urge for gold and would do almost anything to acquire it.

"No, not Grantz this time. Tenner reported he received a message from the Lakiams. It seems they want their warships back."

Kurt relaxed in his chair, taking a deep breath. Mara had warned him of this when she left. "What did they say?"

"They want you to come to Kubitz and turn over the vessels to them. They will have ships and crews there to return them to Lakiam. They also want the Andock vessels."

Kurt stood up and walked to the window overlooking the capital. The



city streets were still busy even late in the afternoon. “I don’t see we have a choice. While Mara and Tarnth probably aren’t sure where Earth and Newton are, they can certainly buy that information on Kubitz. It wouldn’t surprise me if the Lakiams haven’t already arranged for that.” That was the bad thing about Kubitz; anything and everything was for sale for the right price. Kurt didn’t want a fleet of Lakiam warships showing up over Newton or Earth. Despite the two planets’ newest defenses, the Lakiams possessed some of the most powerful warships in the galaxy. Even the Gothan Empire was afraid of them.

“So we just turn over those warships to them?” asked Governor Spalding unhappily. “Can we afford to?”

Kurt pivoted and returned to his chair. “Fortunately we’ve already learned everything we can from those vessels. Lomatz’s engineers can duplicate every system on any of those warships. The new battlecruisers we’ve built are actually more powerful than the Lakiam or the Andock vessels. We’ve put more weapons on board our ships and eliminated a lot of the wasted space present on the Protector World vessels. We’ve already built ten battlecruisers, and our new battleship will be ready in a few more weeks.”

Governor Spalding looked thoughtful and then replied. “So it was a good decision to allow Lomatz and his people to settle on that island?”

“It would seem so,” replied Kurt. There had been a lot of discussions before that decision was made. “You must remember their technology was already way ahead of ours. They’ve been studying Protector World and Enlightened World technology for years. Without their help, we could never have duplicated the advanced technologies on those Lakiam and Andock ships. The upgrades Lomatz’s people have made to Newton Station are breathtaking. What they’ve helped us to accomplish in a few short months would have taken us years to do by ourselves.”

“Yes, I’ve spoken to Colonel Simms, and he’s more than satisfied with what’s been done to the station. It’s hard to believe how rapidly they can build a new ship. I must take a tour when I have the chance.”

Kurt went silent for a moment, and then he asked, “How soon should we take the warships to Kubitz?” The ships had been made spaceworthy in the repairs bays in Newton Station. Kurt had hoped to keep them.

“The Lakiams are demanding we have them there in two weeks. They will have a small fleet waiting to take them off our hands.”

“I’ll make the arrangements. Is there anything else?” Kurt wasn’t happy

about returning to Kubitz, but he didn't see where he had any choice. He didn't want the Lakiams coming to Newton and seeing any of the new ships that had been built.

"Yes, you'll be taking a considerable quantity of gold. We've spent a lot on the automated factories and medical devices we've ordered over the last six months. President Mayfield has asked us to purchase a number of the automated factories and construction robots for use on Earth. He hopes it will make reconstruction easier. Lomatz also wants to purchase some specialized mining and refining equipment."

"Yes, we spoke briefly about that. We'll need the expanded mining and refining technology to keep Newton Station supplied with the materials to build the new ships. Lomatz also suggested buying some specialized factories that can turn out ship components when properly programmed."

"Are you satisfied with the defenses we've put around Earth?"

"Eighty million people," murmured Kurt, thinking about all the lives lost in the Profiteer attacks. "The Class Two Orbital Defense Platforms and its Command and Control Station we've given them should be sufficient. We've also provided Fleet Admiral Tomalson with additional ships."

"Most of the world still blames the North American Union for their trouble with the Profiteers, particularly after what Marlen Stroud did. The loss of life didn't help."

"What's the current status of people coming to Newton?" Ships arrived daily with immigrants.

"Our most recent census indicates we're nearing a population of nineteen million. All those cargo and detainee ships we took from the Profiteers makes moving people from Earth to Newton a lot easier."

"How many more will we take?" The original plan had been to get Newton's population up to around twenty million.

Governor Spalding focused on Kurt. "I spoke to President Mayfield a few days ago about that. While most of our immigrants are from the North American Union, we are taking a large number from the European Union as well. Right now we're accepting nearly everyone who has reasonable qualifications that could be useful here. Once our population reaches twenty-two million, we'll reduce the number of immigrants to a few hundred thousand a year. We don't dare drain the solar system of too many of their highly skilled people or we risk collapsing the system's fragile economy."

"Sounds reasonable," replied Kurt. Twenty-two million would give

Newton sufficient people to operate the growing fleet as well as all the orbital installations. So far plenty had volunteered for the military, and Kurt hoped to keep it that way.

“One more thing,” Spalding said with a pained grimace. “Tenner said to bring more gold coins for Grantz. That crazy Profiteer has acquired every one Tenner had.”

Kurt only shook his head. He should have warned Marvin not to let Grantz know how large a supply of coins were housed at the embassy.

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Captain Randson had just finished his meal and was listening to his daughter tell him about the classes she had signed up for. She was a freshman in high school this year and was excited about all the new students she would meet.

“Algebra,” she said with a frown. “Why do we have to take so much math? What good will it ever do?”

“It’s part of a well-rounded education,” Emily said with a humorous smile.

“You want to go to college, don’t you?” asked Andrew, laying down his fork. He could well recall how he had disliked math too when he was her age.

Alexis toyed with her dessert before answering. “Yes, I want to go to college. I want to be a physical therapist and help people.”

“Then you’ll have to take math,” Emily said, gazing at her daughter. “Probably a lot of it.”

Andrew looked at Alexis. She was rapidly becoming a young woman. Soon the boys would start calling, and he wasn’t sure he was ready for that.

“Let’s go shopping,” suggested Emily, smiling at her daughter.

“I need a nice dress,” stated Alexis hesitantly. “There’s a dance to start off the school year, and I want to look nice.” She looked nervously at her father.

“A dance?” stuttered Andrew in surprise. Surely this boy stuff wasn’t starting already?

“Yes, a dance,” Emily said, gazing sharply at Andrew. Then she turned to Alexis. “I’m sure we can find something suitable here at the mall.”

Andrew groaned inwardly. They would be here for hours.

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Kurt made it to the apartment he and Keera shared. She had suggested they move to a small house in the suburbs where they could have more room,

so they could have friends over, such as Captain Randson and his family. Kurt agreed with her as he really enjoyed spending time at his sister's house and playing baseball with Bryan, his nine-year-old nephew.

Then there was Meesa and Dalen. Keera invited them over quite often for family meals. Part of this was so Keera could keep a close watch on her brother to make sure he didn't return to his old ways. He had already been arrested once on Newton for building small snooper robots to spy on competitors' businesses. The small flying robots were a little larger than one's thumb and used very widely on Kubitz, something Kurt had shared with Ambassador Tenner to watch for at the embassy.

"How was your day?" asked Kurt.

Keera sat on the couch, munching on some popcorn—something they didn't have on Kubitz, and Keera had taken an immense liking to. He also noticed she had a large glass of tea on the coffee table next to her. Tea was something else Keera was fascinated about as they didn't have such a wide variety in the Gotham Empire as was prevalent on Earth and Newton.

Keera put aside the bowl of popcorn and, standing up, came over and gave Kurt a kiss and a big hug. "I've been at the new medical center, helping to install some Kubitz medical equipment. I even got a few government permits to allow several of Lomatz's people to assist."

Kurt nodded. Anytime some of Lomatz's people left their island, they were issued a travel permit. There was still much concern about the people on the island contaminating the culture on Newton. Many of them had Profiteer connections. "How's it coming along?"

"Slowly," Keera said with a deep sigh, leading Kurt to the sofa and indicating for him to sit next to her. "I'm spending a lot of time explaining to doctors and medical technicians how to use the equipment."

Kurt looked thoughtful and then spoke. "I'm sure many more people on Lomatz's island know how to use the equipment, probably even some doctors and additional medical technicians."

"Yeah, I'm using a few of them, but the travel permits are only good for forty-eight hours. It's making everything so time-consuming." Keera looked intently at Kurt. "A few of Lomatz's people were never involved with the Profiteers or with what goes on at Kubitz. If I can find a few doctors, nurses, and medical technicians who would be willing to work full time at the new hospital, do you think it would be possible to lengthen the travel permits?"

Kurt frowned as he thought it over. "I can speak to Governor Spalding

about that, but they would have to be heavily vetted to ensure they don't attempt to spread Kubitz's culture to Newton."

Keera's eyes brightened. She leaned forward and kissed Kurt on the cheek. "Could you? This new technology could save a lot of lives. I'm certain, if we can get it installed in the new medical center, it will be much simpler to install elsewhere. We can train the medical technicians and nurses at the center, and then they can return to their own medical centers and train others."

Taking Keera's hand, he looked deeply into her eyes. "I'll see what I can do. I'll talk to Governor Spalding first and then to Lomatz."

Keera nodded. "I knew you would understand." She hesitated a moment before speaking again. "Dalen and Meesa are coming over for supper. I've made a dish that is very popular on Kubitz which I think you will like. I know they will."

"You know I enjoy your cooking. How soon before your brother and Meesa arrive?"

"About an hour," Keera said, grinning suggestively. "If you're well behaved, I have a special surprise for you later."

Kurt's heart raced a little. Keera's smile turned her face into something radiant and very alluring. He had a pretty good idea what she had in mind.

"What are your plans for tomorrow?" asked Keera, knowing the effect she was having on Kurt.

"Working up some crew rosters for our new battlecruiser." Kurt did not intend to tell Keera that, in less than one week, he would be returning to Kubitz. Last time she had tagged along, and Kurt had nearly been killed in an ambush. This time he intended to take sufficient ships to ensure that didn't happen again.

Keera stood up, placing her hands on her hips. "I'll finish getting everything ready for supper. Just make sure you have plenty of energy for later."

Kurt nodded as Keera made her way to the kitchen. One thing he could say about living with Keera: she continued to surprise him.

## Chapter Three

Four days later, Kurt was on board the *Star Cross*, preparing to set out for the Gothan Empire. Keera hadn't been pleased to learn Kurt was returning to Kubitz. She despised that world due to the assassination attempts on Kurt as well as for what it had done to her brother.

"All ships are ready for orbital departure," reported Captain Randson.

Kurt looked at the viewscreens in the front of the Command Center. The heavy battlecarrier *Ranger*, under the command of Rear Admiral Susan White, was prominently displayed. Along with the *Ranger*, the battlecruisers *Ceres* and *Trinity* would be going as heavy escorts. In addition, the light cruisers *Trenton*, *Crescent*, *Justin*, and *Olympia* were in attendance. This was a sufficient force to ensure no problems with the smaller Profiteer fleets, which patrolled the outer regions of the star cluster that held the Gothan Empire. Those small fleets routinely attacked cargo ships or other Profiteer ships that might contain items of value.

In addition, the *Newton Princess* would be going. The passenger liner would return the Newton crews on board the two Lakiam battlecruisers and the four Andock vessels—while transporting a large quantity of gold in one of its holds. Part of it would be delivered to Ambassador Tenner and stored in the secure vault beneath the embassy compound, and the rest would be deposited with the Controllers at the Controller station at the main Kubitz spaceport.

"Lomatz left two days ago with six of his large cargo ships," Andrew said as he finished checking his command station. "He should arrive at Kubitz before we do."

"I never would have believed how valuable Lomatz has been. These black ships of the Destroyers of Worlds must really have him spooked."

"Can't say that I blame him," responded Andrew as he scanned his command console. "So far only the Lakiams have stood up to them and lived, and that's only because they have dark matter warheads on their hypermissiles." Andrew paused and looked at Kurt thoughtfully. "I don't suppose we can get our hands on a few of those?"

Kurt shook his head. "No. From what Mara told me, they're in short supply. The Lakiam worlds are working overtime to produce enough for their own ships. They had hoped, by defeating the black ships once, it would delay their future attacks in the Lakiam sector of the galaxy. So far that seems to be

holding true.”

“What about these two-hundred-megaton antimatter missiles we’ve been hearing rumors about? Can we get any of them?” asked Lieutenant Mays. “I’m not sure anything we have now will be effective against the black ships if what we’ve heard about them is true.”

Kurt frowned. He didn’t know how this information about the two-hundred-megaton warheads had gotten out. He suspected one of Lomatz’s technicians had mentioned something. Lieutenant Mays was always looking for better weapons.

“Or can we build our own?” she asked.

Leaning back in his command chair, Kurt focused his attention on Lieutenant Mays. He couldn’t stop her mind from working overtime, trying to find a way to destroy the black ships. “Maybe. None are available in the Gothan Empire. The largest antimatter missiles they make are one hundred megatons.”

Our new ships have antimatter chambers as their power source,” said Andrew. “Is there any way we can find out how the Gothan Empire creates their antimatter warheads?”

Kurt let out a deep sigh. They needed more powerful weapons. As of now they had no means to destroy a black ship. “I’ll speak to Avery Dolman when we get to Kubitz,” Kurt answered. “Perhaps he can get that information for us.” Avery Dolman seemed to be able to get his hands on about anything, though the secret to making antimatter warheads might be beyond even his reach.

Andrew nodded his understanding. “Sometimes I forget everything is for sale on that godforsaken planet.”

“This may be different,” Kurt said with a deep frown. “We’re talking about a major weapons system, one the weapon’s dealers on Kubitz may not want to part with. From what I understand, they’re the only ones in the entire Gothan Empire that produces antimatter weapons.”

“But, if we can discover their method, we could possibly build two-hundred-megaton warheads or even larger,” said Lieutenant Mays, her eyes brightening. “It would give us something to use against the black ships until we can develop something more powerful.”

“Remember, the reports we’ve received from Ambassador Tenner indicates it takes forty of those missiles to penetrate the screen of a black ship. Not only that, they have to be delivered to a small area of the energy

screen in a very short amount of time.”

“I’ll work on a program for that,” Mays said as she faced her tactical station. “If you can get me the missiles, I’ll get them to the target.”

“Newton Station has given us permission to leave orbit,” reported Communications Officer Lieutenant Brenda Pierce.

With all the traffic present in the Newton System, every effort had been made to ensure ships could enter and leave the system safely. A series of updated hyperspace detection buoys allowed Newton Station to monitor all traffic within ten light-years so they could direct incoming and outgoing ships.

Kurt looked at one of the other screens showing the 1,700-meter-long *Aurelia*. A crew of forty-seven could run it. It still amazed him how the Lakiams operated such powerful warships with crews of that size. Of course the ship had multitudes of repair robots to handle routine maintenance plus specialized combat robots for internal security. The *Aurelia* had played a major role in driving the Profiteers permanently from Earth.

“Take us out,” ordered Kurt. “Let’s go find out what awaits us on Kubitz.” In the back of Kurt’s mind, he couldn’t help worrying. On two of his trips to Kubitz he had nearly been killed. Of course, with the destruction of the Profiteer ship *Ascendant Destruction* and the death of High Profiteer Creed, that threat should be greatly diminished.

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On Kubitz, Grantz was in one of the pleasure houses, eating a meal of delicacies only found in these establishments. Food from all across the galaxy could be ordered as well as drinks found nowhere else. Grantz was a Marsten Profiteer. He was bipedal and slightly taller than a Human. His skin was a light blue color with coarse white hair on his head. His face, while humanoid, had larger-than-normal eyes.

“Why are we here?” asked Avery Dolman, known for his involvement in nearly all the black market enterprises on Kubitz. If anyone wanted something hard to find on the black market, or some secret information, Dolman was the one to go to.

Grantz swallowed a Homalt egg, a rare delicacy that was hideously expensive. A year ago he wouldn’t have even considered eating such an exotic item. Now, with all the gold coins he had gotten from Marvin Tenner, he allowed himself to splurge on occasion.

“Just be patient,” Grantz said as he cut a slice off the large Merton steak



on one of his plates. “We’re meeting a couple Profiteers with information on the black ships.”

“Kubitz is full of information on the black ships,” muttered Dolman. “Most of it false.”

Grantz went silent as one of the scantily dressed servers refilled their drinks. “This involves the Protector Worlds. It seems one of them has been attacked.”

Dolman’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Impossible! The black ships have stayed away from those heavily defended worlds. Their prey has been the Enlightened Worlds and their colonies.”

“Not anymore,” Grantz said as he saw the two Profiteers he was waiting on. Raising his hand, he gestured for them to come over to the table. “My friends are here. Maybe now we’ll find out more.”

The two Profiteers made their way through the crowd to Grantz’s table.

“Profiteer Grantz,” one of them said. “I believe you are seeking information?”

Grantz nodded. “Sit and have a drink. We have some business to discuss.”

The two sat, and the server promptly brought them two of the drinks Grantz and Dolman had before them.

Grantz took a long sip and then shifted his attention to the two newcomers. “I understand you know something about the black ships attacking one of the Protector Worlds?”

“Perhaps,” replied the taller one cautiously as he reached for his drink. “Such information won’t be free.”

Grantz reached into his pocket and took out one of his gold coins. Sliding it in front of the Profiteer, Grantz waited for a response.

The Profiteer reached out and took the coin, testing its weight in his hand. “Such information as you want will cost two of these coins.”

Reaching into his pocket, Grantz took out a second coin and slid it over. He had hoped to get by with paying only one. It pained him immensely to let go of the valuable coins.

Taking the second coin, the Profiteer quickly pocketed them. “The black ships recently attacked the Bascom System, destroying the fleets defending the system as well as their two inhabited moons.”

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“Do you have proof of this?” demanded Dolman. He still couldn’t

imagine the Destroyers of Worlds successfully attacking a Protector World, surrounded by massive defensive systems as well as large fleets of heavily armed warships.

“Yes,” the Profiteer replied. Reaching into his pocket, he handed over a small computer disk. “The Bascoms sent observation ships to Lakiam with reports on the progress of the battle. This disk contains a copy of those reports. They are very detailed and contain videos of the battles in space and above their worlds.”

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Grantz took the small disk and pocketed it. This was the kind of information he had been seeking. No doubt Marvin Tenner and Fleet Admiral Vickers would pay a premium price for this. He would recoup his gold coins and more. This little venture assured his continued trips to the pleasure houses where he could enjoy their opulent offerings.

“How did you get such information from the Lakiams?”

The other Profiteer, who had been silent until now, answered. “Several Lakiams occasionally visit the pleasure houses here on Kubitz. Over time we have come to know them and arranged some special performances. They owed us a favor, and, for the right price, they turned over the disk.”

Grantz wasn’t going to ask what type of performances had been provided. The pleasure houses could offer entertainment many people would frown upon. However, any type of perversion was for sale for the right price.

“We also have information on how the Gothan Empire is preparing itself for the coming of the black ships,” the second Profiteer added. “We would be willing to share it with you for a price. It covers ship deployments and the planned defenses for the major Profiteer worlds, including Marsten.”

Grantz looked at Dolman, who would be more interested in this data, though Grantz would be curious to see what his homeworld of Marsten was up to.

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“How much?” asked Dolman, trying not to sound too interested as it might drive up the price.

The Profiteer named a figure, and, after a little haggling, Dolman took out a thick sheaf of credits and handed a large number to the Profiteer, who in return produced another small computer disk.

Securing the disk inside one of his pockets, Dolman looked thoughtful. “How did you obtain this information?” The leaders of various clans and

worlds had been holding secret meetings on how to deal with the black ships. Those meetings were general knowledge on Kubitz, though the details were unknown.

“My brother is a major clan leader on Marsten,” the second Profiteer replied. “I got this off his home computer.”

Dolman nodded. This didn’t surprise him in the least. A Profiteer was a Profiteer and would take valuable information any way he could get it, even from relatives. It was all about making a profit.

“We’ll be going now,” the first Profiteer said, finishing his drink and standing. He looked directly at Grantz and Dolman. Then, in a lower voice, he said, “This meeting never occurred.” With that, the two Profiteers turned and left, vanishing into the crowd.

Dolman shifted his gaze to Grantz. “Well, that was interesting. I hope what’s on these two disks was worth it.”

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Grantz grinned. He had already run the numbers through his head on how many gold coins he would sell his information for. “I guess we’ll find out later.”

Dolman stood; he needed to leave and review what was on the disk. “Are you coming or staying here?”

The young scantily clad server came by, and Grantz reached out, grabbing her and pulling her onto his lap. She giggled and leaned suggestively against the Profiteer. “I’m staying for a while. I have an appointment upstairs.”

“Suit yourself,” said Dolman. “I have other business I must attend to.”

Grantz watched as Dolman left. “Get me another drink,” he said, releasing the server. Watching her walk off, swinging her hips, only made him more anxious for later. Over the past few months he had come to this pleasure house more often. It was becoming one of his favorites as the service, both food and women, was fantastic.

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Several days later Ambassador Marvin Tenner was in his office at the embassy compound when Captain Briar put in an appearance.

“The Lakiams are here,” he announced. “Their ships just went into orbit above Kubitz.”

“They’re early,” Marvin said, wondering why they had come four days before Fleet Admiral Vickers was scheduled to arrive.

“I don’t think the people who run Kubitz are happy,” Briar added. “From what I understand, the Lakiams breezed right past the Controller station without paying any fees.”

“How many ships?”

“Fourteen.”

Marvin let out a long breath. He could well imagine the surprise and concern this appearance by the Lakiam vessels had created. The Lakiams were one of the more advanced Protector Worlds, and, if the reports were accurate, the only one to have actually defeated a Destroyers of Worlds’ fleet.

“Contact the Lakiam ships, and inform them Fleet Admiral Vickers is on his way with the ships they requested to be returned to them. Inform them of his arrival time, and ask if we can be of assistance with anything else.”

Captain Briar nodded. “I’ll have the communications officer attempt to contact the fleet.”

Marvin watched as the captain hurried off to the communications room. One thing about Kubitz: there was never a dull moment.

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Several days later, the *Star Cross* and her attending fleet dropped from hyperspace outside the orbit of the sixth planet in the Kubitz System, four hundred thousand kilometers from the Controller station. All ships that entered the system had to stop at the station to state their business and to pay a fee.

“We’ve been challenged,” reported Lieutenant Brenda Pierce as several lights on her communications console lit up, indicating incoming messages.

Kurt had been expecting this. “Inform them who we are and that only four of our ships will be proceeding to Kubitz. The rest will stay here. Have them take the fee from our account.” Each time a ship entered the system to trade, they were offered two choices. For a large fee paid in credits, they could proceed to Kubitz and go into orbit, or they could conduct their business through the Controller station and stay out past the sixth planet.

“Detecting over seven hundred ships in orbit around the station, not including their small patrol ships,” reported Lieutenant Lena Brooks on Sensors. “Two small squadrons have departed the station and are coming toward us.”

Captain Randson studied the tactical display. “Same as usual.”

“We have confirmation of the fee being deducted from our account,” Lieutenant Pierce said. “They’re transmitting the approval and a copy of the

transaction.”

A few minutes later the two small groups of patrol ships passed by the fleet and then, after completing several circles, headed toward the station.

“Admiral, the station asks why we have Lakiam and Andock ships with us.”

Kurt looked at Lieutenant Pierce. “Inform them we’re here at the request of the Lakiams to conduct some business.”

“I’m sure that’ll pique their interest,” Andrew said, looking at one of the screens that displayed the massive station. “Every Profiteer in the system will want to know what type of business we have with the Lakiams and why we have Lakiam and Andock warships with us.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Kurt answered. Very seldom did a Lakiam warship visit the Gothan Empire.

Andrew looked thoughtful. “This might be a good thing. I’m sure the Dacroni mercenaries reported on the battle above Earth and the role the *Aurelia* played. This will help to ensure the Profiteers stay away from Earth and Newton. They’re bound to believe we’re involved with the Lakiams somehow.”

“Rear Admiral White, you will remain here with the rest of the fleet unless I send for you,” Kurt said over the ship-to-ship comm. “The two Lakiam ships, the *Aurelia* and the *Treliid*, and the four Andock vessels will remain here as well. Make sure no one approaches any of those ships without my permission.”

“Yes, Admiral,” Susan replied. “I’ll launch a CSP to keep any curiosity seekers away.”

“Don’t let them spook you,” Kurt added. “Remember, these people will do almost anything to earn extra credits. If you’re unsure how to handle a situation, contact the *Star Cross*. Either I or Captain Randson will tell you what to do.”

“There won’t be a problem,” promised Rear Admiral White.

Kurt turned his attention to Captain Randson. “Andrew, take us in.”

Kurt watched as the *Star Cross*, *Ceres*, *Trinity*, and *Newton Princess* accelerated their sublight drives and headed toward Kubitz. No ships were allowed to perform a hyperspace jump inside the orbit of the sixth planet or they would face stiff fines from the Kubitz government.

“Admiral, I’m picking up fourteen Lakiam vessels in orbit around Kubitz,” reported Lieutenant Brooks.

“Fourteen,” muttered Andrew with a deep frown. “I bet the Kubitz government and the Controllers aren’t happy about that.”

“Admiral, I have Ambassador Tenner on the comm,” added Lieutenant Pierce. “He wants to speak with you.”

Nodding, Kurt activated his private comm system. “Hello, Marvin. I see you have some company in orbit.”

“You could say that,” Tenner replied. “I also have some guests here at the embassy compound. One in particular wants to see you as soon as you arrive.”

“Who?”

“A Lakiam woman named Mara Liam. She’s been quite adamant that she speak with you.”

Kurt went silent for a moment as he absorbed the fact that Mara was at the compound. He hadn’t known if she would be with the Lakiams picking up the warships or if she would remain at home.

“Very well, tell her that I’ll be there shortly. Is there anything else?”

Kurt heard Marvin sigh over the comm. “Yes, I hope you brought more gold coins. Grantz claims he has some vital information for you.”

This surprised Kurt. He had no idea what the Profiteer could be up to. “Tell Grantz that I’ll speak with him later.”

Kurt wondered why Mara wanted to speak with him. Grantz’s normal shenanigans was business as usual on Kubitz.

## Chapter Four

Prince Brollen watched expectantly as the large Intergalactic Transport Vessel exited hyperspace. The massive vessel was powered by a Zero-Point Energy drive, which made intergalactic travel possible. A journey that normally took one week in hyperspace could be done in a few hours. Four Collector Ships were attached to the ten-thousand-meter-long vessel. All four ships were fully loaded with food pellets from Galaxy X241. Enough to feed all the Vorn in the home system for several months.

*Is my offering to Queen Alithe ready?* asked Brollen, turning toward Military Commander Fraymot.

Yes, Fraymot replied as numerous large icons appeared on the tactical display.

They were in a small red dwarf system that contained the homes of the Vorn race within 116 massive habitats, each ten thousand kilometers in diameter, all orbiting the star. The largest of these was the Conclave Habitat, where the ruling Hive Queen held court.

*Should the Reaper move away from the transport ship?*

No, answered Prince Brollen. *We will only be here for a short period of time. I must report to Queen Alithe and the Royal Court, and make my presentation of the food cubes we harvested from the worlds inhabited by food species 647. I believe Queen Alithe and the other Queens will be very pleased with the taste of this species.*

*Perhaps we should have harvested more of food species 647?*

No, Prince Brollen replied, his antennae waving slightly. *I wished to set an example for the other worlds in that galaxy, and I believe we accomplished that. I strongly suspect, in the future, the planets these so-called Protector Worlds defend will be less strongly held. Make my personal shuttle ready. It is time I paid our Queen a visit.*

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Less than an hour later Prince Brollen was led into the massive chamber which held the Vorn Queen, her retinue of lesser Queens, and the members of the Royal Court. Prince Brollen brought with him twenty drones of the Working Caste, carrying large ornate bowls. Each was full of small gray pellets.

*Prince Brollen, it is good to see you once more,* projected Queen Alithe. Queen Alithe was the largest of the more than one hundred Queens in

the chamber. Each habitat had one High Queen in control, though there were a number of lesser Queens in each habitat, waiting to take over the role of High Queen should she succumb to illness or the frailties of age.

Prince Brollen bowed and then approached Queen Alithe. *I have brought you a gift*, he sent, gesturing toward the ornate bowls. At his command, one of the drones approached the Queen and placed the bowl on a table at her side. Then the drone shuffled off, rejoining the others.

*This is food species 647. I believe you will find the taste exquisite.*

Queen Alithe stood up, towering above the others in the court. She reached for one of the small gray pellets, placing it between her mandibles. With a loud crunching noise, she chewed it and finally swallowed the ground-up pellet. For a long moment she was silent as she took in the taste of this particular food species. She turned and sat, overlooking the Royal Court.

*Prince Brollen has brought us a wonderful new taste in a food species. He is to be commended for his superior harvesting techniques as he leads our fleets in the greatest number of different food species that has been brought to our tables.*

Brollen swelled with pride. He had ensured his continued status as one of Queen Alithe's favorites.

*Come closer*, sent Queen Alithe.

Prince Brollen approached the Queen. On each side of her, two heavily armed guards of the Warrior Caste stood. Any indication of a hostile move toward the Queen would mean instant death.

*I am your servant*, sent Prince Brollen with a bow. *I live only to serve you.*

The Queen reached out and touched Prince Brollen with one of her hands. Her antenna stood straight, and her multifaceted eyes focused on the prince. *If you continue to perform like this, I may consider mating with you.*

Prince Brollen did not need to reply. Queen Alithe was known to choose a different consort during each breeding cycle. To be chosen for such a privilege was considered a high honor.

The Queen stood and slowly walked around the prince as if inspecting his every physical attribute. *Yes, you would serve me well as a consort.*

*I am honored, my Queen*, replied Prince Brollen.

Queen Alithe sent a quick mental command to the drones holding the large bowls of food pellets. *Serve the new food species to the Royal Court. You have done well.*



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Later Prince Brollen returned to the *Reaper*. He had spoken to a number of the Royal Court members, including several military leaders. They had asked his recommendations for the harvesting of Galaxy X241. He had sensed a new aura of respect in their questions since Queen Alithe had announced he would become a consort. Brollen explained his plan to force the Protector Worlds' fleets into pulling back to protect their own systems, allowing for easier harvesting of numerous worlds. The military leaders still had a hard time accepting that any systems in Galaxy X241 were dangerous to Vorn ships. In the end, they agreed to give Prince Brollen more authority in the harvesting and to vastly increase the size of the fleet he was responsible for. As he prepared to leave the Royal Court, Queen Alithe summoned him and stated she expected him to return in four to six months for the next breeding cycle.

*We will be departing shortly, he informed Military Commander Fraymot. When we return, more motherships will be assigned to our fleet as well as additional cruisers.*

Fraymot nodded his understanding. *We will continue to lead the fleets in the harvesting of Galaxy X241.*

Prince Brollen did not reply. His plan was working flawlessly. He had assured his position in the power structure of the Vorn race. As a consort of the Hive Queen, it placed him in rank just below that of a habitat High Queen. His commands would be law.

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At Kubitz, Kurt gazed at the multiple viewscreens showing the fourteen Lakiam battleships. They were imposing on the screens, much larger than most of the other ships in orbit. Kurt also noticed the other ships were keeping a safe distance between them and the heavily armed Protector World vessels.

"We've gone into standard orbit," reported Lieutenant Brooks. "Two thousand kilometers above Kubitz."

"Admiral, you've been asked to check in at the Controller exchange at the main spaceport," added Lieutenant Pierce from Communications. "They say there may be another fine involved."

"What for this time?" muttered Andrew, sounding frustrated. "Sometimes I think they're making up this stuff to drain us of all our gold."

Kurt frowned and slowly shook his head. "I have no idea. Ambassador

Tenner didn't mention anything. Have our shuttle prepared and tell Sergeant Jones to ready his security detail. Lieutenant Pierce, contact the embassy compound and arrange for transportation to meet us at the spaceport." Several Humvees were kept at the compound. Even in the capital city, it was unsafe to move about unescorted.

"What about our special cargo?" asked Andrew, raising his eyebrows.

Gold was on board the *Star Cross* in two small chests, with even more on the *Newton Princess*. "Bring both of them. It may be necessary to bribe one of the Controllers at the Controller exchange." Bribing officials was the standard way to do business on Kubitz.

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Later the small shuttle dropped rapidly through the turbulent atmosphere of Kubitz. Sergeant Jones had brought along six Marines, and they would be responsible for the two small chests of gold as well as security.

It still amazed Kurt that gold was such a valuable commodity across the galaxy. It had been explained to him that most gold deposits were far beneath the ground on the majority of the planets, making it expensive to mine. Earth was a rarity, having plentiful gold deposits so close to the surface.

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As the shuttle landed, Corporal Evans looked at Sergeant Jones. "I wonder what'll happen to us this time?"

They had been involved in two firefights on Kubitz in the past. Several Marines had even been killed and one abducted. "Just stay sharp," ordered Sergeant Jones as the hatch opened. "Remember, we're on an alien world that's more like a pirate enclave than a civilized society."

"Space pirates," muttered Corporal Evans as he checked his heavy assault rifle. "It's hard to believe such a place can exist."

Sergeant Jones agreed. Holding his rifle at the ready, he stepped from the hatch and descended the ramp. His eyes moved from side to side, searching for any danger. Around the shuttle were other heavily armed people going about their business. None seemed to be paying attention to them.

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Kurt walked down the ramp, stepping onto the main spaceport on Kubitz. Small robots loaded and unloaded ships as well as conducted necessary repairs. Cargo haulers moved back and forth between buildings, delivering their loads to the larger vessels on the far side of the spaceport.

“The atmosphere is the same as last time,” muttered Andrew, peering at the dismal-looking sky. It was difficult to see the planet’s sun directly overhead.

“It’s pollution,” Kurt said, noting the heavy haze. “Something that at one time nearly overwhelmed Earth.”

“It even smells,” said Corporal Evans disgustedly. “You’d think they would do something to clean it up.”

“Form up,” ordered Sergeant Jones. Instantly his Marines took escorting positions around Fleet Admiral Vickers and Captain Randson. Four of the Marines carried the two heavy chests that contained the gold.

It took a few minutes, but they made it to the large building of the Controller exchange on the periphery of the spaceport. At the doors to the exchange, six Lylan Enforcers stood. The Enforcers were humanoid with large muscular arms, legs, and a squat chest. They came from a high-gravity world, which gave them nearly superhuman strength.

“We have a deposit to make,” Kurt said, gesturing toward the two chests.

“Leave your weapons here,” directed one of the Lylans. “They will be returned to you after your business is completed.”

“Only four of us will be accompanying the admiral and the captain,” Sergeant Jones informed them. “The other three will be staying here.”

“The three staying may keep their weapons,” the Lylan said.

Entering the building, they were soon led to a small office where a Controller sat. He was easily seven feet tall and humanoid. His head was slightly larger than normal and completely bald. The Controller’s eyes were of normal size, though his lips were a little thinner. His body was slim, and his hands had six long digits. He was also a little pale, as if he very seldom saw any sunlight. Kurt wasn’t certain, but this might be the same Controller he had dealt with before, the one he had paid a hefty fine to as well as filed the contract that gave Newton and Earth access to the three areas of space which held Julbian, Sertez, and Maldon.

“I am Controller Kelmor, what business do you have?”

“I wish to deposit some gold into my account,” Kurt answered, explaining who he was and where he was from.

The Controller nodded and gestured for the pair of Lylan guards in the room to place the two chests on a sturdy table and open them. The Controller’s eyes widened slightly at the sight of the gleaming gold bars.

Kurt watched as the Controller carefully measured and tested the gold for purity as well as weight. When he was done, Kelmor returned to his desk and entered some information on his computer console. "The gold is valued at forty-eight million credits. I have credited it to your account."

"Thank you," Kurt answered. "When we arrived in orbit, I was told to report to the exchange. Do you know the reason for that?"

"One moment," Kelmor replied as he checked his computer console, then looked up in surprise. "It seems you have secured technology not allowed to be sold in the Gotham Empire. For that a two million credit fine has been assessed, and your future trading inside the empire has been severely restricted."

Kurt shook his head. Somehow, someone had discovered what Lomatz and Dolman had done when Kurt's ships had escaped from the Draconi mercenaries. "What can we do to lower the fine and remove the restriction?"

"That is up to the discretion of a Controller," Kelmor said, glancing meaningfully at the gold bars in the two chests.

Kurt sucked in a deep breath. No doubt Kelmor was suggesting a bribe. Fortunately Kurt had come prepared for this. "Sergeant Jones, hand me the items I asked you to safe guard."

Sergeant Jones reached into the two deep pockets of his uniform and pulled out two small gold bars, handing them to Kurt.

Kurt took the two bars and placed them on the desk in front of Kelmor. "I wish to offer you these for the time and effort you have taken for my people." The two bars were worth about 640,000 credits.

Kelmor eyed the bars and then turned to his console. "The fine has been reduced to one million credits and the restrictions on trading have been temporarily removed."

"For how long?" asked Kurt. There were many things for sale on Kubitz that could be beneficial to Earth, Newton, and the other three Human worlds now part of their alliance. He didn't want to lose access to trading on Kubitz.

"One year," Kelmor answered. "At the end of that time, we can discuss adding another year to the removal of the trading restrictions." Kelmor reached out and tapped one of the small gold bars suggestively.

"I'm sure we can work something out," Kurt answered. It seemed another bribe would be necessary in the future.

Kelmor pressed several icons on his console, and a small shiny

computer disk popped out. “This is your deposit record, and states you have paid your fine and are allowed to trade for one year on Kubitz.”

Kurt gestured to the others, and they exited, followed by the Lylan Enforcers. Once outside, after they had retrieved their weapons, the group made their way toward the two heavily armed Humvees that were waiting for them.

“Damn thieves,” muttered Andrew. “Is everyone on this crazy planet on the take?”

“It’s what their economy is based on,” Kurt answered as he entered the rear of one of the heavily armored vehicles.

Andrew entered behind Kurt and then paused, seeing who waited for them. “Can this day get any worse?”

“Hello, Captain Randson!” bellowed Grantz with a wide smile. “I am glad to see you again.”

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The ride to the embassy compound was quiet, except for Grantz talking excitedly to Kurt about a deal he wanted to make for some valuable information he had obtained. Andrew tried not to listen as he and Grantz didn’t get along. Every time Andrew came to Kubitz, Grantz tried to talk Andrew into going to the Pleasure Houses and sampling their entertainment. Andrew had explained to Grantz that Emily would not allow that kind of behavior. Even so, Andrew’s explanations seemed to fall upon deaf ears where Grantz was concerned.

Andrew watched their approach to the large protective habitation dome covering the center of the city from one of the small-reinforced glass windows. Many of the larger cities on Kubitz had the large domes to protect the inhabitants from the polluted atmosphere that hovered above much of the planet. Unfortunately only the more affluent could afford to reside under the domes. The less privileged and most of the working class were forced to stay outside the domes in crowded and overpopulated and polluted areas. There was also a deadly acid rain that fell on occasion. Rain so deadly the inhabitants had to take cover or risk death.

The two Humvees stopped as the drivers showed their passes to the guards in front of the large entrance to the dome. A number of entrances were on the periphery, and all were heavily guarded. Andrew watched as one of the Lylan Enforcers motioned for them to continue. Andrew leaned back, relaxing. It was much safer inside the dome but only marginally. Nearly

everyone in the city was armed. Men, women, and even older children carried handguns or some type of automatic weapon. Heavy weapons, including energy weapons, were banned, though some Profiteer clans still managed to sneak them past the guards.

Andrew sighed as they drove down several long busy streets before finally arriving at the embassy compound. The compound was protected by a tall wall with razor wire on top, as well as several guard towers armed with rapid-fire M240K machine guns which fired 7.62 mm rounds at a top rate of eight hundred per minute. Andrew was well aware some of the smaller Profiteer clans had no problems with attacking an embassy if a profit was to be made. That was why a full company of Marines was assigned to the compound.

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Kurt exited the Humvee, carrying the small information disk Grantz had given him. Kurt had promised to look it over, and, if the information was valuable enough, he would reward Grantz with additional gold coins.

“Remember,” Grantz said in his gruff voice. “I paid in gold for that disk and risked my life.”

“At a pleasure house,” said Andrew, stepping closer. He had heard part of the conversation between Kurt and Grantz. “If I know you, the person that provided this information was probably intoxicated and never a threat.”

Grantz grinned. “You must come with me to the new pleasure house I have found. The women are exquisite and will do things you can only dream about. Why, just the other night ...”

“That’s enough,” Andrew said, shaking his head. “I don’t need to hear about your romantic escapades. No doubt you would exaggerate them as you do everything else.”

“Let’s go inside,” Kurt said, trying not to laugh. Grantz continually tried to talk Andrew into going to a pleasure house. His second in command would never do such a thing, and he suspected Grantz realized that too.

Once inside, one of the Marine guards led Kurt and Andrew to Marvin Tenner’s office. Kurt saw that Tenner, Captain Briar, and Mara waited inside.

“Mara, it’s good to see you again,” Kurt said, stepping toward the Lakiam woman. Mara was a communications officer in the Lakiam fleet, very beautiful and alluring. She was slightly taller than Kurt, well proportioned, and her skin was unblemished with a golden tan. Mara had deep blue eyes someone could get lost in.

“Fleet Admiral Vickers,” responded Mara, reaching out and shaking the admiral’s hand. “I understand you brought our ships as requested.”

“Of course,” Kurt answered with a slight smile. “I promised I would return them if you asked.”

Mara went silent for a long moment. “I guess that means you’ve duplicated some of the technology and weapons on board, or you wouldn’t be so willing to hand them over.”

Mara was well aware Kurt’s people had been working on duplicating the technology and weapons on the Lakiam and Andock vessels. Before she left for Kubitz, construction had already begun on the new warships which Lomatz’s people had helped design. She had expressed her doubts that Newton would be successful in duplicating some of the Lakiam and Andock technology. Even if they did, she doubted if the Humans would know how to use it. Kurt remained silent, waiting for her to continue. He strongly suspected she was here for another reason.

Mara pursed her lips and then continued. “Not wanting to admit that I’m right? You know, when I returned to Lakiam and told Fleet Commodore Dreen about what happened and what you were doing in the Newton System, he laughed. He couldn’t believe a race as young as yours would even attempt duplicating our technology.”

“Commodore Dreen,” Kurt said, recognizing the name. “Isn’t he the one who annihilated the Destroyers of Worlds’ fleet?”

“The same,” Mara answered, her eyes focusing intently on Kurt. “It took Tarnth and me several days to convince him that we were serious. When he finally realized we were telling the truth, he demanded we return and take possession of the *Aurelia* and the *Treliid* as well as the Andock vessels. He’s as concerned as I am about such advanced technology falling into the wrong hands.”

“The ships are yours,” Kurt answered simply.

Mara eyed him suspiciously. “I informed Fleet Commodore Dreen your world might someday grow to become a Protector World. Earth and Newton are in a desolate sector of the galaxy with no Protector or Enlightened Worlds within four thousand light-years. Most lie toward the galactic center where more stars are. The Gothic Empire is the closest grouping of civilized worlds, and we both know what they are like. It may be generations before the black ships find Earth or Newton.”

“Or it could be sooner,” said Andrew.

“I’ll do what I have to in order to defend my people,” responded Kurt. “If the black ships find us, we’ll be as ready as we can be.”

Mara let out a deep breath. “You are fortunate Fleet Commodore Dreen is a relative of mine. I convinced him that, in time, your people could be of use in the war against the Destroyers of Worlds. I saw how your people fought against the Profiteers over Earth. That fierceness has long since left our race as we strive for Enlightenment. Only a fraction of our population still possesses the intense aggressiveness needed to fight the Destroyers of Worlds.”

“What are you saying?” asked Kurt. What was Mara up to?

“Fleet Commodore Dreen has agreed to allow the *Aurelia* to return to Newton under my command,” Mara announced. “Eighty Lakiams will be on board, including a few technicians and scientists familiar with the technology on our vessels. They will be tasked with determining what technology you may replicate and install in your warships.”

Kurt looked meaningfully at Andrew. He was hesitant to inform Mara that most of the technology had already been duplicated. Lomatz’s technicians had performed miracles working out all the technical details once they had unrestricted access to the ships. Mara and Tarnth had inadvertently revealed many clues to their advanced technology when they helped get the *Aurelia* ready for combat against the Profiteers who had taken over Earth.

“That’s not really necessary,” Andrew began.

Mara looked at Andrew and then responded. “Most of the *Aurelia*’s crew is made up of people I trust. They fully understand the danger the Destroyers of Worlds represent. Fleet Commodore Dreen has agreed to allow your world to be responsible for protecting the other civilized worlds in this sector.”

“Does that make us a Protector World?” asked Andrew, his face showing immense surprise.

“No, not even close,” answered Mara, shaking her head. “It will take thousands of years before your world can reach that status.”

“We accept your offer of help,” Kurt said, realizing he had no other choice. “How soon can you be ready to leave?” Perhaps having some Lakiam scientists and technicians around would have its own benefits.

“One week,” replied Mara, turning her attention to Kurt. “My people wish to go over the *Aurelia* and make sure all systems are operating at maximum efficiency. We also will be transferring some supplies to allow my



crew to stay on the *Aurelia* in the comfort they have grown accustomed to.”

One week was much longer than Kurt had planned on staying on Kubitz, but now he had no choice. “One week,” he replied. “Then we will return to Newton.”

Mara nodded. “I’ll go to the *Aurelia* to make preparations. I would like to meet with you in private on board my ship before we depart.”

“I can do that,” Kurt replied. Why did she want a private meeting? Was something else going on here she was hesitant to mention around the others?

Standing up, Mara left the office, shutting the door behind her.

“Wow!” said Andrew with deep concern. “What’ll she say when she finds out we’ve already duplicated their technology and added much more?”

Kurt shook his head. “We’ll deal with that problem when we return to Newton.” Kurt looked at the small computer disk he held in his hand, the one Grantz claimed showed a Protector World battling the Destroyers of Worlds. He was anxious to view that information to see what might await in Newton and Earth’s future.

## Chapter Five

Fleet Commodore Dreen of the Lakiam battlecruiser *Basera* was in his quarters, studying the latest reports from the various space battles across the galaxy. In the last week alone, over sixty-two planets had fallen victim to the Destroyers of Worlds. The defending fleets had destroyed only a handful of the black ships while suffering horrendous losses.

“What’s your assessment of the current tactical situation?” asked Lakiam Council member Shriel Marl.

Shriel was a senior council member and had served in the Lakiam government for nearly twenty years.

“We’re losing,” Commodore Dreen said simply, placing the reports on his desk. “The black ships are nearly indestructible with their energy screens that absorb the power of most of our weapons. Only our dark matter missiles have proven effective. Other Protector World fleets have been wiped out if they attempt to resist the black ships. Thousands of ships have been lost. Both Class Two and Class One defensive systems protecting the planets have been blown apart by the black ships’ weapons. Protector World fleets are being pushed back across the galaxy.”

“But the black ships’ energy-absorption shields can be overwhelmed if enough antimatter missiles strike it,” objected Marl. “All the Protector Worlds have such missiles, as do many other worlds. Why aren’t more black ships being destroyed?”

“Very few have warheads of the two-hundred-megaton range,” Dreen pointed out. “They are expensive to build.”

Council member Marl’s face took on a strained look. “Then what is the answer? We can’t just let the Destroyers of Worlds wipe out all the civilized races in our galaxy.”

Commodore Dreen folded his arms across his chest. “I have been speaking to Andock Fleet Leader Arlak Moor.”

Council member Marl’s eyes widened at this revelation. The Andocks and Lakiams had been adversaries in the past while acquiring Enlightened Worlds to defend. Distrust existed between the two.

“All my ship captains are in agreement. We must form a close alliance with other Protector Worlds if we want to see our worlds and those Enlightened Worlds we defend survive this invasion.”

“The Lakiam Council might object to that,” warned Marl. “Sharing

information is one thing, but working together in such a manner will be seen as counterproductive to our future goals.”

“There will be no future goals if we can’t stop the Destroyers of Worlds!” warned Dreen, his eyes flashing. “Everyone must understand, if we don’t stand together, then we will all fall separately.”

Council member Marl looked intently at the commodore. “What exactly do you want?”

“I want to share the secret of our dark matter missiles with Andock Prime. We need to reduce the number of Enlightened Worlds we are protecting, and our fleets must work in conjunction with Andock fleets.”

Marl shook his head in denial. “What you’re asking won’t be easy. We have signed agreements with those Enlightened Worlds to protect them. It will be frowned upon to cancel those agreements. Not only that but the dark matter missile is one of our biggest military secrets. The council will not be willing to give up that advantage.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen slid a small computer disk across his desk toward council member Marl. “Take this disk to the council and have them view it. It shows what happened to the homeworlds of the Bascoms. Their fleets and orbital defenses were wiped out, and then their twin worlds were harvested by the black ships. Only a few Bascoms survived in their deepest shelters. That is what faces us if we don’t join together with other Protector Worlds to stop this invasion and if we don’t share the secret of our dark matter missiles. We must have victories, not defeats. Currently the Destroyers of Worlds are bleeding the Protector Worlds of their fleets. We’re fighting battles against impossible odds. That must be changed and changed very quickly, before it’s too late.”

Council member Marl looked gravely at the commodore. “I will do as you suggest, but I can’t promise anything. You’re asking for a lot.”

“What I want is to give us a chance to survive.”

Council member Marl stood up, pocketing the disk and preparing to leave. Then he paused and looked at the commodore. “Some of the other council members may wish to speak to you.”

“That’s fine,” Dreen replied as he stood. “I will come anytime. We must work through this very quickly as time is rapidly running out.”

Marl nodded and then left the commodore’s office.

After Marl left, Fleet Commodore Dreen made his way to the *Basera*’s Command Center. Stepping inside, he headed toward his command chair and

sat down. The entire room was circular with six control consoles sitting in a small semicircle before a slightly upraised command dais. On the walls, numerous screens showed views of space. “What’s the current status of the fleet?”

“We have two thousand battlecruisers in the system,” Alborg replied from Tactical.

Dreen examined the viewscreens on the wall. Numerous battlecruisers were displayed as they orbited Lakiam. Also several of the large Class One Orbital Defense Platforms, which protected the planet, appeared on multiple screens.

“How many ships are currently in the system?”

“Of all classes?” asked Laylem from his sensor console.

“Yes, of all classes.” The Lakiam System was the trading center for this entire sector. At any one time it was not unusual to have hundreds of ships from other star systems present.

Laylem took a moment as his hands moved over his console. “I confirm 2,063 battlecruisers, 712 cargo ships, and 87 passenger liners. That does not include mining ships and other small vessels that lack hyperspace drives.”

Commodore Dreen took a moment to gaze at the largest screen, focused on Lakiam. The deep blue oceans, the white clouds, and the landmasses which marked the home of the Lakiam race. He was determined not to allow the Destroyers of Worlds to ravage this planet.

“What’s the current status of the dark matter missiles?”

“All ships have been resupplied,” replied Alborg, turning his attention to the commodore. “The facilities constructing the missiles are running around the clock. In addition, two new facilities came online last week.”

“Do we have the capacity to go on the attack?”

Alborg hesitated briefly. “We have replaced what we used in the battle against the Destroyers of Worlds. We’ve even built up a small inventory of the missiles. However, not until the final two construction facilities go online in another month will we see a large surplus of the missiles.”

They needed another victory soon. If the Destroyers of Worlds were allowed to continue their attacks unchecked, at some point the Protector Worlds would no longer have the ships to stop them. He had told council member Marl about his plan of forming a closer alliance with the Andocks, but Dreen wanted to greatly expand upon that. He had chosen ten nearby Protector Worlds suitable for such an alliance. He needed some way to

convince the Lakiam ruling council to agree.

“What are the latest reports on attacks by the Destroyers of Worlds?”

Communications Operator Sheera Keenol turned toward the commodore. “It’s not good,” she began with concern in her voice. “The nearest attack was only 512 light-years distant. The Enlightened colony world of Chii was hit two days ago. Over one and a half billion inhabitants are missing. All the planet’s major life forms have been taken.”

Commodore Dreen pulled up the information on the colony on his command console. Chii was an Enlightened World colony under the protection of the Parmonts. The Parmonts were responsible for nearly twenty Enlightened World civilizations. Rumors were that the Protector World civilization had pulled back major portions of their fleets to protect their own planets. This was occurring across many regions of the galaxy as the reports of what happened at Bascom became general knowledge.

With a deep sigh, Fleet Commodore Dreen knew something had to change soon or all would be lost. If he could get this alliance formed and enough dark matter missiles built, just maybe he could save a small portion of the civilized galaxy.

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On Kubitz, Fleet Admiral Vickers leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, stunned by what he had seen on the computer disk Grantz had given him. The power of the black ships was astonishing. No doubt, if these vessels showed up over Earth or Newton, the battle would be short, and the Human fleets would lose.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” said Andrew.

“Yes,” replied Kurt. “Even with our new defensive system, we can’t stop those ships.”

“What about our new battlecruisers?”

“The black ships are destroying entire fleets composed of battleships and battlecruisers as powerful as the ones we’re building now.”

Andrew let out a deep breath. “No wonder Lomatz wanted to bring his people to Newton. For once I’m glad we live so far out from the more civilized sectors of the galaxy.”

Kurt looked at Andrew. “We need that damn neutronium marble that Lieutenant Mays talked about. We need a weapon of that magnitude to stop the black ships.”

Andrew shook his head. “How do we get something like that? From

what I understand, not even the Enlightened Worlds can mine a neutron star.”

A thoughtful look covered Kurt’s face. “We may not be able to get any neutronium, but I wonder if there’s something else we can substitute.”

Andrew frowned. “I know where this is going. I suppose you want to speak to either Lomatz or Avery Dolman.”

“Probably both,” answered Kurt. “We must find a way to defend ourselves from the black ships. Earth and Newton are probably safe for now, but, as the black ships spread out across the galaxy, the likelihood of our planets being discovered grows.”

“Working with Dolman is like working with the devil,” said Andrew frowning.

“He’s helped us in the past,” Kurt pointed out. “Dolman arranged for Lomatz to give us the stealth system for our hyperdrives which allowed us to escape from the Dacroni mercenaries.”

“Don’t remind me,” replied Andrew. “I have a hard time dealing with people who make a living here on Kubitz.”

“I know how you feel,” replied Kurt. “But, remember, here it’s just their way of life, and Dolman is damn good at it.”

Andrew looked at the shiny disk Kurt had taken from the computer and laid on the desk. “How much gold are you paying Grantz for that?”

Kurt laughed. “Enough to keep him happy. You have to admit he’s useful at times.”

Andrew grudgingly nodded. “Sometimes, but what’ll happen when he takes all our gold?”

Kurt grinned. “Then I guess we ask him for a loan.”

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Kurt was inside a bar on the outskirts of the city. Avery Dolman had requested a meeting, and this was where he wanted to meet.

“Ah, this is more like it,” Grantz said with a wide grin as he took a drink from the mug in front of him. He reached out and slapped a serving girl on the backside as she passed by the table. She squealed and laughed, and then moved quickly away before Grantz could do anything else.

“Why did Dolman want to meet here?” asked Andrew as he sipped his drink. It was different than what Grantz had ordered, but it still had a sharp and bitter taste. Andrew coughed, his eyes watering.

Grantz laughed and reached over, slapping Andrew on the back. “My friend, you should get out more often. I tell you, spend one night at the

pleasure houses with me and I'll show you what good drinks and food are. They have items on their menus from all over the galaxy. Even in all the time I have spent at the pleasure houses, I have not yet sampled everything they have to offer. We won't even have to sample the women, though I promise they will do things you can't even imagine. We can go only for the entertainment. They have a drink at the new one I've been going to that explodes like a supernova as it's going down."

Andrew shook his head as he frowned at Grantz. "One of these days someone will poison or shoot you at one of those establishments."

Grantz leaned forward and winked. "I have friends there who look after me. Some are very beautiful."

"Admiral," Corporal Evans said, gesturing toward the door, as a man entered the bar.

Sergeant Jones was outside with two other Marines, while Corporal Evans had come inside with Kurt. Their Humvee was parked outside with a driver and two other Marines if needed.

Dolman had two heavily armed escorts with him. This was normal as Dolman never went anywhere without bringing adequate security. The man came over and sat at the table.

"Admiral," said Dolman as he eyed the drink in front of Grantz. He shook his head. "I don't see how you can drink that stuff."

Grantz grinned. "I can out drink any man or nonhuman."

"I believe it," said Andrew.

"Why did you want to meet here?" asked Kurt. Normally Dolman came to the embassy compound. Kurt still needed to ask Dolman about a substitute for neutronium.

"Too dangerous," Dolman replied as his eyes scanned the room, taking in all the patrons. "I've come into possession of some information the governments of the Gothan Empire don't want out."

Kurt raised his eyebrows. "What kind of information?"

Dolman leaned forward as if he wanted to make sure he wasn't overheard. "A number of months ago, the Gothan Empire sent out a task force of forty battleships under the command of Dacroni Clan Leader Masak with one order. Find a black ship and destroy it."

"The fools," bellowed Grantz and then, in a quieter voice, asked, "Do they want to lead the Destroyers of Worlds here? It's best if we remain hidden."

“Quiet, Grantz,” ordered Kurt, wanting to hear what Dolman had to say. “What happened?”

“A black fleet attacked an Enlightened colony world of the Bollons,” Dolman said. “The system was Ralla, where Masak found a black fleet. He waited until it was engaged against the planet’s meager defenses and then jumped in with his fleet. He launched a general attack against the enemy and found his weapons useless. Switching tactics, Masak ordered all forty of his battleships to concentrate their weapons fire on just one vessel of the black fleet. He destroyed it and then ordered his fleet to jump into hyperspace. Before he could escape, the black ships opened fire and destroyed fourteen of his battleships in only a matter of seconds.”

“Seconds,” Andrew said, his face turning pale.

Kurt and Andrew were well aware of just how powerful a Dacroni battleship was. “Where did you get this information?” Kurt asked Dolman. Kurt wanted to make sure it was genuine.

Dolman looked at Grantz. “Our friendly Profiteer here arranged for a meeting between us and several other Profiteers. Fortunately one of them was the brother to Dacroni Clan Leader Masak.”

“Masak,” groaned Grantz, his eyes widening. “They never told me that.”

“So that’s where you got the information about the Destroyers of Worlds attacking Bascom,” Kurt said, shifting his gaze to Grantz.

“I didn’t know it came from Masak,” grumbled Grantz. “I’ll have to stay away from the pleasure houses for a while now. If Masak finds out I bought that information from his brother, I’m dead!”

“Good riddance,” said Andrew with a pleased smile.

“What else did you learn?” Kurt asked Dolman, ignoring Andrew and Grantz. Kurt wanted as much intelligence on the Destroyers of Worlds as possible.

Dolman slid a shiny computer disk across the table. “It’s all here. Complete sensor scans of Masak’s attack on the black ships, as well as the Gothan Empire’s preparations for when the dark ships come here.”

Kurt picked up the small disk and placed it in his pocket. “How much?” he asked. Dolman very seldom did anything for free.

“Double what I paid for it, since I took all the risks.” Dolman then told Kurt how much it had cost him.

“Contact Ambassador Tenner, and he will arrange for your payment.”



Dolman stood up and then spoke again. “How do you like all of Lomatz’s people being on Newton?”

“We’re keeping an eye on things,” answered Andrew. “We won’t let them turn our planet into another Kubitz.”

Dolman nodded. “Lomatz returned last week. He’s been loading his transport ships with all kinds of supplies and automated factories. A few eyebrows have been raised, and some questions asked. I told him to be careful. The same goes for you as well.” With those final words, Dolman turned and walked to the door, along with his two escorts.

“Let’s get out of here,” Kurt said, standing.

Grantz stood as well.

“I thought you would stay.”

“No,” Grantz said, taking a long drink and then setting his mug on the table. “The best place for me is at the compound, at least until I know Masak isn’t looking for his brother or anyone his brother might have come into contact with.”

“Afraid to risk your hide?” asked Andrew. “What about all your women at the pleasure houses?”

Grantz frowned. “They’ll just have to wait.”

Kurt looked toward the bar, where several scantily clad women danced and loud music played. If not for all the guns strapped to most of the patrons’ waists, this bar would pass for many found on Earth. Kurt would ask Dolman about a substitute for neutronium at another time.

“Come on, Grantz,” said Kurt. “We’ll make sure no one shoots you.”

The group left to return to the compound. Once there Kurt wanted to go over the information on Dolman’s disk to compare it to the one Grantz had given him earlier. He was anxious to see how the Dacroni battleships had destroyed a black ship.

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Up in orbit, Dacroni Clan Leader Jarls frowned at his viewscreens; Lakiam battlecruisers orbited over Kubitz. Not only that but several more Lakiam battlecruisers as well as four Andock vessels sat in space past the sixth planet accompanied by Human ships from either Earth or Newton.

Jarls was dressed in dark gray battle armor, the Dacronis’ standard uniform, except when not on board their ships. He was humanoid, with bulky legs, torso, and arms. His face was similar to a Human’s but rounder and chunkier. His neck was shorter with his head almost resting on his torso.

“Is it possible the Earth Humans have formed an alliance with the Lakiams and the Andocks?” asked Salas, Jarls’s second in command.

“I doubt it,” replied Jarls. “Something else is going on here.” Very seldom did Protector World warships visit Kubitz or any world in the Gothan Empire.

“The *Aurelia* is one of those two Lakiam battlecruisers near the Controller station,” pointed out Salas. “The *Aurelia* was at the last battle of Earth.”

A troubled scowl covered Jarls’s face. The *Aurelia* by itself had been responsible for driving the Profiteers from the planet. Clan Leader Creed had been killed in the fighting as the Profiteer fleet fled the planet, leaving behind numerous cargo ships and detainee ships. It had cost several Profiteer Clans a fortune. Fortunately Jarls had recognized the Lakiam battlecruiser for what it was and had pulled back his battleships before they were lost to the battle as well.

“What should we do about Vickers?” asked Salas. “He’s on the planet. We can send a few teams there to take him out.”

Jarls considered what Salas said. While it was tempting to kill Vickers, there was no longer any point in it, especially with fourteen Lakiam ships so near. “From the rumors I’ve heard on Kubitz, Lomatz has provided Vickers with a full Class One defensive system.”

Salas’s face turned pale upon hearing that. “A Class One system?”

“Yes, one that may even rival what’s around Kubitz. Besides we have other concerns now.”

“You mean the Destroyers of Worlds.”

Jarls nodded. “All the major clan leaders on Dacroni Four are in agreement. We must do what we can to defend our own world. The orbital defenses have been strengthened, and at least 70 percent of our clan fleets are now required to stay in the system in case a black fleet appears.”

“Due to Masak’s encounter with the Destroyers of Worlds,” said Salas. “Is it true he destroyed one of their warships?”

Jarls nodded. “Only one but at a cost of fourteen of his battleships.”

Salas shifted his gaze to the viewscreens. “I wish I knew what the Humans and Lakiams are up to.”

“We all do,” answered Jarls, as his focus drifted to one of the screens showing a Lakiam battlecruiser. He couldn’t ever recall a Protector World sending so many warships to Kubitz before. He was certain the Kubitz

government as well as the Controllers must be greatly concerned over what was going on in orbit. Jarls leaned back in his command chair and whispered to himself, "Fleet Admiral Vickers, what are you up to?" Jarls wished he had a way to find out, but recently many of his old lines of communications had dried up. Even Avery Dolman had grown silent when it came to the Humans from Earth and Newton. Jarls was deeply concerned that, with the appearance of the black ships in their galaxy, the Gothan Empire would never be the same again.

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Several days later Kurt was on the *Aurelia*, meeting with Mara. He was distinctly aware of how beautiful and alluring the Lakiam woman was. They were in her quarters, and she had just poured Kurt a drink very popular on Mara's homeworld.

"Fleet Commodore Dreen was highly interested in what I had to say about your worlds," Mara said as she sat across from Kurt.

"This Commodore Dreen must be very special," replied Kurt. Keera would be highly unhappy if she knew he was in Mara's personal quarters, even if she did sit opposite him. Her sitting room was lavishly furnished with bright and colorful paintings on the wall.

"He is," Mara said as she took a sip of her drink. "He's our most brilliant military leader. He's trying to form alliances with other Protector Worlds against the black ships."

Kurt set his drink on a small table near him. "How does all this concern my world?" He had a strong suspicion Mara wasn't telling him everything.

Mara's eyes narrowed. "In the past, many primitive worlds escaped the culling of the Destroyers of Worlds. Some of these planets were like yours, hidden in backwater areas of the galaxy. From those worlds, the new Enlightened and Protector Worlds arose. It could be that your planets are destined to play that role in the future."

Lomatz had said something similar. "Perhaps," replied Kurt. "But what if the black ships find us?"

"They will spend years culling the main worlds of the galaxy," said Mara. "Many small empires similar to the Gothan Empire will resist them. Fighting will continue in our galaxy until every civilized world and empire has fallen to the Destroyers of Worlds. That's how it has always been and most likely how it will always be. They are an unstoppable force."

"You're making a chilling prediction," replied Kurt. He wondered how

many of the civilized races of the galaxy felt this way.

"I'm only facing reality," Mara said with a look of sadness spreading across her face. "They may, indeed, find your world, and, then again, you may find your worlds spared the nightmare of being culled."

"You said Fleet Commodore Dreen was forming an alliance with other Protector Worlds. Surely, when joined together, they will be able to fight the black ships."

"You don't understand," Mara said with a deep sigh. "Very few Protector Worlds ever work together. They all follow certain rules, but most are more concerned about the Enlightened Worlds they defend and becoming Enlightened themselves someday. I don't believe very many Protector Worlds will join with Lakiam to stand against the Destroyers of Worlds. If we can't form a unified front against this dangerous enemy, then I fear there is no hope for the galaxy."

Kurt picked up his drink and took a small sip. The taste was unlike anything he had tried before. "I still don't understand why you're coming to Newton with the *Aurelia*. By now you must know we've duplicated much of the technology on your warships."

Mara's eyes widened. "I suspected as much," she admitted. "The people I'm bringing with me consist of a number of very talented technicians and a few scientists. We are willing to help you with any technical problems you may encounter with adapting our technology to your vessels."

"What do you want? There must be something."

Mara took a deep breath, and then she focused sharply on Kurt. "Lomatz brought a large number of his people to Newton. I want permission to do the same. If the war goes badly for Lakiam, I want to bring several thousand of my people to your world. If your world is spared, then we can make it the most powerful world in the galaxy once the Destroyers of Worlds leave. Perhaps by doing this, we will be ready for them next time."

"Did you discuss this with Fleet Commodore Dreen?" Kurt was greatly surprised by Mara's request.

"Yes," replied Mara. "He was hesitant at first, but, in the end, he saw the wisdom of attempting to save a few of our people. This continued ravaging of our worlds by the black ships every few million years must come to a stop. If this works, we just might be able to do that. We wouldn't have to reinvent all our technology again."

Kurt went silent as he considered what Mara had said. Having Lakiams

on Newton could have a bigger impact than Lomatz's people.

"I'll have to speak to Governor Spalding," he said finally. "I can't promise anything."

"I understand," replied Mara. She stood, setting down her drink. "We can depart as soon as you're ready. My people have checked out the *Aurelia*, and all the necessary supplies have been loaded."

Kurt hesitated, and then he asked another question. "Are there any dark matter missiles on board your ship?"

Mara's eyes narrowed, and her lips tightened. "Yes, twenty such missiles are on board. However, I should warn you. The technology for you to build such warheads is beyond anything currently on your world. Even my own people have a difficult time building the warheads. I am curious to hear how you learned of the missiles."

Kurt smiled. "I have my sources. Once we arrive at Newton, I'll have more questions." Kurt greatly wished to speak to her about the Lakiams' battles with the black ships, but that needed to wait. Right now he needed to return to the *Star Cross* and set a course for home. He had been gone longer than he wanted, but, at least this time, no one had tried to kill him while he had been on Kubitz.

## Chapter Six

Fleet Commodore Dreen listened patiently to council member Brewl Darmas explain, once again, why an alliance with the Andocks was out of the question.

“Each Protector World has its own sphere of influence,” Darmas said, as if that was a sufficient explanation. He slowly shook his head. “We have eighty-seven Enlightened civilizations to protect, and we don’t have time for an alliance that will drain our resources.”

“You don’t understand,” Dreen said, trying to stay calm. “Those eighty-seven Enlightened civilizations have 1,400 colonies that also need protecting. We don’t have the ships.”

“Preposterous,” Darmas said dismissively. “We have the largest fleet in the history of our civilization. The only problem would be if we had to send some of our ships to help the worlds in this supposed alliance of yours.”

Commodore Dreen stared at the viewscreen on the wall of his quarters. Brewl’s face looked very determined. “When was the last time you left Lakiam?”

“Leave Lakiam?” replied Darmas, stunned. “Why would I do that?”

“It might give you a better perspective of what’s going on out there,” replied Commodore Dreen. “The Destroyers of Worlds are rampaging across the galaxy. If we don’t join with other Protector Worlds, our own planets may fall victim to their attacks.”

“With our defenses?” Brewl said in disbelief. “I don’t think so. If we commit ourselves to this war effort, as you desire, we are turning away from Enlightenment. We must not do that.”

“As you wish,” Dreen said, seeing this conversation going nowhere. “I just ask that you keep an open mind.”

“I always do,” Brewl replied as the screen went blank.

Fleet Commodore Dreen let out a deep sigh. He had made very little progress with the council. Nearly 63 percent of its members were against any alliance with other worlds, though they had approved more ship construction as well as increased defensive measures. The fear of endangering their future Enlightenment derailed any progress on the military preparations Dreen really wanted. He wasn’t sure what could be done to change their minds.

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Eighty-two light-years distant the answer to Dreen’s problem suddenly

appeared. In the Lakiam System of Holdez, a Destroyers of Worlds' fleet dropped from hyperspace. Around the seventh planet orbited the inhabited moon of Holdez, which the Lakiams had terraformed over two thousand years in the past. The moon held a thriving population of over two hundred million. The system was rich in minerals, and a robust mining industry operated across the planets, moons, and asteroids.

Aboard the Lakiam battlecruiser *Nixa*, warning alarms sounded, and red lights flashed.

"Report!" ordered Captain Belson as he rushed into the Command Center.

"Scanning satellites have detected a Destroyers of Worlds' fleet exiting hyperspace at a range of six hundred thousand kilometers."

Since the failure of the ships at Bascom to detect the black ships in hyperspace, the Lakiams had seeded their systems with small satellites armed with numerous high-definition space cameras that could spot an anomaly in their vicinity. The cameras continuously videoed the area of space around them to see if any stars were occluded or if a black ship was visible.

"How many ships?" Captain Belson was deeply concerned. He only had a light task group, consisting of thirty-five battlecruisers. They had not been expecting an attack in this region of space.

"Two motherships and 407 cruisers," reported Sensor Operator Darma. "All available camera satellites have been focused on that area."

"Contact Lakiam, and inform Fleet Commodore Dreen what's happening." Belson was in trouble. His fleet wasn't strong enough to stop the black ships.

"All hyperspace frequencies are blocked," Communications Operator Marlon replied. "I can't get any message through."

Captain Belson had expected that. It was one of the reasons all Lakiam worlds, colonies, and scientific outposts were now broadcasting a continuous hyperspace signal toward Lakiam. If any signal abruptly stopped, then the home system would know something was wrong. Belson just hoped help arrived before the black fleet could reach Holdez. If not, then the inhabited moon was doomed.

"Orbital defenses are coming fully online," Tactical Officer Ardlee reported. Twenty Class Two Orbital Defense Platforms were above the moon plus a Class Two Command and Control Station. In addition, two hundred defensive energy cannon satellites were in orbit.

“Alarms are sounding on Holdez,” Communications Operator Marlon added. “People have been told to go to their shelters.”

Captain Belson nodded. For 99 percent of the population, there was no safe place to go.

“Black fleet is moving in our direction,” Darma reported. “Estimated contact in twelve minutes.”

Captain Belson took in a sharp breath. Twelve minutes was not nearly enough time for reinforcements to arrive. “We will move the fleet back to the defensive grid. Perhaps, by adding its firepower to ours, we can delay the black ships until help arrives.”

He was met with silence from his other officers. The battle would be long over before more Lakiam vessels could reach the system.

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Fleet Commodore Dreen was in his quarters, thinking about his recent conversations with various council members, when the ship’s alarms sounded. The communications device on his desk also began buzzing, and, reaching out, he activated it. “Report.”

“Contact with the Holdez System has been lost. Their hyperspace beacon ceased broadcasting six minutes ago,” Alborg’s voice reported over the comm.

Commodore Dreen stood up. “Prepare the fleet to enter hyperspace immediately.”

“Commodore, we can’t take all the ships and leave Lakiam undefended,” pointed out Alborg. “This could be a feint to draw us away.”

Commodore Dreen paused, realizing his second officer was right. “We’ll take only the fleet assigned to the *Basera*,” he ordered. That was still nearly five hundred vessels. “Inform the council we’re responding to a possible attack at Holdez.”

As he made his way to the Command Center, Dreen felt a change in the ship. A slight vibration indicated the subspace drive had been activated, and they were moving away from the planet. A normal person could not detect the subtle change in the ship, but someone who was used to how the ship operated would notice immediately. Holdez was over eighty light-years distant. Even at top speed they might not make it there in time.

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Captain Belson watched the ship’s tactical display intently. His fleet had made it safely to the defensive grid and now waited for the approaching



black ships to reach engagement range. His ships had a full complement of dark matter missiles, and all the defensive platforms had at least a few each.

“All ships, stand by to fire,” he ordered over the ship-to-ship comm. “We will target ten black ships with our first missile barrage. Once those ships have been destroyed, we will switch to the second group of ten.” From previous battles, twelve to fifteen dark matter warheads should overload the enemy’s shields. He intended to hit each of the targeted black ships with forty. If he could destroy enough of them quick enough, perhaps they would pull back. He wouldn’t expend the energy or the time firing other weapons. The best strategy was to focus all the fleet’s dark matter missiles on the enemy’s defensive screens, inflicting as much damage as possible. If he only had more ships, he would make an attempt to take out the two inbound motherships. However, too many of the spindle-shaped cruisers were protecting them to make it feasible with his current fleet.

In the background he could hear the governor of Holdez, begging to be taken off the planet. “Turn off that comm!” he ordered. He was sadly disappointed in the governor. The Lakiam race was supposedly well on their way toward Enlightenment. However, the arrival of the Destroyers of Worlds had demonstrated the Lakiams still had a long way to go, much further than expected.

“Engagement range in two minutes,” Darma reported in a calm voice.

The tactical screen was updating continuously. Hundreds of red threat icons were approaching the defensive grid and the Lakiam fleet.

“All hyperspace-capable noncombat ships are jumping from the system.”

On the tactical screen, dozens of friendly green icons vanished as the ships entered the safety of hyperspace. For several long moments this continued, and then the only green icons remaining around Holdez were fleet units. Far out in the system, mining ships and other commercial vehicles powered down in the hope the black ships would not detect them. As they did, their green icons faded away on the long-distance sensor screen.

“Engagement range!”

“Fire!” ordered Captain Belson.

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In space, the thirty-five 1,700-meter-long battlecruisers emptied their missile tubes, sending 420 dark matter missiles flashing into hyperspace to smash into the energy shields of ten black ships. Each dark matter warhead

had an explosive force of five hundred megatons. Space lit up with the brilliance of the explosions as the raw energy washed across the defensive screens of the enemy. All ten collapsed as the amount of energy they could absorb was quickly exceeded. The ten screens released their pent-up energy in one horrendous flash. The black ships beneath the screens died instantly as they were turned into glowing space dust. For a moment the ten areas of space burned like a supernova, then the light faded away.

The Lakiam ships fired again and then again. Twenty more black ships succumbed to the deadly dark matter energy. The Class Two Orbital Defense Platforms began launching their missiles. Eight more black ships died as the platforms fired off their missiles in sprint mode.

Then the black ship returned fire with their black antimatter beams. Lakiam battlecruisers blew apart, one after another. The beams easily penetrated the Lakiam's powerful energy screens, cutting deep inside the ships. Missile fire on the black ships rapidly decreased as Lakiam ships and launchers were destroyed.

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Captain Belson grimaced as he watched his fleet being systematically annihilated.

"How many have we destroyed?" The dark matter missiles were effective. Computer analyses indicated the enemy screens burst between the fourteenth and eighteenth warhead detonation.

"Forty-two," reported Darma. "We've damaged another eighteen."

"Keep firing missiles," ordered Captain Belson. He still had a slight hope the enemy would pull back.

"Enemy is continuing to fire their black antimatter energy beams," Darma informed the captain. "Our energy screens are not stopping the beams." Then in a louder and more concerned voice, he said, "Enemy ships are launching their black spheres."

This was the end. "All ships and defensive platforms, fire every missile you can before the spheres attach themselves to your energy screens," ordered Belson. "Once the spheres reached the screens, the black orbs would siphon off the energy powering the screens and then the ships themselves. Shortly after that, the ships and defensive platforms would not be able to launch any more missiles."

"Missiles launching in sprint mode," confirmed the tactical officer. "We won't get all of them launched."

Captain Belson looked at the viewscreens. Bright explosions were pummeling four of the black ships. With satisfaction, he saw their screens vanish, and then brilliant explosions of light marked the death of the four enemy vessels. At least his fleet was taking a few of the deadly enemy with them.

Then his flagship shook violently. Warning alarms sounded on the damage control console.

“We’ve been hit by two black antimatter beams,” the damage control officer reported. “We have major sections of our hull open to space, and we’ve lost four of our missile tubes.”

“Keep firing,” ordered Belson, as his ship shook uncontrollably. On one of the viewscreens, he saw a Class Two Orbital Defense Platform blow apart.

The battle was lost. He could not save Holdez.

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The black ships continued to advance as the black antimatter spheres reached the defending ships and the defensive platforms. The spheres attached themselves to the screens, rapidly draining them of energy. Then they floated down to the hulls, spreading out. In just a few minutes all the power had been drained, leaving the ships and platforms helpless. Black ship antimatter missiles arrived, leaving only glowing wreckage behind.

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Above Holdez, its shattered defenders died in bright blasts of light. Across the inhabited moon, people rushed to find shelters before the Destroyers of Worlds’ motherships went into orbit. Any who remained on the surface were doomed. But there was nowhere to go as the shelters were overflowing, leaving 99 percent of the population trapped on the surface.

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The black motherships went into orbit, and, from each, fourteen beams of black light flashed down. In a matter of minutes, millions of Lakiams were turned into a black ashy substance that the tractor beams, embedded in the black rays, carried back to the motherships. On board the two motherships, the tractor beams brought the organic substance inside, where it was fed into the converters. The converters classified the different organic substances and then changed them into appropriate food for each of the three castes of the Vorn race.

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A few hours later Fleet Commodore Dreen waited anxiously as the

*Basera* dropped from hyperspace, two million kilometers from Holdez. Alarms rang loudly as the fleet went to full alert.

“All ships are in battle formation,” reported Sensors Operator Laylem.

“All weapons are online,” added Alborg from Tactical.

“I’m not receiving any broadcast stations from Holdez,” said Sheera Keenol from Communications, with deep concern in her voice. “The entire system is silent.”

“What about the black ships? Any signs of them?”

Laylem spent a few minutes working on his console and then turned toward the commodore. “No, none of our ships are picking up anything on their viewscreens. I’ve also accessed the camera satellites in the system, and I can confirm the black ships left the system forty-six minutes ago.”

Commodore Dreen looked at one of the viewscreens, showing Holdez. The atmosphere of the planet seemed filled with dust. He had seen this before. With a sickening feeling, he knew he had arrived too late.

“Take us in, and keep an eye on the viewscreens. There’s always the possibility a few black ships might be lurking about. Communications, broadcast an all clear and identify us. I imagine the mining operations and some ships are powered down.”

Dreen intended to go into orbit and then send shuttles to the surface. A few deep shelters were on this moon, and he was hoping for some survivors. He intended to take videos of the destruction wrought by the black ships and then share them with the council. Perhaps, once the council members all saw what the Destroyers of Worlds were capable of doing to a Lakiam world, they would see the wisdom of forming alliances with other Protector World civilizations.

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Two hours later Fleet Commodore Dreen stood near the center of what was once the capital city of Holdez. He was in an environmental protection suit, due to all the smoke in the air and the fires burning in the destroyed city. Whatever weapon the Destroyers of Worlds used had practically leveled every building higher than a few stories. What buildings remained had their walls caved in and were clearly unsafe to enter.

“The entire moon is like this,” reported Thomal Lorn, a climate specialist. “Nearly one thousand locations on Holdez were destroyed like the capital.”

Several other Lakiams accompanied the commodore as well as six of

the large eight-foot-tall combat robots. The robots were equipped with heavy stunners as well as a small energy beam cannon.

“What about the search for survivors?”

“Not many,” replied one of the military officers in charge of the combat robots. “Reports indicate that a number of the deep shelters were blasted open. Early estimates seem to indicate less than thirty thousand people survived. We’re continuing to search.”

Commodore Dreen clasped his hands behind his back as he thought over the ramifications of what had occurred. Over two hundred million Lakiams, plus the defending fleet, had been wiped out. He shuddered, thinking of the fate of the inhabitants. They were now food for the Destroyers of Worlds.

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Prince Brollen was pleased when the transport ship exited hyperspace into the system where they had established their primary base for operations in Galaxy X241. Gazing at the large tactical display through his multifaceted eyes, he saw hundreds of green icons, representing Vorn motherships, collector ships, and cruisers. Even a few transport ships were in orbit above the system’s sole planet. The planet was a dead husk without an atmosphere or even a single moon.

*You have returned,* a voice spoke in Prince Brollen’s head. Brollen recognized Prince Ortumad, who was in command of the system. Brollen also thought he detected surprise in Ortumad’s communication.

*Yes, Queen Alithe has chosen me as a future consort.*

Ortumad went silent for a long moment. *I accept your higher position in the Royal Court. What are your orders?*

*We will continue to harvest the more lightly defended worlds, sent Brollen. However, we can’t allow the others to join their forces against us. There are planets that possess weapons dangerous to our ships. Those planets must be harvested.*

*You speak of the ones with the dark matter missiles.*

*Yes, we will continue the harvest, but shortly we must destroy those who can be a danger to us.*

*By your command,* answered Prince Ortumad.

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Fleet Commodore Dreen was once more in the Lakiam home system, which comprised fourteen worlds. The fourth planet was Earth-like with

planets number three and five having been terraformed. All three held large populations. Scattered across the system were large domed cities on numerous moons and asteroids. The Lakiams' pride and joy were the 215 massive orbital habitats which circled the three inhabited planets. In all, the Lakiam home system had a population in excess of sixteen billion.

"Ship is in stationary orbit," reported Jalad from the Helm.

Commodore Dreen nodded. He had been silent for most of the trip home. He still felt the effects of the disaster that had wiped out the population of Holdez. Over two hundred million Lakiams turned into food for the Destroyers of Worlds. On the entire moon of Holdez less than forty thousand survivors had been found in the deep bunkers. They had emerged in shock, terrified by the destruction that surrounded them.

Other vessels had arrived from various Lakiam planets, bringing aid. Already a massive tent city had been constructed for the survivors. Commodore Dreen had left 110 of his battlecruisers in orbit to defend the shattered world from another attack, though he doubted if the Destroyers of Worlds would return.

"What now?" asked Alborg from his tactical station. "What happens if they attack another of our worlds?"

"Our fleets are dispersed across too many Enlightened Worlds," Laylem said, turning from his sensor console to speak to the commodore. "If we don't do something, they will pick us off fleet by fleet until we no longer have the ships to resist them."

Commodore Dreen listened to his command crew. He had a lot of respect for them and their opinions. If these attacks continued, the Lakiam worlds would eventually fall. He could not allow this to happen.

"Do you have the computer files loaded?" he asked, focusing on Laylem.

"Yes, Commodore. I've created 250 copies, as you requested."

Copies of the devastation they had found on Holdez. The destroyed cities, the videos of the stunned people exiting the few remaining shelters, and the ship ruins in orbit. Perhaps now he could convince the council to take appropriate action. He intended to give each council member a copy, as well as the largest news media stations on the planet. It would be a risk, but he must somehow force the council to allow him to make the necessary alliances with other Protector World civilizations before it was too late.

Two days later Fleet Commodore Dreen was summoned to the Lakiam Council chambers. As he entered the massive structure housing the government for all Lakiam worlds, he couldn't help but wonder what awaited him inside. For two days he had heard nothing from any council member. However, the news media had been full of charges and countercharges about the inability of the fleet to defend Holdez from the Destroyers of Worlds. Some of the people were demanding all Lakiam warships be pulled back from Enlightened World space to protect Lakiam worlds. What use was it to work toward Enlightenment if they were all doomed to die? The videos of the carnage on Holdez were replayed over and over again. Lakiam and other nearby Lakiam worlds demanded the government do something to protect them from suffering the same fate.

When he reached the ornate doors behind which the council met, he presented his credentials to the heavily armed guards. Lakiam had little crime, and the guards were a traditional post.

"You may enter," the senior guard said, opening the massive doors.

Stepping inside, Dreen saw the entire council was assembled. Over two hundred members representing every Lakiam world and colony.

"Fleet Commodore Dreen," said Lead Councilor Harlus Atratis. "Will you take a seat, and we will begin this meeting."

Commodore Dreen approached the lone remaining empty chair, which faced the assembled council. Sitting, he looked unfazed at the councilors.

"I will start off by saying we are not pleased about the videos you released to the news media," Atratis said reproachfully. "It has put this council in a precarious situation."

"Our entire civilization is in a precarious situation," Dreen answered simply. "Not just this council. It was my duty to release the videos to the media. With the number of aid ships currently at Holdez, other videos would have come out shortly. It was better if I ensured their accuracy."

"Still," Atratis said, "it should have been our decision."

"I have requested you be removed from command," council member Darmas said as he stood. "I believe your actions demonstrate your lack of ability to lead our fleets."

"Who else is to lead our fleets?" challenged council member Marl defiantly as he too rose. "Who else can claim a victory against the black fleets?"

Several other council members rose, shouting their agreement, while

even more rose, voicing their disapproval.

“Sit down,” ordered Lead Councilor Atratis. “We will act civilized in this chamber.” Atratis turned toward Fleet Commodore Dreen. “I want you to explain to this council what type of threat the Destroyers of Worlds are and what you believe will happen if we don’t follow your recommendations to form alliances with other Protector Worlds.”

Commodore Dreen heard rumblings of dissent from a number of council members at hearing mention of *alliances*. Now he must convince the council he was right.

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For the next two hours he spoke to the council, sometimes pausing to answer questions. Many times several council members heatedly argued over something Dreen had said, and they had to be calmed by Lead Councilor Atratis. Finally Commodore Dreen finished speaking. The room went silent as everyone weighed what he had told them.

In the end, they agreed—by a very narrow margin—to allow Dreen to form alliances with five Protector World civilizations. Dreen had asked for ten but had hoped to get at least four. The council also disapproved the measure of sharing the knowledge on how to build dark matter warheads with other Protector Worlds. While this was disappointing, it wasn’t a surprise.

As Dreen was leaving, he was stopped by council member Marl.

“Commodore, you won today by the narrowest of margins.”

“At least now we can form the alliances we need to fight the black ships.”

Marl looked intently at Fleet Commodore Dreen. “You realize what we did today sets us back on our road to Enlightenment.”

“Enlightenment does not serve us if we’re all dead.”

Marl let out a deep breath. “You proved that in your speech. Let’s hope you’re right. Keep in mind you made several powerful enemies today.”

“If you mean council member Darmas, I’m well aware of how he feels.”

Marl went silent for a long moment, and then he spoke again. “Build your alliances, and fight your war. I fear the path we’re about to embark on, but I see no other choice.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen nodded. The path he had set the Lakiam race upon today would probably move them far from Enlightenment and toward barbarism. He was treading a narrow line. But now he had to negotiate with



several Protector World civilizations. If he were successful, maybe Lakiam would survive, not as a civilization moving toward Enlightenment, just as one hoping to exist.

## Chapter Seven

From the large Newton Station observation window, Fleet Admiral Vickers gazed at his new flagship. The replacement *Star Cross* sat in one of the massive repair bays as its supplies were being loaded.

“She’s a beaut,” said Captain Henry Watkins, commander of the light carrier *Vindication*, an older man and very good at strategy. He had been Kurt’s mentor in his early years and became a close and trusted friend.

“We needed a flagship that will stand out,” commented Captain Randson with a pleased grin. “When we go to Kubitz, the Profiteer clans will give us a wide berth.”

“Maybe,” replied Kurt. He had already taken numerous tours of the ship during its construction phase, but now he was anxious and ready to command the ship’s shakedown cruise. “However, if we do return to the Gotham Empire, they’ll know we’ve gained access to Protector World technology.” This concerned Kurt somewhat, considering they had just been fined and nearly banned from trading on Kubitz based on rumors of using restricted technology. This ship would confirm it. It could pose another set of problems. However, he would worry about that later.

“When will Lomatz arrive?” asked Colonel Simms. “He’s bringing more direct energy projectors for the station.”

“A few more days yet,” answered Kurt. He had spoken to Lomatz briefly on Kubitz, and the weapons dealer was trying to acquire more defensive systems for Newton. With the increased demand from the other worlds in the Gotham Empire, Kurt wasn’t sure Lomatz would be successful, even with all his connections. However, Lomatz had mentioned he might have a surprise for Kurt when he returned. More than that Lomatz wouldn’t say.

“What about my neutronium marble?” asked Lieutenant Mays, standing next to Andrew.

“No luck,” replied Kurt. “I talked to Avery Dolman, asking if he knew anyone who could mine a neutron star, and he burst out laughing.”

Mays looked dejected. “What about a good substitute?”

“Dolman’s making inquiries. He says, if there is one, it would come from an Enlightened World. They would be the only ones who might know how to make an object as small as we need with sufficient mass.”

“Good luck with that,” Henry said, frowning. “I imagine those

Enlightened Worlds are scared to death about the Destroyers of Worlds. I still can't believe they harvest intelligent beings for food. It's like something from one of those old horror videos."

"If they ate you, they'd get indigestion," said Andrew, grinning.

"I'm too old to be food," grumbled Henry. "They're interested in youngsters like you."

Colonel Simms looked at Kurt. "What would happen if a black fleet came here?"

Kurt shook his head. "Our weapons still aren't powerful enough."

"Not even our new ships?"

"I've seen a lot of video footage of Protector World fleets fighting Destroyers of Worlds' ships. In almost every instance the Protector World fleets are wiped out. In very rare cases a few black ships were destroyed when their shields overloaded."

"We need that damn neutronium marble," muttered Lieutenant Mays.

"I'm afraid no race is advanced enough to mine a neutron star," Andrew said. "Not even the Enlightened Worlds."

With dawning realization, Kurt remembered, months ago, how Lomatz had mentioned meeting a member of a secluded advanced race—millions of years older than any currently Enlightened World. And millions of years ago they had hidden themselves from the Destroyers of Worlds and, since then, had refused contact with any other civilization. To the galaxy overall, they had ceased to exist.

"There might be a solution to your neutronium marble after all," Kurt said to Lieutenant Mays.

"What?" she blurted out, her eyes widening.

"I'll speak to Lomatz when he arrives. If I'm right, I may have a mission for the new *Star Cross*."

Andrew moaned. "Why do I not like this already?"

Kurt smiled. "It'll be an adventure."

"I'm getting too old for adventures."

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Later that day Kurt and Keera were at his sister's for a relaxing evening meal. Denise was an excellent cook, and Kurt never missed a chance to take her up on sampling her cooking. His sister had also been giving Keera cooking lessons, and the two hung out together quite often.

"There's plenty of chicken," Denise said, grinning as Kurt reached for

his third piece.

“Mom says fried chicken’s your favorite meal,” proclaimed nine-year-old Bryan as he reached for a second chicken leg. “It’s mine too!”

Kurt grinned at his nephew, then looked at Alex, Denise’s husband. “How’s work going?” Alex was a systems analyst at one of Newton’s largest computer firms.

“Great! With the influx of immigrants from Earth, business is booming.”

“What about the aliens on the island?” asked Bryan, waving his chicken leg and nearly dropping it. “When will I see one?”

“Bryan, put that on your plate before it ends up on the floor,” admonished Denise. “The aliens don’t leave their island very often so you probably won’t see one.”

Bryan set the chicken leg on his plate and reached for his fork to attack the pile of mashed potatoes and gravy he had been avoiding. “We should have had macaroni and cheese too.”

“You have too much macaroni and cheese as it is,” Denise said, shaking her head. “Keera, how’s the training going at the new medical center?”

“Slow,” replied Keera. “We have received most of the new equipment that I wanted, and we’re in the process of teaching people how to operate it. It just takes time because it’s so new here on Newton.”

“I understand some of Lomatz’s people are involved,” Alex commented. “They’re not trying to steal us blind, are they?”

Keera laughed and shook her head. “I know Kubitz has a bad reputation, but not all its people are like that. Many of Lomatz’s people are technicians and others who worked in his operations on Kubitz and had very little to do with the Profiteers.”

“Isn’t he a weapons dealer?” asked Denise, frowning.

“Yes,” answered Kurt. “He also operates a large fleet of commercial vessels, including the large cargo and construction ships that have been hanging around Newton.”

Alex looked thoughtful and then spoke. “I would still keep a close watch on them. We don’t want Newton turning into another Kubitz.”

“It won’t,” promised Kurt. “Lomatz’s people are pretty well confined to their island and need travel permits to leave it. Those helping Keera went through an extra security check to be on the safe side.”

Denise frowned at Bryan, who was building a tower out of his mashed

potatoes with a spoon. Seeing the look on his mother's face, Bryan stopped and, using his fork, took a small bite from the top of the tower.

"I understand Mara came on the *Aurelia*."

"Yes, the Lakiams have agreed to help us with some of their technology," Kurt explained to his sister. He didn't want to mention several thousand Lakiams might be coming to Newton to live eventually. However, with their level of technology, they would have a more profound impact on Newton than Lomatz's people. Kurt still needed to speak to Governor Spalding about that. When he did so, he might have Mara come along to explain their reasons for wanting to come to Newton.

"So, is your new flagship ready?" asked Bryan, putting down his fork. He had demolished his potato tower. It was now flattened out over much of his plate.

Kurt smiled. "Yes, they're loading supplies, and I'll be taking it out in a few days for its shakedown cruise."

"Can I see it?" asked Bryan, his eyes lighting up with excitement. "Can I shoot its big guns?"

"Bryan!" exclaimed Denise. "You can't go up in a spaceship. Uncle Kurt has some very important things to do."

Bryan nodded. "He has to kill more of the bad aliens."

"Not all aliens are bad," Kurt said. "Someday I'll take you to the *Star Cross*, and you can sit in the captain's chair."

"You don't think Captain Randson would mind?" asked Bryan, his eyes lighting up.

"No, I don't think he would mind at all."

"Are you going to Earth anytime soon?" asked Alex. "The news states a lot is going on there."

"I may stop during the shakedown cruise. President Mayfield is up for reelection in another few months, and I would like to speak to him beforehand."

"He's not going to win, is he?" asked Denise.

Kurt shook his head. "Probably not. He's way down in the polls, and, after everything the Profiteers did to Earth, the people are ready for a change in leadership."

"Any idea who they may chose?"

"Ellen Lambert is one of Mayfield's biggest supporters. She's also very connected with the people in the North American Union. Mayfield may

encourage her to run in November.”

“I’ve read some things about her,” Alex said, thoughtful. “Her home is in Dallas, Texas, and she’s been heavily involved in the reconstruction. She seems to be very popular.”

Kurt nodded. “Mayfield feels confident she will continue his policies.”

“Is Fleet Admiral Tomalson coming to Newton anytime soon?” asked Denise. “I know at one time he talked about settling down here.”

Kurt grinned. “Admiral Aaron Colmes of the battleship *Atlas* is being groomed to take over. He did an outstanding job at the battle of Earth and didn’t shirk his duties. Rod Tomalson speaks very highly of him, and, once he feels Aaron is ready, Rod plans to relocate and retire on Newton, probably when the elections are over.”

“He deserves it,” Alex said. “He’s done a lot for us.”

They finished their meal with some small talk about what was happening on Newton. Denise wanted to take Keera shopping at the new Westside Mall, and Bryan wanted Kurt to come to his next ball game.

On the way home, Keera turned to Kurt. “Why don’t we buy a home out in the suburbs, like your sister has? I think it would be nice, particularly for entertaining.”

Kurt nodded his agreement. They had discussed this previously. “Why don’t you have Denise help you look? If the two of you can find a place, let me know, and we’ll see what we can do.” Recently, with Keera’s brother and new wife coming over, Kurt and Keera’s apartment was feeling a little cramped for dinner parties. A larger place would be nice.

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The next day, Kurt gave Mara and several other Lakiams a tour of his new flagship. They stopped to speak to the chief engineer and several technicians in the engine compartment.

“This is remarkable,” commented Thule Rasht. “I never would have believed your people could duplicate this technology.”

“Not only that, they’ve improved upon it,” added Mals Bren, a hyperdrive research scientist. “If I’m correct, this ship travels in hyperspace over 20 percent faster than an equivalent Lakiam vessel.”

“How is that possible?” asked Mara, looking curiously at Kurt.

Kurt sighed. No point in keeping secret what they’d done. “We combined the technology of several Protector Worlds to build the ship.”

“Lomatz,” Mara said knowingly. “That weapons dealer has been

researching Protector World technology illegally for years. We heard rumors of that but could never confirm it.”

“That would explain a lot,” Mals said, nodding. “I noticed several pieces of Andock technology incorporated into the hyperdrive and, unless I’m mistaken, some Tarbon technology as well.”

Now was as good a time as ever to ask the question burning in the back of his mind. “Have any of you heard of an ancient Enlightened race who has remained hidden from the rest of the galaxy for millions of years? Perhaps as long ago as the first or second attack on our galaxy by the Destroyers of Worlds?”

“You speak of the Glaymons,” Thule said, his eyes narrowing. “That rumor has been around for millennia. Every once in a while, small ships are spotted with technology far different than what other Enlightened Worlds use. However, this rumor has never been confirmed.”

“Have you heard something?” asked Mara suspiciously. “Did you pick some information on Kubitz? People have searched for these supposed Glaymons in the past, but all leads have proven false. Most of the Protector Worlds don’t believe the Glaymons exist.”

“Yes, the same rumors as you’ve heard,” Kurt quickly answered. “As you know, we have a large KEW cannon running down the center of our ships.”

“I saw that,” Thule said, clearly confused. “I don’t understand why you would designate so much space on your ships for such an obsolete weapon.”

Kurt turned to Thule. “What would happen if we could accelerate a piece of neutronium to 60 percent the speed of light and slam it into the energy screen of a black ship? A piece about this big.” Kurt indicated the size of his thumbnail.

Mals’s eyes widened. “For a brief moment it would generate the power of a small star. From what I know of the power needed to bring down one of the black ship’s screens, a weapon such as you describe would destroy the vessel instantly.”

Mara shifted her gaze to meet Kurt’s. “That’s why you asked about the Glaymons. You need their technology to mine a neutron star and design some type of containment field for the weapon rounds. Without a containment field they would crush and destroy any ship that tried to use them.”

Mals went silent for a moment. “Even if the Glaymons exist, no one knows where their world—or worlds—are hidden.”

Kurt looked at the Lakiams and then took a deep breath. "I may know of a way to find them. If I do, would some of you be willing to go on the mission?" When meeting a race as advanced as the Glaymons, Kurt would feel more confident if he had a few Lakiams with him. At least they might understand the Glaymons' advanced technology.

He was met with silence as the three Lakiams looked questionably at one another.

"How?" asked Mara. "Contact has never been made with this mysterious race, and we're not certain the Glaymons even exist."

"They exist," confirmed Kurt. "I know someone who actually met one."

"Are you certain of this?" asked Thule with excitement in his voice.

"Yes," Kurt answered. "One of their small scout ships broke down, and this individual helped to repair it."

"So I was right to return to Newton with more of my people." Mara looked from Mals to Thule, who both nodded. "If we agree to go on this mission, I want to take the *Aurelia*. Its current crew has both the scientists and technicians necessary to meet the Glaymons, if we find them."

"I would suggest we update our hyperdrive to the same standards as the *Star Cross*," Mals said. "From what I've seen, it will be relatively easy to do."

Kurt nodded. He hadn't planned on the *Aurelia* accompanying him, but he could see where the Lakiam scientists and technicians on board would be useful. "I'll speak to Colonel Hayworth and arrange for the *Aurelia* to enter one of Newton Station's repair bays."

"Very well," replied Mara. "Let's continue this tour. I want to see what other technology Lomatz and his people have stolen from the Protector Worlds."

For the next four hours they slowly made their way through the flagship with Mals and Thule stopping occasionally to inspect a piece of equipment or to ask technical questions. A few of Lomatz's people were still on board, and they were a treasure trove of information for the Lakiams once Kurt allowed them to speak.

"It's simply amazing," Mals said as they headed toward the Command Center. "We have adapted some of the technology from the Enlightened Worlds we defend, as all Protector Worlds do. What Lomatz and your people have done is combine all that varied technology into this ship."

Mara stopped and gazed at Kurt. "Do you fully understand how



everything works on this vessel, particularly the technology you have installed? Can you repair it if it breaks down?"

"Yes," answered Kurt. Lomatz and his people had toiled over some of the equipment, making sure the crew could install as well as repair it. "Some was very difficult, but we have a basic understanding of how it all works."

"Amazing," said Mals, shaking his head. "I never would have believed it possible."

Mara hesitated as she watched a pair of the small repair robots whiz by. "I see you have even duplicated our robots. What about the specialized nanites used to repair major damage to our ships?"

"That was more difficult," admitted Kurt. As a matter of fact, they had employed Avery Dolman to get the information from a Lakiam cargo captain who wanted to visit a particular pleasure house on Kubitz. Dolman had made all the necessary arrangements, and then Grantz had accompanied the captain to ensure his safety. "But we did find out how to manufacture them." What Kurt didn't mention was that this same captain had furnished them with a small autofactory that could produce the nanites.

"The ruling council at home won't be happy to hear this," said Mals, with a deep frown creasing his forehead. "I think it best we don't mention it."

"Not tell the council?" Thule responded, surprised. "They're supposed to be informed if our technology gets loose on less civilized worlds or cultures."

"Look where we are," Mals pointed out. "We're thousands of light-years away from the nearest Enlightened World or Protector World. With the Destroyers of Worlds' threat, what does it matter?"

Thule looked stunned for a moment and then nodded. "You're right. I fear our path toward Enlightenment has come to an end, possibly permanently. Perhaps it would be wise to share more of our technology so we can better defend all worlds against the black ships."

"The council would never agree to that," Mara said unhappily. "It is already fighting Fleet Commodore Dreen on his alliance proposal concerning other Protector Worlds."

Entering the Command Center, Mara looked around, not surprised at all. "This is very similar to the *Aurelia's* except for a few more command stations."

Kurt sat, for the first time, in the command chair upon the small dais overlooking the Command Center. He flinched as the chair automatically

adjusted itself to his shape. The entire room was circular with ten control consoles, all connected and active, sitting in a semicircle before the slightly raised command dais. On the walls, the numerous screens were currently off as the ship was inside Newton Station.

The three Lakiams moved about the Command Center, examining various stations. Occasionally they would stop and speak animatedly to one another. Finally their inspection ended, and they approached Kurt.

Mara stood with her hands on her shapely hips and a satisfied smile on her face. "Make the arrangements for updating the hyperdrive on my ship. When you're ready, we will accompany you to find the Glaymons, if they exist." With that, Mara and the other two Lakiams left leaving, Kurt alone in the Command Center.

For several long minutes Kurt sat there, deep in thought. He could do nothing until Lomatz returned, as he was the one who had met and repaired the Glaymons' scout vessel. Leaning back and relaxing, Kurt gazed about the Command Center. Tomorrow he would take the ship on its shakedown cruise to Earth. Perhaps when he returned, Lomatz would be back on Newton.

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"How was your meeting with Mara?" Keera asked Kurt hours later in their apartment as she stirred the stew cooking on the stove.

"It went about as expected," Kurt said, coming up behind Keera and putting his arms around her. "Did you and Denise go out house hunting today?"

"We did, but I couldn't find one with any character. Too many cookie-cutter houses out there. I want something more unique and individualized for us."

Kurt stepped away from Keera as she turned to face him.

"I'm thinking about having Dalen build our house. He's running all those construction robots, and he could just program in the plans."

"We would have to buy a plot of land somewhere."

"No problem," Keera said excitedly. "Denise and I found two brand-new housing developments with large lots. Plenty of room for future expansion, if necessary, plus a large yard for our kids to play in."

"Kids?" Kurt repeated, his eyes showing surprise. "You hadn't mentioned that before."

"Yes, kids," she repeated, grinning. "Someday I want a couple children of my own."

Kurt nodded. "Denise would like that, and so would Bryan."

"Someday," Keera said, stepping forward and kissing Kurt on the lips. "Dalen and Meesa are coming over for supper, and he's bringing a bunch of house plans. He also said, if we can tell him what we want, he can design it and give us something completely original."

"I like that idea," Kurt said. "Maybe when I return from the shakedown cruise, we can have Dalen start construction."

"That's why they're coming over tonight. You may be gone for a week or two, and we have some decisions to make."

"I like the idea of designing our house. It would be nice to come home to a real house rather than an apartment. And we shouldn't be gone more than one week. I must speak to Lomatz immediately when he returns, and he should be back by then."

"Lomatz," repeated Keera, frowning. "What do you need with him?"

"He knows a secret that could help us against the black ships."

Keera turned to stir the stew again. "Be careful. I know recently Lomatz has been helpful, but remember where he comes from. His priorities may not be the same as yours."

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Keera was right. While recently Lomatz had been very reasonable in his dealings with Kurt and Newton overall, the man still operated a large weapons operation on Kubitz. However, Lomatz was Kurt's only hope of finding the Glaymons. If this race was as advanced as Kurt believed them to be, they might know how to mine a neutron star.

## Chapter Eight

The Enlightened World of Talmor had known peace for over six hundred thousand years. They were an avian race and still maintained the ability to fly. Their cities were beautiful and almost magical. Tall towers reached for the clouds, sparkling in the bright afternoon sunlight. The people of Talmor were nearly ten feet tall and very slim with wings that could carry them nearly anywhere they wanted. They had developed complex dances performed in the air, which told the history of their people. Tens of thousands of years in the past, geneticists had modified the bodies of the Talmor race so the wings were nearly invisible when folded against their backs. When fully extended, each wing reached out nearly eight feet, allowing the Talmorans to float on the natural thermals abundant on their world.

The Talmorans had spread out across five other star systems within six light-years of Talmor. This suited the Talmorans as it ensured their civilization would endure if disaster struck one of their worlds. Due to a nearby barbaric civilization that rebuked the path to Enlightenment, the Talmorans had signed an agreement with the Protector World of Alstreth. In return the Talmorans made available portions of their advanced technology, including some of their remarkable genetic research, which showed promise in greatly extending the lifespans of the Alstreth race. The agreement was mutually beneficial to both races as it allowed the Talmorans to focus on the aesthetics of their civilization and the Alstreths to enjoy longer lives.

However, all that beauty and longevity was endangered with the arrival of the Destroyers of Worlds.

In the great soaring towers of the Talmor, warning alarms sounded. Over the comm system tying their world together came the warning that a Destroyers of Worlds' fleet had appeared in the outer regions of the Talmor System. The dangerous black ships had been spotted by the vast network of telescopes and deep space cameras the Talmorans used for research. Great concern and fear spread across the planet as its inhabitants looked toward the sky, hoping the Alstreth could protect them.

In the great tower of Windstream, Ibal Welstahl stood at one of the massive windows, where launching into the air was possible. What a fantastic feeling to float in the warm thermals that surrounded the tower.

"What are we to do?" asked Dalol, his mate of forty years.

Ibal turned toward Dalol, reaching out and taking her hand. "We must

trust that the Alstreth can protect us. With their urging, we have a powerful defensive grid around our planet and there is a large Alstreth fleet currently in orbit.”

“But these are the Destroyers of Worlds,” replied Dalol, fear evident in her eyes. “Only the Lakiams have resisted them, and the Lakiam worlds are far from here. What if the Alstreth cannot stop this evil?”

Ibal let out a deep breath. “Our race has endured for millions of years. We are truly Enlightened. For millennia our people have known peace and the harmony of living with nature upon our worlds. If it is our time to pass on to the next level of existence, then we shall.”

“I’m afraid,” Dalol said, stepping closer to Ibal. “We are both still young.”

Ibal took Dalol in his arms, spreading his wings until they surrounded both of them protectively. “There is nothing to fear. If we are to die today, we will go together and share in the journey to the next level of life. It is the nature of all things.”

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Dalol laid her head against Ibal’s shoulder. She trusted his words, and, for a moment, her fear abated.

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Prince Brollen gazed in anticipation at the main viewscreen, with the inhabited world rapidly approaching. Initial scans could not determine how far out this race had spread across the system. After detecting the waiting fleet and scanning the planet’s defense grid, the black ships made a short hyperspace jump closer to the inhabited planet.

*Strange, reported Military Commander Fraymot. Our long-range sensors still show no bases or other habitats on any of this system’s worlds besides the fourth one. There are numerous automated mining operations, but no signs of any of the fourth world beings on any of those.*

Prince Brollen nodded his triangular-shaped head, his twin antennae standing erect. *That confirms what our scout ships have reported. The fourth planet is inhabited by an avian species that still maintains the ability of flight. It is safe to assume they prefer vast open areas, which small colonies and domed habitats would lack.*

*Then we shall harvest all six of the worlds this food species resides on?* Scout ships had revealed this particular food species had spread across five other star systems.

Yes, replied Brollen. *The Avian species we have thus far harvested are very popular with the Queens back home. We shall harvest all six of this food species' worlds and send one of the Collector Ships to the Conclave Habitat with the food pellets. It will be a special gift for Queen Alithe.*

Military Commander Fraymot went silent as he studied one of the tactical displays focused on the fourth planet and the defenses protecting it. Then he sent a thought to Prince Brollen. *There is a moderate-size fleet protecting the planet and more of the large orbiting defensive platforms. I do not believe they will pose a danger to our vessels.*

Prince Brollen shifted his gaze to another of the viewscreens, revealing one of the orbiting defensive platforms. *All these platforms are very similar. I wonder if one particular world or food species produces them? It might be in our best interests to pay that species a visit to prevent them from developing and deploying even more powerful ones. While these platforms are not a threat now, if they are developed further, they could be.*

*That may be a wise decision,* replied Military Commander Fraymot. *I will have our scout ships search for such a food species.*

Prince Brollen nodded his approval. *Very well, let's proceed against this world. I am growing curious as to the taste of this particular species.*

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This Destroyers of Worlds' fleet was the most powerful yet to assault the worlds of Galaxy X241. Upon Prince Brollen's last trip to the Conclave Habitat and his promotion to potential consort, he had taken command of the harvesting of this galaxy. Currently in his fleet were 8 motherships and 1,600 of the spindle-shaped cruisers. Brollen was determined that nothing and no world would stand up to his fleet, not even the Protector World that possessed the dark matter missiles. His goal was to fill all the Collector Ships, sending them to the home system, ensuring the Queens and the habitats they served had sufficient food. Once that was done, he would pay a visit to the food species with the dark matter weapons. It was essential they be eliminated before they could become even more dangerous.

Under the guidance of Military Commander Fraymot, the massive fleet approached Talmor with the ships spreading out to encircle the entire planet. Once surrounded, the black ships would use their black antimatter beams and the spheres of destruction to wipe out all opposition.

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Prime Leader Xlan of the Alstreth gazed in consternation at the

multitude of red threat icons rapidly approaching Talmor and his badly outnumbered fleet.

“What are your orders?” asked Minor Leader Maxdor. “Our computer predicts we have no chance for a victory. If we stay, our entire fleet will be annihilated.”

Xlan shifted his gaze to the large viewscreen of the Enlightened World of Talmor. Only the previous week he had traveled to the surface, in awe of the beauty of their amazing towerlike cities. Their culture, including their artwork and air dances, was something to behold. If he refused to meet the Destroyers of Worlds in battle, all that would be lost to the galaxy. However, with the size of the approaching black fleet, he could do nothing to prevent the attack. The enemy fleet was overwhelming and racing toward his fleet like a juggernaut. To stand in its way was suicide.

“Two minutes until engagement range,” reported the sensor operator in a strained voice. “Total black ship contacts now exceed over 1,600.”

“Prime Leader,” said Maxdor, his eyes reflecting deep and growing concern. “We only have sixty battlecruisers and four battleships. If we engage the Destroyers of Worlds, the battle will be brief, and we will all die. It will be a futile gesture to sacrifice our ships and our crews in such a way.”

Xlan shuddered, his decision made. The order he was about to give was one certain to haunt him for the rest of his life. “All ships are to enter hyperspace and return to Alstreth. Send a signal to all our ships protecting other Talmor worlds to do the same.” Xlan was convinced, once the black ships finished with this system, they would move on to the others. The Talmoran race would soon cease to be.

“All hyperspace communication frequencies are blocked,” reported the communications officer.

Xlan nodded. He had expected that. “We will enter hyperspace and then drop out once we’ve cleared the interference. We’ll send our messages to our other fleets before continuing to Alstreth.”

Xlan watched the viewscreens as his flagship made the hyperspace jump. The last sight he had of Talmor was of the black ships circling the planet. Xlan closed his eyes, feeling the pain of what would shortly occur on Talmor. The four billion Talmorans and all other major lifeforms on the planet would soon become food for the Destroyers of Worlds.

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On Talmor the alarms continued to sound. Many of the avian people

took to the air, with no safe place for them to go. Across video screens the announcement was made that the Alstreth fleet had fled into hyperspace, leaving the planet defenseless except for the orbiting defense grid.

“Can the grid stop them?” asked Dalol, her eyes focusing on her mate.

Ibal slowly shook his head. “No, it consists primarily of Class Two Orbital Defense Platforms. From what I have heard, not even the Class Ones have been able to stop the black ships.”

“Then we’re doomed,” said Dalol, accepting the inevitability of their death. It greatly saddened her as they had two children, Makol and Lalen, who were on the far side of the planet, studying the large mammals living in the ocean depths. She wished she could tell them good-bye.

Ibal looked toward space. Already he could see brilliant flashes of light where the defensive grid was engaging the Destroyers of Worlds. “Perhaps somewhere in this galaxy is a race which can stand up to these destroyers of life.”

Dalol nodded and closed her eyes. She hoped their death was quick and painless.

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Prince Brollen watched the last defensive platform explode as several black antimatter beams carved it in two. He had been surprised when the defending fleet abruptly entered hyperspace and fled. *It seems our demonstration of what we can do to their Protector Worlds has borne fruit. The defenders now fear meeting us in battle. In the worlds we have harvested recently, the defenders have been far fewer.*

*A few defensive satellites must be destroyed, and then the harvest can begin,* reported Military Commander Fraymot. *None of our ships suffered any damage.*

*I will be in the converter chamber,* replied Brollen. *I wish to sample this food species and see if they are worthy to add to my own food collection.*

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It only took a few minutes to annihilate the orbiting energy beam satellites. With the last defensive satellite destroyed, the huge motherships settled into orbit around Talmor. From each ship fourteen black beams flashed toward the planet. Wherever one touched anything organic, it turned the living organism into a black ashy substance, which was pulled up to the converters in the motherships by tractor beams. Across the cities of Talmor the beams moved, changing flesh to ashes. In the crowded sky above the



cities, brief shrieks were heard as the deadly beams did their work.

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Dalol looked at Ibal and spoke. "We had a good life together."

"Yes, we did," Ibal replied as a black beam came toward their tower. He held Dalol closer, not wanting her to see. With a gentle smile, he spoke one last time. "You are the love of my life." Then the black beam passed through the tower, leaving black ashes floating in the air, which the embedded tractor beam quickly took away.

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For nearly two hours the deadly beams moved across the planet, not leaving any area untouched. Then they stopped, and white energy spheres fell on the surface. The condensed spheres of energy burst like bubbles and expanded outward, destroying everything in their path. The tower cities of Talmor were turned into smoking and burning rubble, leaving no sign of the magnificence that once stood upon the planet.

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Inside the converter room, Prince Brollen crunched on a gray food pellet. He swallowed and nodded in satisfaction. He would add a number of these to his private collection. Food species 1012 was acceptable and had a unique taste—very refined and pure.

*We are ready to move to the next inhabited world of this food species, Military Commander Fraymot reported from the Command Center. All the harvesting has been completed, and all evidence of a civilized culture ever existing upon this planet has been annihilated.*

Prince Brollen gazed at the converter, knowing it would be a few hours yet before it finished processing food species 1012. A surprising number of pellets had been found which were suitable for the Royal Caste. *Take us to the next planet. By the time we arrive, all the processing will be finished. Let us hope the other worlds of this food species yield such a quality take.* He was certain Queen Alithe would be quite pleased with this bounty.

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A few minutes later the Vorn fleet entered hyperspace on their way to the next world of the Talmorans. When the Vorn fleet was finished, this Enlightened race would no longer exist but would serve as food for the Destroyers of Worlds. It was the way of the Vorn, and it would always be so. No mercy and no compassion. There was only the Vorn.

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Fleet Commodore Dreen sat in his office with council member Marl, discussing the alliance.

“The Andocks, Parmonts, and the Bascoms have agreed to join the alliance,” Dreen said, sounding tired. He had spent long hours each of the last few days, trying to coax various Protector Worlds into joining with the Lakiams and providing warships for a joint fleet to fight the Destroyers of Worlds. “Many others refused as they are pulling back their fleets to protect their own worlds. Fear of the Destroyers of Worlds is spreading rapidly.”

“I suspected it would not be easy,” Marl said, folding his arms across his chest. “Every day we receive more reports of the culling of Enlightened Worlds by the black ships. Many Protector Worlds are afraid they will be attacked next, due to what happened at Bascom.”

“The Bascoms are angry,” Commodore Dreen replied with a deep sigh. “They lost their two homeworlds to these fiends. Fortunately they’re spread across enough worlds to remain a powerful presence in their region of space. They still have substantial fleet assets and have promised to aid us in our battle against the Destroyers of Worlds.”

Marl looked thoughtful and then spoke. “We must find a way to detect the black ships and to learn their targets, or we will never be able to defeat them. Even if our alliance included every Protector World in the galaxy, it would do no good if we can’t track these Destroyers of Worlds’ fleets.”

“I know,” replied Commodore Dreen, feeling the pressure to make the alliance work. “The best scientists we and the Andocks have are working around the clock, searching for answers. The black ships utilize some type of masking field to hide the radiation signatures from their hyperdrives. We must find a way to see through that field.”

Marl stood up and walked across the room to gaze at a painting of Lakiam hanging on the wall. “I’ve always admired this painting. It makes me realize how small we are in the grand scheme of things.” Turning around, he faced Commodore Dreen. “Something’s been bothering me recently. We’re the only Protector World to defeat a black fleet. Wouldn’t that make us a target?”

Commodore Dreen’s eyes widened. “They’ve already destroyed Holdez. I suspected that was in retaliation for defeating their fleet and destroying a mothership.”

“Was it retaliation or a probing attack?” Marl had served in the fleet for a few years before embarking on his political career and knew a little about

strategy.

“You’re suggesting they would eliminate us because they consider us a danger to their harvesting of this galaxy?”

“Yes,” said Marl, nodding. “Just look at what you’re doing in forming this alliance. Let me ask you a question. If the Destroyers of Worlds were to attack us here at Lakiam with a fleet of several thousand of their vessels, could you defeat them?”

Commodore Dreen considered the question. “It would take our entire current inventory of dark matter missiles, but I believe we could stop them.”

“What if a second fleet of the same size shows up immediately after the first?”

Commodore Dreen could feel the blood leaving his face. “We would lose. We could probably cause it a lot of damage, but I don’t think we could stop them if they were determined to push through to Lakiam.”

“How many ships do you estimate the Destroyers of Worlds have?”

“Probably several hundred thousand or more,” answered Dreen. “They’ve been doing this for millions of years. They must have a large reserve of vessels in case they come across a powerful enemy.”

“What if we’re that enemy?”

Fleet Commodore Dreen went silent as he thought over those words. In order for the Destroyers of Worlds to have been so successful for millions of years, they must have faced powerful enemies before. It would indicate they had a method to deal with such threats.

“We have to find a way to track their vessels and quickly,” Dreen said after a moment. “Until we do, we will be vulnerable to such an attack. If we knew they were coming, we could take adequate precautions, even calling in more of our fleet units or our allies.”

Council member Marl nodded. “I’ll be going now. I know a few scientists in the military research division. I’ll see what I can do to push things from my end. The remaining two dark matter facilities should be completed in a few more weeks. That should help immensely with the availability of warheads.”

“Let me know if there is anything else I can do.” Commodore Dreen watched as Marl exited his office. Then, leaning forward, Dreen activated the comm device on his desk. “Alborg, come to my office for a strategy session.”

Dreen intended to ask Alborg the same questions council member Marl had just asked him. Alborg was a brilliant tactician and tactical officer.

Perhaps he could envision a way to better protect Lakiam from a massive black fleet attack. What they really needed was a weapon that could easily penetrate black ship energy shields. Lakiam's scientists were searching for such a weapon, but, so far, all they had come up with were dead ends.

Commodore Dreen picked up one of the various reports he had been studying. Many of the Protector Worlds across the galaxy had repositioned their fleets to protect their homeworlds, leaving countless Enlightened Worlds open to attack. The reports he received daily indicated the Destroyers of Worlds had ramped up their assaults. Dreen had confirmation of at least twenty large black fleets currently operating in the galaxy. What deeply concerned Dreen was, how many more were still coming? What if this was only the initial wave?

Pressing an icon on his computer console, he stared at the current Lakiam fleet deployments. Lakiam was responsible for eighty-seven Enlightened civilizations. Those civilizations had more than 1,400 colonies. Over the last several weeks he had sent out orders, pulling Lakiam fleet units from the smaller colonies. He had strengthened the fleets around the eighty-seven Enlightened civilizations' homeworlds and some of their major colonies to compensate. When the pullback was complete, it would leave defenseless over eight hundred Enlightened World colonies, except for the meager defense grids that protected some of them. A number of colonies would have nothing but a few energy beam satellites to stave off an attack.

Fleet Commodore Dreen felt guilty for leaving those worlds unprotected. However, by doing so, he had greatly enhanced the fleets around the main worlds and those defending the thirty-two star systems that contained Lakiam worlds or major mining operations. As he waited for Alborg, he greatly feared for the future of the galaxy. He was struggling to find five Protector World civilizations to join the alliance. One thing he was certain of: if they failed to stand together, they were all doomed.

## Chapter Nine

Admiral Kurt Vickers sat in the Command Center of the battleship *Star Cross*. The 1,500-meter-long warship was just about to drop from hyperspace into the solar system. On the tactical display, four other green icons were visible—the four battlecruisers of the new design built at Newton Station. Each was one thousand meters in length and had more firepower than a Lakiam vessel of the same class.

“Hyperspace dropout in six minutes,” Lieutenant Styles reported from the Helm.

“All systems are operating at top efficiency,” Captain Randson added as he checked his command console.

“No unidentified contacts on the long-range sensors,” reported Lieutenant Lena Brooks.

Kurt nodded. The new sensors on the *Star Cross* could reach out nearly fifteen light-years, a big improvement over the old sensors. That would give them ample warning of any potential danger.

A small repair robot darted across the Command Center, stopping near the wall. The robot quickly removed a tiny access panel, made some minor adjustments, then replaced the panel, and left through the open hatch.

Andrew shook his head. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to those damn robots. They seem to be everywhere.”

Kurt grinned. “Eight hundred of them are on the ship. All programmed to do routine maintenance and even major repairs if necessary.”

Andrew let out a deep sigh. “We’re running this ship with a smaller crew than on the old *Star Cross*, and yet this ship is much larger.”

“Everything’s automated,” said Lieutenant Mays to Andrew from her tactical station. “While our crew can do the repairs, it’s easier and more efficient to let the robots handle that function.”

“It’ll take some getting used to,” responded Andrew with a slight grimace.

“Two minutes to dropout,” reported Lieutenant Styles.

Kurt shifted his gaze to another tactical display of the solar system. Hundreds of friendly green icons moved about the system. Since forming an alliance with the humanoid worlds of Julbian, Sertez, and Maldon, interstellar trade had taken off, due to Kurt’s purchase of a large number of small cargo ships from Kubitz. While the price of warships had skyrocketed, the small

cargo ships had remained reasonable. These vessels had been sold to the three new humanoid worlds to aid in trade between all five star systems. They were also fortunate to have the captured Profiteer cargo ships as well as their large detainee ships. All had been modified at Newton Station for Human use. Every day ships from Earth arrived at Newton and vice versa.

Kurt focused on the fifteen violet icons in orbit around Earth. These were the Class Two Orbital Defense Platforms and the Command and Control Station. While Earth's defenses weren't nearly as powerful as Newton's, they were sufficient to ensure the Profiteers never bothered the planet again.

"Dropout."

Kurt felt a momentary twinge in his stomach, and then the *Star Cross* exited hyperspace into the solar system four hundred thousand kilometers from Earth.

"Receiving standard challenge from the Command and Control Station," reported Lieutenant Brenda Pierce. "Sending recognition codes."

The station had known the *Star Cross* and her attending ships were inbound as they had been told about the trip several days earlier. With the advent of Lakiam communication technology, it was now possible to send messages between Newton and Earth. A delay of several minutes occurred due to the vast distance between the worlds, but at least they could communicate.

On the main viewscreen, the Earth suddenly appeared. The atmosphere was filled with white clouds obscuring much of the North American Union. However, the deep blue of the Pacific Ocean was plainly visible. Kurt let out a deep sigh. Seeing Earth from space was something special. Even though his home was now Newton, Earth would always hold a special place in his heart.

"I have Fleet Admiral Tomalson on the comm," Pierce said, her eyes widening.

Kurt activated the comm unit on his console. "Hello, Rod. I planned to come to the *Retribution* to pay you a visit."

"No, you've seen this old tub. I'm more interested in your new battleship."

Kurt couldn't help but grin. "Come on over, and I'll give you the grand tour."

"As soon as you go into orbit, I'll come aboard. I have a few things to discuss with you as well."

The comm went silent, and Kurt turned his attention to the viewscreens. The Moon was also prominently displayed. He could see several of the large domed colonies on its surface.

“Sure are a lot of ships in orbit,” Andrew said as he studied the tactical displays.

“Mars too,” responded Kurt.

Mars had been settled by the European Union along with Australia and Japan. The planet was already using technology purchased from Kubitz by Newton to begin the terraforming process. Climatologists predicted that, within twenty years, Mars would have a breathable atmosphere. The terraforming equipment had been delivered to Mars—also to the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. Those were more complicated projects due to the size of the moons and lesser fields of gravity and would require some type of atmospheric retention field.

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Twenty minutes later the *Star Cross* and her escorts went into orbit above Earth as six Lance fighters flew by for a close inspection.

“We’ve been scanned by nearly every ship in orbit,” reported Lieutenant Brooks.

Lieutenant Mays grinned. “Won’t do them any good, not with the sensor-dampening field we have now.”

Lomatz’s people had made this discovery when they had looked at various ways to combine the technology of the four Protector World civilizations when designing the new *Star Cross* and the heavy battlecruisers. While most scans would be stopped by a ship’s energy screen or the armored hull, this dampening field stopped the scans cold, just short of the screen.

The *Star Cross* and the four heavy battlecruisers would cause a stir. None of the new warships had made the trip to the solar system until now.

“Admiral, I have a query from the government of the North American Union. President Mayfield requests a meeting at your earliest convenience.”

This didn’t surprise Kurt. He wanted to meet with the president too as this would be Kurt’s last opportunity to do so before the elections. “Inform the government I’ll be coming down to the surface tomorrow if they want to set up an informal meeting.”

Kurt gazed at the Earth on the viewscreen. It was a beautiful planet, and, from space, none of the destroyed cities were visible. Chicago, Washington, Paris, Cairo, Moscow, and numerous other cities scattered

around the world had been hit by Profiteer nukes. Thanks to advanced technology secured from Kubitz, the radiation had been removed. Also highly specialized radiation drugs had been brought back to help the injured. In every city, reconstruction was underway. In another few years the cities would be rebuilt, and the signs of the Profiteer attack would be gone. However, in each city, memorials were already being constructed so no one would ever forget what had been done to Earth and its people.

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Kurt was in his quarters when the hatch opened, and Fleet Admiral Rod Tomalson stepped in. Rod was graying around the temples and had a few more lines on his forehead.

Kurt stood with a big welcoming smile on his face. “Rod, it’s good to see you.”

Fleet Admiral Tomalson stepped over, shaking Kurt’s hand.

“Have a seat. We have a lot to talk about,” said Kurt, gesturing toward the large conformable chair in front of his desk.

“This new *Star Cross* is amazing,” commented Rod as he sat. “Just from what I saw in the flight bay and on my way here, it’s far more advanced than anything we have in the solar system.”

“It’s based primarily on Lakiam and Andock technology with some odds and ends thrown in from a few more Protector Worlds. Lomatz and his people have worked wonders in helping to design and build this ship.”

A slight frown crossed Rod’s face. “I was going to ask you about that. How are all those Profiteers doing that you settled on Newton? Any problems?”

“No, none at all. For the most part, while Lomatz’s people worked with the Profiteers and sold them a lot of weapons, none of them are actual Profiteers. Many of them seem to be normal people, wanting a good and safe place to live. Not only that, a lot of highly qualified technicians came to Newton. Even a few scientists. It may take a while, but eventually we’ll transform Newton into a highly technological civilization. Already discussions are ongoing about changing our educational system to conform with how children are taught on more advanced worlds. While we may have some problems adapting to all the new technology, our children will grow up with it.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it’s working out. I think it will be at least several generations before Earth is ready to attempt something like that. We



still have numerous places across the planet with poor education systems that need a lot of assistance.”

Kurt nodded. “The government of Mars has asked to send some observers to the new schools we’re setting up. If they like what they see, they may put in the same system.”

“Times are changing,” Rod said with a deep sigh. “Hell, just a few years ago, we thought we were alone in the universe. Now look at us.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“What about these Destroyers of Worlds? What’s the latest word on them?”

Kurt’s expression turned grim. “They’re still sweeping through the galaxy, culling world after world. Space battles are reported daily. So far the Protector Worlds are on the losing end. No one’s found an effective strategy to use against the black ships. Lomatz and Mara feel we’re relatively safe out here, being so far off the beaten path. It may be years before they find us, if they ever do.”

“Mara,” repeated Rod. “I heard she was with the *Aurelia*.”

Kurt leaned back and gazed at Rod. “The Lakiams are trying to form an alliance with other Protector Worlds so they can put up a united front against the black ships. Fleet Commodore Dreen believes, if he can rally enough Protector Worlds to his cause, he might be able to save some of the Enlightened Worlds from the black ships.”

“Will they be successful?”

Kurt slowly shook his head. “They might delay the Destroyers of Worlds some with their dark matter missiles. But, from what Mara has told me and what I’ve seen of some of the battles between Lakiam vessels and the black ships, I don’t think they will be successful. It takes fourteen or more of those massive warheads exploding within microseconds of each other to pop a black ship’s shield. They don’t have the construction capacity to manufacture enough dark matter warheads quickly enough, especially when considering how massive the fleet of black ships must be.”

“We need a better and more powerful weapon,” Rod said, his eyes narrowing sharply. “Where will we find it?”

Kurt hesitated. He had only revealed to a few people his plans to search for the Glaymons. If they could be found, and if they had the technology to mine a neutron star, maybe it would give Newton and Earth and its alliance the weapon they needed. “We may have a lead on that, but it’s a distant one,

and I still must speak to a few people.”

Rod accepted that and didn't inquire further. “Have you been to any of the three new humanoid worlds we're trading with recently?”

“No,” replied Kurt. “However, I plan on taking the *Star Cross* to Julbian on this cruise before returning to Newton.”

“Julbian's an interesting world,” Rod said, nodding. “I was there a few weeks ago, working on the joint defense treaty. Walking around on the planet almost made me think I was on Earth. In another few years their technology will be on the same level as ours.”

“We're trying to update all the worlds to the same technological level,” responded Kurt. “It may take a while, but we'll get it done.”

“I don't know if any of us will be able to match Newton. If Lomatz's people are as good as you say they are, they give Newton a distinct advantage.”

“How's the training of your replacement going?”

“Fleet Admiral Aaron Colmes is coming along fine. He's a good officer and dedicated to the fleet. I've already informed him that, as soon as the election is over, I will be retiring to Newton.”

“We'll be glad to have you,” replied Kurt, smiling.

“A quiet home on the beach,” Rod said with a relaxed smile. “I'm really looking forward to sitting in the sand and listening to the waves wash up on the shore. Maybe I'll even do a little bit of fishing.”

Kurt nodded. Rod certainly deserved his retirement after all he had been through on Earth and with the Profiteers. Fleet Admiral Tomalson had always supported Kurt, and, thanks to Rod, Newton was the world it was today.

“So, how about that tour?”

Kurt stood. “Let's go. I think some of the technology on this ship will amaze you.”

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A few hours later they were in the Command Center. Rod looked breathlessly around at all the changes from the old *Star Cross*.

“Your sensors can reach out for fifteen light-years?”

“Yes,” answered Kurt. “Not only that, we have equipment on board which makes our ships undetectable in hyperspace, at least to the types of sensors the Profiteers have. It wouldn't surprise me if the Lakiams could still track us, but less developed worlds shouldn't be able to.”

Rod's gaze moved across the Command Center, taking in everything.

“This is an amazing ship. I suppose the battlecruisers possess the same technology?”

“Yes,” answered Kurt. “Our battlecruisers are more powerful than Lakiam ones.”

Rod grinned. “At least the Profiteers will give you a wide berth from now on.”

Kurt nodded. “They’d better, if they know what’s good for them.”

Rod let out a deep sigh. “President Mayfield wants to meet with you while you’re here.”

“How’s the election going?”

“Recent polls show Mayfield will lose so he’s throwing his support behind Ellen Lambert, who will keep most of Mayfield’s policies in effect.”

“I’ve never met her,” Kurt said, wondering what she was like.

“She’s a very practical person. I’ve spoken to her a few times, and she’s well aware of the threats in the galaxy. She’ll keep Earth’s defenses up and will be a big supporter of the fleet.”

Kurt looked at a large viewscreen, showing a new shipyard under construction. “How soon before the shipyard is done?”

“A few more months and we can start ship construction.”

All the major governments on Earth were involved in building the new shipyard. “Would Earth be interested in several of Lomatz’s construction ships helping with the shipyard?”

Rod shook his head. “No, that would not be a wise decision. A lot of hard feelings are still harbored toward the Profiteers, and, even though Lomatz and his people aren’t Profiteers, they are still from the Gothan Empire, and many of them worked on Kubitz. I think it would only complicate the issue.”

Kurt nodded. He understood their reluctance, but the construction techniques Lomatz’s people could emplace would radically improve shipbuilding. “What if we built several construction bays at Newton and then used the big fleet tugs to bring them here?”

Rod looked thoughtful as he considered Kurt’s offer. “That might work. Mention it to President Mayfield when you talk to him. We could certainly use the increased ship-building capacity.”

“I’ll try to speak to him tomorrow. I want to get on with this shakedown cruise.”

“I’d better return to the *Retribution*. Fleet Admiral Colmes is due on

board, and we'll be reviewing some tactical information on his battle with the Profiteers."

Kurt took a data disk from his pocket and handed it to Rod. "The two of you might want to take a look at this. It contains information on the Lakiams' battles with the black fleet as well as what happened when some Dacroni mercenary ships came into contact with a black fleet as well. There are recordings of sensor scans as well as videos of the battles."

Rod took the disk. "We'll review it. I've been curious about the black ships for quite some time. I can't believe those ships are as powerful as everyone claims."

"They are," responded Kurt. "After you view the disk, let me know what you think." Kurt was curious to hear Fleet Admiral Tomalson's interpretation of the data. Maybe he would pick up on something Kurt had missed.

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Late the next afternoon the *Star Cross* and her escorts were ready to leave the solar system. Kurt had met briefly with President Mayfield and expressed his gratitude for Mayfield's support of Newton. The president had promised to speak with the other Earth governments about Newton building two construction bays for the new Earth shipyard.

The *Star Cross* and her four escorts settled into formation and set out toward Mars at full sublight. Kurt wanted to test the ship's sublight engines as well as a few other systems on the ship. Traveling through the solar system was a good test for the ship's sensors and other systems due to all the traffic. The ship traffic in the solar system was much heavier than any of the other Human systems in the alliance.

"I thought the space around Newton was busy," muttered Andrew as four new contacts appeared on the long-range sensors.

"Four cargo ships from Maldon," reported Lieutenant Brooks. "A flight of Lance fighters from the light carrier *Wasp* is outbound to confirm their identity."

Kurt had reassigned some ships to the solar system. Fleet Admiral Tomalson now had four battleships, two light battlecarriers, and fourteen battlecruisers under his command. All the battleships and battlecruisers had been purchased from Kubitz and updated at Newton. "Inbound cargo ships are required to exit hyperspace at designated coordinates. That's where the *Wasp* and the *Dante* are deployed." Kurt was pleased with how thorough the

fleet assigned to the solar system was in checking out new ship contacts.

"It's a relief to know the solar system is safe from the Profiteers," commented Andrew. "At least that's one less thing we have to worry about. How did your meeting with President Mayfield go?"

"Pretty well," Kurt replied with a frown. "However, one thing he mentioned concerns me. High Profiteer Creed's body has never been found."

This announcement was met with silence from Andrew.

"We know the *Ascendant Destruction* was destroyed, but Creed was on Earth during the attack. We assumed he died in the fighting, but Mayfield can't confirm that."

"What if he survived?"

"He's not a threat anymore," answered Kurt. "I'll send word to Ambassador Tenner to have Avery Dolman and Grantz make some inquiries just to be certain." Kurt didn't mention that, if Creed did survive, Kurt would do everything possible to take Creed into custody and bring him to Earth to be put on trial for war crimes. Too many people had died to allow the greedy Profiteer to remain free. "Besides, there's a good chance he died in the battle. A number of shuttles were destroyed, and he could have been on board one of them."

"Let's hope so."

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At full sublight it didn't take long for the *Star Cross* and her escorts to reach the red planet. On the main viewscreen, Mars rapidly grew larger. Even from this distance a few clouds were visible in the atmosphere, the result of the terraforming going on. From what Kurt understood, it was possible to walk on the surface near the terraformers without a breathing mask for very short periods of time. As the atmosphere thickened and the oxygen content increased, people could gradually stay out longer and longer, until one day the surface of Mars would be similar to Earth's.

"Contact with Phobos Station," reported Lieutenant Pierce. "Two cargo ships will be passing close to our flight path."

"Already spotted them," said Lieutenant Brooks. "They'll pass above our flight path at a little over 1,500 kilometers."

Andrew shook his head. "Used to be that 1,500 kilometers sounded like a lot. But, at the speed we're moving, it's just a moment's travel."

"Things have changed," Kurt said in agreement. On the main viewscreen, Mars continued to grow. The larger settlements were visible as

they were protected by huge atmospheric domes.

Four violet icons appeared on the tactical display, representing the Class Two Orbital Defense Platforms, tasked with protecting the planet. Kurt wished there were more, but the backlog on platform orders at Kubitz was now over several years long.

Mars continued to grow in size until they reached their closest approach. As the *Star Cross* and her escorts pulled away from the planet, Kurt was well satisfied with how the ship's sublight drive performed. "Captain Randson, prepare to enter hyperspace. Let's pay Julbian a visit."

Andrew smiled. "That should be a good test for the hyperdrive as Julbian is 412 light-years distant."

A few moments later Kurt felt the familiar twinge in his stomach as the *Star Cross* made the jump into hyperspace. It would take the small fleet eleven hours to reach the Julbian System. Kurt was anxious to see the progress that had been made there since his last visit after destroying the Profiteer fleet.

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Early the next day Kurt watched the long-range sensors update data on the Julbian System. The trip in hyperspace had allowed them to test the ship's long-range sensors as well as the hyperspace communicators. Normally ships in hyperspace could only communicate if they were within seventy thousand kilometers of each other. Otherwise their hyperspace speed would distort communication to the point it was incomprehensible. The system the Lakiams and the Andocks used allowed for hyperspace communication if ships were within three hundred thousand kilometers of each other. This was useful as it allowed entire fleets to stay in contact on their journey through hyperspace.

"Hyperspace dropout in twenty minutes," reported Lieutenant Styles.

"All systems functioning normally," Andrew said from his command console. "This has been the smoothest shakedown cruise I've ever been on."

"Don't jinx it," cautioned Lieutenant Mays. "We haven't tried out the weapons yet."

Kurt was in agreement. A system beyond Julbian was full of large asteroids and planetary debris—an ideal place to test the new weapons on the *Star Cross*.

The hatch to the Command Center opened, and Dr. Willis stepped in. He spent a moment looking around, frowning at two small repair robots

standing idly in their charging slots. “Damn robots are everywhere,” he muttered. “Hell, I’ve even got a pair of them in my medical bay.”

“They serve their purpose,” responded Kurt, grinning. “What brings you up to the Command Center?”

“Bored to death,” replied Willis. “With the reduced crew size, my nurses can handle the minor stuff. I think we’ve treated several bruises and one severe laceration so far. I’m still trying to figure out how to operate some of the medical equipment I’m responsible for.”

The ship had been equipped with the most modern medical equipment known. Keera had spent considerable time making sure the warship had the very best. “Shall I arrange for additional training for you and your staff?”

“No, I’ve got a young hotshot intern who seems to understand it all pretty well. He’s explained how everything functions to the rest of us. I don’t feel comfortable with how computerized everything is. The new medical systems diagnose the injury, prescribe treatment, and then initiate the treatment. Most of the time we stand around and watch. Mark my words, a day will come when a Human won’t even be in the med bay. It’ll all be robots and computers.”

“None of that can replace your friendly bedside manner,” commented Andrew.

Dr. Willis frowned and shook his head. “What I actually came here for was to see if I could possibly go down to the surface of Julbian. They have an advanced medical center there that treats mental illness, and I would like to study their procedures.”

Kurt nodded. “That might be possible. I was planning on spending a few days in the system.”

“Hyperspace dropout in ten minutes,” reported Lieutenant Styles.

As Dr. Willis left, Kurt returned his attention to the tactical display, showing the Julbian System, all twelve planets. Planet four was inhabited by the Julbians, who had already reached out and explored several nearby star systems. The people on the planet were very similar to Humans with their civilization just a few decades behind Earth’s. Steps were being taken to bring the Julbian civilization up to par with Earth’s through trade and exchange of certain technologies.

The system steadily drew nearer until Lieutenant Styles announced it was time for the *Star Cross* and her four escorts to drop from hyperspace. Kurt felt the familiar twinge as they exited hyperspace four million

kilometers from the planet.

“Lieutenant Pierce, inform Julbian Space Command of our arrival.”

“Yes, Admiral,” replied Lieutenant Pierce.

Andrew gazed at the blue-white globe on one of the ship’s viewscreens. “Julbian looks a lot like Earth.”

On another screen, the small shipyard that orbited the planet swam into view. The Julbian government had allowed one of Lomatz’s construction ships to build an additional construction bay onto the station. All six of Julbian’s small cruisers had been updated, and two more modern battlecruisers had recently joined their fleet. In addition 6 Class Two Orbital Defense Platforms and 120 dual energy beam satellites orbited the planet.

“Julbian Space Command has given us permission to go into orbit,” reported Lieutenant Pierce.

“Take us in, Andrew,” ordered Kurt.

“Several Earth cargo ships are in orbit,” reported Lieutenant Brooks. “Even a few Newton ships are here.”

This pleased Kurt as it showed how successful interstellar trade between the humanoid worlds was. It brought all five star systems closer together. The systems were now protected from the Profiteers; however, he had to find a way to protect them from the Destroyers of Worlds or all that he had worked for would come crashing down.

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For two days the *Star Cross* and her escorts orbited Julbian. Kurt met with several members of the Julbian government as well as their commanding fleet admiral. He also unloaded some hyperspace detection buoys for the Julbians to place around their star system. The buoys would give them advance warning of any inbound ship once it came within five light-years of the system. They also worked out some secure codes to be used in case of an attack. The shipyard above Julbian had a hyperspace transmitter on board that could reach Newton, though it took nearly an hour for the message to travel one way. Once he was satisfied the meetings had accomplished what he wanted, he ordered the *Star Cross* and her escorts to leave Julbian and enter hyperspace. Their destination was a small nearby star system where they would run their weapon tests.

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A few hours later Kurt watched as Lieutenant Mays consistently blew large asteroids into vast fields of glowing debris. The ship’s particle beam



cannons were now more potent as they were powered by the ship's two antimatter chambers. The force beams and the direct energy projectors were just as impressive. As the *Star Cross* traveled across the massive asteroid field which dominated the system, the flagship left a trail of destruction behind it. On the main viewscreen, a ten-kilometer-long asteroid was split in two as the ship's force beams disrupted the atoms holding the asteroid together. The four heavy battlecruisers were also involved in the weapons testing.

"It's hard to believe these weapons are ineffective against the black ships," said Andrew as he watched the ship's direct energy projectors demolish the rest of the asteroid.

Kurt agreed. The weapons his new flagship possessed were so much more powerful than what was on the old *Star Cross*. "It's that damn energy absorption screen. It takes a tremendous amount of energy to overload it, and beam weapons simply don't possess the necessary punch."

"A neutronium marble would," commented Lieutenant Mays as she targeted a nearby comet with the ship's particle beam cannons.

"Our KEW cannon is designed to handle a much larger round. How big of an engineering project would it be to redesign it to handle a neutronium marble?"

Lieutenant May's eyes widened. "Not that big. The system is designed to handle different size rounds through the use of magnetic fields."

"Would a magnetic field accept the neutronium?"

Lieutenant Mays looked thoughtful and then replied. "It should. The problem's the mass."

Kurt took a deep breath. They would stay in this system for two more days, running battle drills, and then they would return to Newton. Lomatz should have arrived by now, and Kurt would speak to him about the Glaymons. With some luck, Kurt just might get Lieutenant Mays her neutronium marble.

## Chapter Ten

Kurt was on Newton Station meeting with Lomatz, Rear Admiral Susan White, Rear Admiral Jacob Wilson, Colonel Roger Simms, Mara Liam, and Thule Rasht. Under prodding from Kurt, Lomatz told his story about finding a Glaymon scout ship in distress.

“Remarkable,” said Thule, his eyes wide in disbelief. “Are you certain this being you encountered was a Glaymon?”

“Yes,” responded Lomatz. “He told me how they had been in hiding since the first incursion by the black ships over twenty-two million years ago.”

Mara placed a small shiny disk on the conference table and pressed it. Instantly a hologram of the galaxy appeared, floating above the table. “Where did you say you encountered this ship?”

Lomatz studied the hologram for a moment and then pointed out the region of space. Mara made an adjustment, and that section of the galaxy was greatly expanded until they had the exact coordinates of the encounter pinpointed.

“In between these two stars,” said Lomatz, indicating a space between a red dwarf and a blue giant. “We found his ship drifting here.”

Thule let out a deep breath. “That’s a heavily populated area of the galaxy. The star population there is extremely dense with less than a light-year separating most of them. Also some very old Enlightened Worlds are in that region.”

Kurt stood, gazing at the representation of the targeted galactic region. Then he turned toward the others in the room. “How would you hide a world—or worlds—from the black ships for millions of years? Particularly in a heavily populated region of the galaxy?”

“Interstellar space,” suggested Rear Admiral White. “The space between stars would be a good hiding place.”

“But not in this section,” said Thule, shaking his head. “There’s too much traffic, and surely, by now, some cargo ship, passenger liner, or even a Protector World vessel would have found their hiding place. No, it has to be someplace else.”

Kurt looked at Lomatz. “Do you have any idea what direction the vessel was traveling when you received your distress call?”

“No, we could not detect the vessel until we were right up on it. We

traced it by homing in on the distress call. Once the ship was repaired and left, it vanished immediately from our sensors.”

Kurt looked at the depiction of the stellar region floating above the table. “Where else could you hide from the Destroyers of Worlds for twenty-two million years?”

“A dust cloud or a nebula?” suggested Mara. “Though most would have been explored by now.”

Kurt glanced at Lomatz, noticing how uncomfortable the weapons dealer looked. Kurt had a sudden suspicion Lomatz wasn’t telling them everything.

“Lomatz, are you telling me that you encountered a ship this advanced and made no attempt to trace it to its point of origin?”

Lomatz went silent and looked as if he wished he were someplace else.

“You put a tracking device on that scout ship,” Colonel Simms said suddenly, his eyes opening wide. “You tried to track the Glaymon vessel.”

“Is that true?” demanded Kurt. It was the only thing that made sense from the look on Lomatz’s face.

With a deep sigh, Lomatz slowly nodded, his yellow eyes focusing on Kurt. “I did. We couldn’t track it with our long-range sensors, but the tracking device we placed on board the vessel allowed us to follow its beacon for nearly ten light-years. It suddenly ceased to function, and we received a warning message from the Glaymon. He informed me that, if I ever revealed I had tracked him, he would return and ruin my weapons dealing operation. He also insisted I destroy any evidence of what my ship had recorded of his course. He insinuated he would know if I failed to do so.”

“And did you?” asked Mara, leaning forward.

“Yes, I was too afraid not to. I ordered all computer files relating to tracking the Glaymon ship destroyed, as well as the backups.”

Rear Admiral White let out a deep sigh. “Then we’re right where we began.”

“Not necessarily,” said Lomatz, sounding nervous. “Before I erased the data, I used it to extrapolate the destination of the Glaymon vessel. I did it all by hand so there would be no electronic evidence of it.”

“So you know the ship’s destination,” said Mara, focusing on Lomatz.

“Where was the Glaymon ship going?” asked Colonel Simms. “We must know.”

Lomatz stepped closer to the hologram and, reaching forward, made

some adjustments. The view changed to show an area at the very edge of the galactic core. "A small discreet gaseous nebula is here," he said, pointing it out. "The nebula is very dense and contains high levels of radiation."

"Radiation. So no reason for the black ships to investigate it," said Mara in understanding. "The high radiation levels would prevent the development of life."

Lomatz nodded. "There are several regions in the nebula where the gas and dust density are so high they cannot be penetrated by any known sensors. The Glaymon world or worlds must be there."

"Is there anything else we know about this nebula?" Mara asked Thule.

"It's supposed to be extremely dangerous," replied the weapons specialist, calling up some data on a handheld computer device he had with him. "Numerous exploration ships have been lost exploring it. It's currently listed as too dangerous to investigate."

Kurt leaned back, nodding. "We have our target."

Rear Admiral Wilson slowly shook his head. "The only problem I see is that the Glaymons don't want to be found. If they've been destroying all the exploration ships that ventured near their worlds, what will they do if they see a heavily armed fleet coming their way?"

"There must be a way for us to communicate with them," said Mara with a deep frown. "Surely, if they know how dire our situation is, they'll agree to a meeting."

Lomatz shook his head. "Remember, they've been in hiding for over twenty-two million years. Why would they be willing to help us if they've allowed the galaxy to be stripped of life numerous times since they went into seclusion?"

"What if we don't give them a choice?" said Kurt. If it were true the Glaymons had been destroying unarmed exploration craft he had no compunction about forcing the issue. "What if we threaten to reveal their hiding place to the galaxy at large unless they allow contact?"

Everyone at the conference table grew silent, and then Rear Admiral White spoke. "They have found a way to survive for all these years. Do we really want to take that away from them? This is the oldest race in our galaxy. If we force them to reveal themselves, they may perish. Do we really want to do this?"

Colonel Simms shifted his gaze from the hologram to Kurt. "What if they have the technology to build the neutronium marble Lieutenant Mays

wants? What would that mean in the war against the Destroyers of Worlds?"

"We would have a way to fight the black ships," Mara answered, her eyes lighting up. "It would make the battles winnable. We have no individual weapon now which can easily destroy a black ship. The neutronium marble can."

"Mara's right," Kurt said with a deep sigh. "I hate endangering the Glaymons' seclusion, but we must have that weapon, or we can't stop the Destroyers of Worlds. The Glaymons are the only race who may have the technology we need."

"That's a five-week trip with our new hyperdrives," commented Colonel Simms. "Figure five weeks there, two weeks on location, and then another five weeks back. Whoever goes will be gone from Newton for at least twelve weeks. A lot can happen in that time. What if the black ships show up while you're gone?"

Kurt took a deep breath. "It's a risk we'll have to take. I plan on taking the *Star Cross*, four of our new heavy battlecruisers, and the *Aurelia*. We'll go to the nebula, find the Glaymons, and then return as rapidly as we can." Kurt hoped the black ships stayed away during that time. So far none of the vessels had been seen in this sector of space or even around the Gothan Empire.

Lomatz hesitated, and then he spoke up. "I'm going. I'll bring my flagship as well as one of my construction ships. They've already been converted to the improved antimatter power system along with the advanced hyperdrives."

This was news to Kurt. He hadn't been aware Lomatz had done that. He wondered what other surprises Lomatz had up his sleeves. "Your flagship and the construction ship can come."

Lomatz yellow eyes narrowed slightly. "If there's a problem, the construction ship can make repairs to any ship in the fleet. I'll make sure to include a number of scientists and extra technicians in case the Glaymons agree to aid us. But I feel I should warn you. I'm not very confident they'll help. They're more likely to impound our fleet and make us vanish as they have everyone else who has entered that nebula."

"We'll take precautions to make sure that doesn't happen." Kurt had a few ideas which might work in that regard.

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For the next two hours they planned the Glaymon mission and set a date

for departure. When the meeting was over, they all went to their own ships, except for Mara, who stayed behind to speak with Kurt in private.

Mara studied Kurt's face for several long moments. "If we do find the Glaymons, which I have serious doubts about, will you share the technology with Fleet Commodore Dreen?"

"Will Lakiam sign a treaty with Newton recognizing us as equals?"

"But you're not a Protector World," objected Mara, her eyes widening. "How can you expect to be our equals?"

"In twenty-two million years, no Protector World or Enlightened World has come up with a way to defeat the Destroyers of Worlds. Doesn't that tell you something is wrong with this Protector World and Enlightened World system? How many worlds in this galaxy have you refused contact with because they don't measure up to your lofty standards of civilization? You told me once how hundreds of small empires you consider too barbaric have been barred from joining the galactic community. You said tens of thousands of isolated barbaric worlds similar to mine are left cut off from galactic culture."

"But they're barbaric," stuttered Mara. "They have nothing to offer. If we allow them access to the civilized regions of the galaxy, they will contaminate the Enlightened Worlds, undoing hundreds of thousands of years of progress."

"Are you certain of that?" demanded Kurt, trying to drive his point home. "Their diversity might have found a solution to the Destroyers of Worlds long ago. You once said Earth was barbaric. Perhaps it's not us but you who are the barbarians—the Enlightened and Protector Worlds who have turned away from the numerous and diverse cultures spread across the galaxy."

"No, it can't be," argued Mara, shaking her head in denial. "We are not barbaric!"

Kurt grew silent, noting how flushed and angry Mara looked.

"The Enlightened Worlds have known peace for hundreds of thousands of years. The Protector Worlds see to that."

"But they do away with diversity. Perhaps the current path to Enlightenment is a failure."

Mara didn't seem to know what to say. This was probably the first time she had ever had her beliefs challenged in such a way.

"No, we can't be wrong!"

“If we succeed in our mission, I can promise you there will be changes.” With a nod Kurt stood and left the conference room, leaving Mara behind. He hoped he had given her something to think about.

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Later that afternoon Lomatz had requested a private meeting with Kurt. They met on board the *Star Cross* in a small briefing room.

“Seeking out these Glaymons will be very dangerous,” said Lomatz, shaking his head. “They have maintained their isolation from the galaxy for so long they now disdain contact with any other intelligent beings. That was the impression I got from speaking to the one whose ship I repaired. I no longer believe they care about the fate of other civilizations as long as theirs continues.”

“We won’t know until we go there,” replied Kurt. He just hoped Lomatz was wrong. “Is there another reason you asked for this meeting?”

Lomatz nodded. “On Kubitz my weapon specialists have been working on a new defensive platform, powered by antimatter chambers, as are your new warships.” Lomatz leaned forward and activated a holographic projection disk. Above the table appeared a defensive platform with two large energy projectors.

Kurt looked at the platform and then at Lomatz. “What have you created here?”

Lomatz smiled. “The biggest problem with destroying a black ship is the amount of power needed to overload its shield. This platform stores up energy and then releases it in one intense burst. Most of the platform consists of energy storage cells and the two antimatter chambers providing the power. Unfortunately it takes over twenty minutes to build up a sufficient charge to fire one of the energy projectors and then an additional thirty minutes for the projector to cool down sufficiently to allow for a second shot. We had to come up with a new alloy that could sustain the heat of the energy discharge. That’s why there are two energy projectors. The second one can be fired while the first one is cooling.”

“How difficult are these to build?” Had Lomatz actually come up with a weapon that was effective against the black ships?

“They’re not easy,” admitted Lomatz with a deep frown. “My construction people have built four, and I brought them to Newton on one of my cargo ships. The problem is the energy cells. The type we need are produced by an Enlightened World. Through some of my contacts I’ve

secured a contract for the delivery of a large number of the cells. Even so, we can only build eight or ten of these platforms a month.”

“I don’t suppose all these new ones are for Newton.”

“Unfortunately not,” replied Lomatz. “They are very expensive to construct, and I’ll offer some of them to Kubitz to cover the expenses. I’ve approached the Kubitz government using Controller Nirron as a go between. As you know the use of the type of technology these platforms are equipped with is illegal. I believe they’ll make an allowance in this instance as Kubitz will want some of the platforms for their own defense. I am willing to furnish ten of them to aid in the defense of Newton.”

“We’ll take them if they work as you claim. Have you tested them yet?”

Lomatz nodded. “We built a prototype, and it worked as projected. We don’t know if it will actually destroy a black ship, but it is more powerful than our current energy projectors.”

“It’s progress,” acknowledged Kurt. At least it would give them a weapon in place around Newton that might make the black ships hesitate in attacking the planet. “How familiar are you with the region of space we believe the Glaymons are in?”

“I’ve been there a couple times. It’s a heavily populated region of the galaxy with several Protector Worlds overseeing the defense of well over four thousand Enlightened Worlds. It will be difficult to pass through without detection.”

“What about the hyperspace dampening field?”

Lomatz shook his head. “We can try it, but I fear the technology in that region of space is too advanced for that trick to work.”

“Then how do we get to the nebula?”

Lomatz’s eyes narrowed sharply. “An old smugglers’ route weaves through that region of space. If we follow it, we should be able to get close to the nebula without notice. However, once we drop from hyperspace, the danger of our fleet being detected increases substantially.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” replied Kurt. This would be a long trip to the galactic core. In other circumstances Kurt would be excited about exploring that region of the galaxy, but now too much was at stake.

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Fleet Commodore Dreen was in his flagship, the *Basera*, orbiting the Enlightened colony world of Calmoree. The planet had recently been attacked by the Destroyers of Worlds, and the commodore had brought a fleet



out to inspect the planet and to search for any clues that might give him an insight as to how to defeat the enemy.

“Same weapons as before,” reported Alborg.

“All major lifeforms are gone, and the cities have been leveled,” added Sensor Operator Laylem.

Dreen stood and walked closer to the viewscreens, showing the devastated planet. “Why do they go to such extremes to destroy all visages of a planet’s civilization? It seems like a waste of energy and resources.”

“Perhaps they fear survivors building on any technology and science remaining if they didn’t destroy all signs of civilization,” suggested Alborg. “The Destroyers of Worlds must know a truly advanced and warlike civilization would be a threat to them.”

“No, I don’t think that’s it,” Commodore Dreen said with a thoughtful look in his eyes. “We have Enlightened Worlds with very advanced technology. However, as our worlds move toward Enlightenment, we lose our aggressiveness. Look across our galaxy. How many Enlightened Worlds are actually capable of defending themselves? That’s why we have the Protector Worlds. The more advanced a world becomes the less aggressive it is.”

“I agree,” said Alborg. “Even on our worlds, some of our people are incapable of fighting. A time will come when we will cease to be a Protector World and then become Enlightened. At that time we will have to seek out a Protector World to defend us.”

Commodore Dreen looked at a viewscreen, showing the world of Calmoree. The atmosphere was an unhealthy brown because of all the dust and pollutants from the destruction of its cities. While much of the planet was still green and the oceans blue, life was gone. In a few decades all signs of the Destroyers of Worlds’ attack will have vanished, eroded away by the planet’s changing environment. Alborg’s words about Lakiam someday needing a Protector World to defend them was bothersome. For the first time he wondered if the path to Enlightenment was the right one.

“The Belmonts were responsible for defending this colony,” Alborg said. “What happened to the Belmont fleet?”

“I’ve located no evidence of destroyed Belmont warships in orbit,” reported Laylem. “I am detecting the debris from several defensive platforms and a few energy beam satellites.”

Commodore Dreen let out a deep and disappointed sigh. “The same

thing many other Protector Worlds are doing. They're pulling in their fleets to protect their own worlds and the primary Enlightened Worlds. The smaller Enlightened World colonies are left to fend for themselves. I can't criticize them because we're doing the same."

"How will all this end?" asked Jalad from the Helm.

"I don't know," replied Dreen. "Right now, the fleets of the Protector Worlds far outnumber our estimation of the total number of black ships. At some point in time that will change as they gradually wear us down."

Alborg frowned. "One thing has been bothering me. We don't know the actual fleet strength of the Destroyers of Worlds. What if they have hundreds of thousands of ships in reserve, or even millions? We have no idea of their population base or where their worlds are. Our estimate of their fleet size could be incorrect."

Fleet Commodore Dreen had to agree. What if the Lakiams were attempting to plug a hole in a dike with a tidal wave coming?

"Let's finish our examination of the planet and the debris, and then we'll set a course for Andock Prime. I wish to speak to Fleet Leader Arlak Moor about future fleet deployments. It's only a matter of time before the black ships hit one of our worlds again—or one of theirs. When the black ships return, we must be ready." Commodore Dreen had much to think about.

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Several days passed, and Kurt was with Keera and Denise, looking at houses. The two women had found a new construction which fit all of Kurt's and Keera's needs and had arranged for Kurt to walk through it. Kurt was pleased to find out Keera's brother, Dalen, had built it with his construction robots. He had incorporated many of the designs Keera and Kurt wanted.

"It has a modern kitchen with all the necessary items for us to entertain," Keera announced excitedly. "It has an open floor plan so, while Denise and I are in here cooking, we can still visit with everyone."

Denise laughed. "I guess this means more cooking lessons."

A sheepish look spread over Keera's face. "Yes, I still have a ways to go. I can cook a number of the dishes we ate on Kubitz, but many of the foods you eat here on Newton are still new to me."

"You're a fast learner," Denise said, smiling. "I'm sure, in another few months, you'll be cooking all of Kurt's favorites."

Kurt studied the flooring, it was some type of ceramic tile that looked like real wood.

Keera turned to look at Kurt. "When are you going on the long-term mission you mentioned to me? The one to the core worlds of the galaxy?"

"In two more days all the preparations will be finished. We have engineering crews going over all the ships to ensure they're operating at 100 percent efficiency. We're also loading a lot of supplies since this will be a long mission."

"What if something happens?" asked Keera with concern in her eyes. "You'll be far from Newton, and an Enlightened World may not be willing to furnish aid. For that matter, are there any Protector Worlds where you're going? And would your presence be considered a threat?"

"We're taking one of Lomatz's construction ships, and it will be capable of repairing any of our vessels if it becomes necessary. We think we have a route to get in and out safely."

"Lomatz," Keera said in understanding, her eyes widening. "He would know of routes used by the Profiteers to plunder various regions of the galaxy."

Denise shivered. "You won't run into any Profiteers, will you?"

"No," replied Kurt. "They're staying pretty close to home for now."

Keera folded her arms across her chest, and her eyes narrowed. "I understand the *Aurelia* is going as well."

Kurt cringed slightly. Keera didn't care that much for Mara. "Yes, their scientists and researchers are interested in locating a weapon to be used against the black ships, to keep Newton safe. Plus we may need the Lakiams' advice on some matters." He didn't want to mention the Glaymons to Keera. The fewer that knew about the actual purpose of the meeting the better.

Denise let out a deep sigh. "When we defeated the Profiteers, I had high hopes we could live in peace and not have to worry about war ever again. I thought we could live our lives here on Newton and never have to fear attack. A lot of us felt that way."

Kurt nodded his understanding. He too had had the same hopes.

"You'll be gone for over twelve weeks," Keera said with a deep sigh. "What am I supposed to do?"

Kurt smiled and pointed around him. "You have a new house to decorate, and, when I return, we can have a party to celebrate. I'm sure Denise will be more than happy to help you pick out furnishings and everything."

"We can ask Meesa to help," suggested Denise. "I think she would like

that, and it might help her feel more at home here on Newton.”

Keera nodded her head. “Yes, I know she’s been lonely. She and Dalen both abandoned everyone they knew when they left Kubitz. But they’re far better off here than on that black market planet. At least here they won’t get stabbed or shot.”

Denise frowned heavily. “I still find it hard to believe a planet like Kubitz can exist. But I’ve heard you and Kurt talk about it and even Captain Randson’s wife, Emily. She told me what nearly happened to her and Alexis.”

“Kubitz is a hard planet to live on,” admitted Keera. “However, even on a planet like Kubitz, a few good people are still around. Not everyone’s a Profiteer.”

Kurt looked at Keera and his sister. “Let’s go check out the backyard. We must make sure there’s plenty of room for Bryan and me to play catch.”

“He will like that,” said Denise smiling. Then she looked at Keera. “He would like it even better if he had a little cousin to play with.”

Keera blushed slightly but nodded. “Maybe someday he will.”

Kurt remained silent. Children were a ways in the future. First he needed to find a way to keep Newton and Earth safe from the Destroyers of Worlds. His search to find the home of the Glaymons might just enable him to do that.

## Chapter Eleven

Kurt watched the main viewscreen in the Command Center of the *Star Cross* as his 1,500-meter-long battleship pulled away from Newton. Around her flew the four 1,000-meter-long heavy battlecruisers and the 1700-meter-long Lakiam battlecruiser *Aurelia* in close formation. At the heart of the small fleet were Lomatz's two ships. Each of them were an incredible 2,000 meters in length and cylindrical in shape.

"All ships have broken orbit and assumed escort positions," reported Captain Randson.

Randson's family had come to Newton Station to say good-bye. They were still there, watching the fleet depart.

"Course plotted, and we can enter hyperspace at your command," added Lieutenant Styles.

Everyone focused on the viewscreens, displaying the blue-white globe of Newton. It would be a while before they saw that sight again.

"Take us into hyperspace," ordered Kurt, settling in his command chair. It would be a long trip, and they might as well get it started.

"Coordinates have been transmitted to all ships," Styles reported as he touched several icons on his computer screen. "Entry into hyperspace in ten seconds. All ships are tied into the *Star Cross*'s navigation system."

Moments later Kurt felt a slight twinge in his stomach as the ship made the transition into hyperspace. The image of Newton faded away on the viewscreens to be replaced by static. However, in the holographic tactical displays, the fleet was now shown, as well as the nearer stars. The ship's long-range sensors were capable of reaching out fifteen light-years. At the speed the fleet was traveling, nearly a light-year every ninety seconds, it was possible to see the stars actually moving. Or at least they seemed to move; actually it was the fleet that was in motion.

"One thing I do like about this trip," said Andrew with a slight smile.

"What's that?" asked Kurt. Andrew would surely miss his family. They all had people living on Newton. Keera had had a hard time just knowing how long Kurt would be gone. She was concerned about decorating the new house without Kurt's input, even though he had assured her that he trusted what she and Denise would pick out.

"Grantz!" said Andrew smugly. "I won't have to see that conniving gold seeker for at least three months."

“I would hope not,” answered Kurt with the hint of a smile. “But then again, you never know where he might turn up.”

Andrew frowned. “It would be just my luck for him to show up at the Glaymons’ homeworld, demanding a fee for him to introduce us.”

“All ships maintaining standard defensive formation and communication range,” reported Lieutenant Brooks.

“First dropout point is 168 hours from my mark,” said Andrew as he reached forward and set a counter on one of the viewscreens. “Mark.”

Kurt gazed at the counter on a small viewscreen to one side of the Command Center. They would drop from hyperspace four times before the final jump to the target area. At each dropout point they would pause for a few hours to confirm the systems on all the ships were functioning efficiently. If there were any problems, Lomatz’s construction ship would initiate immediate repairs.

“Do you think we’ll run across any black ships?” asked Andrew.

“It’s possible,” Kurt said. “We’ll be passing through a number of regions where they’re active.” Kurt hoped to avoid them as only the *Aurelia* had weapons which were effective against the Destroyers of Worlds. And only twenty dark matter missiles were on board the Lakiam battlecruiser.

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Prince Brollen gazed with satisfaction at the nearby tactical display. For the past two weeks he had been sweeping through food species 1012’s worlds, harvesting each one of them. He had enough food pellets from the six systems to fill a collector ship, plus Brollen had added heavily to his own private food collection stock. This particular avian food species was highly pleasing to his palate, and he was certain they would be to the Vorn Queens as well.

*The harvest of this last world is complete,* reported Military Commander Fraymot.

*Six systems harvested and only token resistance at the first one. These last five had minimal orbital defenses.*

Fraymot turned toward the prince. *It is as you said. They are regrouping their fleets to protect their primary worlds. This will aid greatly in our harvesting of this galaxy.*

Brollen moved to a computer console and used his right hand to touch several icons. Instantly a hologram of this section of Galaxy X241 appeared. *We must send another example to those worlds that would resist us. If we*

*harvest and destroy another of their main worlds, it will force them to draw their fleets even closer to their primary worlds, leaving more worlds for us to harvest without resistance.*

Military Commander Fraymot studied the hologram. *Which world would you suggest we attack?*

Prince Brollen studied the hologram map of this section of Galaxy X241. His triangular-shaped head slowly moved from side to side as he thought over the next target. Reaching out the long fingers of his left hand, he pointed to a star system. *This one. It is heavily held, and a demonstration of our strength there will greatly demoralize the other worlds.*

*That world is close to the food species that possesses the dark matter missiles.*

*Precisely, replied Brollen. This attack will send two messages. We will demonstrate that no food species is powerful enough to stand against us. It will also send a message to the food species that possesses the dark matter missiles. If I am correct, it will force them to pull their fleets around their main worlds, freeing up more worlds in that sector to harvest. It will keep them on the defensive until we are ready to harvest their worlds and destroy their fleets.*

Military Commander Fraymot studied the hologram for a moment and then transferred the coordinates of the target world to the ship's navigation computer. *I would suggest we summon additional harvesting fleets to take part in this attack. The world you have chosen is defended by very large fleet units with antimatter missiles in the two-hundred-megaton range. They have destroyed some of our ships in the past.*

*We will summon two more harvesting fleets. However, before we attack that world, I want to unload our harvested food pellets on a nearby Collector Ship. We shall go there, unload our harvests, and wait for the other two harvesting fleets. Once those fleets have joined ours, we will attack the target world.*

As the harvesting became more widespread, several Collector Ships had been positioned at strategic locations. The valuable ships were heavily protected by Vorn cruisers.

Military Commander Fraymot bowed slightly and then went to carry out Prince Brollen's commands.

Prince Brollen gazed at a large viewscreen, showing a blue-white world beneath the ship. Already its atmosphere had turned darker from the

destruction his fleet had wrought to the towering cities which once dotted its surface. No technology could be left behind for survivors to build upon. This ensured the technology the Vorn fought against was always less developed than their own.

Once the Collector Ship was loaded, he would send it to the ship staging area where a transport ship would take it to the Vorn home system. With the additional two harvesting fleets, he would have 12 motherships and over 2,200 cruisers under his command. The world he intended to attack was powerful and well-protected. No doubt he would lose a few ships in the battle. However, once the enemy fleets were defeated and their world harvested, all resistance to the Vorn harvesting fleets would greatly decrease. It would also prevent the various food species from joining together. Prince Brollen was well aware how outnumbered the Vorn harvesting fleets were by the multitudes of heavily armed warships these so-called Protector Worlds maintained.

While the Vorn had vast numbers of ships in reserve, these were normally kept in their home system, ensuring its safety from attack. The Vorn race well remembered the deadly enemy who had driven them from their home universe. They had always feared that enemy might someday follow them here.

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Three weeks had passed, and the *Star Cross* and her fleet were now deep within the galaxy, drawing ever nearer to the core stars. As they traveled through the more heavily populated regions of the galaxy, it became harder to avoid detection. Very seldom now were the long-range sensors free of contacts. Passenger ships, cargo ships, and even warships from various Protector Worlds were constantly revealed on the sensors.

"I never dreamed space could be so crowded with ships," Andrew said as he studied one of the large tactical displays, showing hundreds of ship contacts.

"It's a sign of civilization," explained Mara. She had come to the *Star Cross* after their last dropout from hyperspace. She was partially familiar with this area of space they were passing through and felt she would be more useful on the flagship where she could offer advice as needed. "Hundreds of Enlightened Worlds are close by and several Protector Worlds. The Destroyers of Worlds haven't ventured into this region as of yet, though it's only a matter of time."



“Admiral, we have a group of ships closing in on our position,” warned Lieutenant Brooks.

“How many?”

“Fifteen.”

Mara stepped up and examined the tactical display. “Hanorian warships,” she announced after a moment. “The Hanorians are a Protector World civilization responsible for defending many of the Enlightened Worlds in this sector. They may believe we’re a Profiteer fleet on a raiding mission.”

“What do you recommend?” Kurt had no desire to get into a space battle with one of the Protector World civilizations. Plus he and his fleet were passing through their space without permission.

Mara pointed to a nearby uninhabited star system. “Drop from hyperspace here, and I will speak to their commanding officer. My people trade with the Hanorians, and I’ll explain we are on an investigative mission involving the black ships. I will tell them we are seeking information that might be available on the core worlds. With the fear sweeping across the galaxy concerning the Destroyers of Worlds, I expect that will be sufficient.”

Kurt nodded. He had to trust that Mara knew what she was talking about. “Lieutenant Styles, bring the fleet out of hyperspace in that system. Captain Randson, set Condition Two across the fleet, but I don’t expect any danger.” Kurt preferred to err on the side of caution.

A few minutes later the eight ships dropped from hyperspace near a small white dwarf star about the size of Newton but with a mass similar to Earth’s sun. Thermal energy illuminated the star in a very dim glow. Any planets the system may have once had were long gone.

“No planetary bodies of any type detected,” reported Lieutenant Brooks.

“Most stars of this type have gone through a red giant phase before becoming a white dwarf,” commented Mara. “There are many such stars in the galaxy.”

The fleet waited until finally the sensor alarms in the *Star Cross* sounded.

“Hanorian fleet dropping from hyperspace around us,” Brooks reported, her eyes showing alarm. “I’m picking up sensor scans and what may be target locks on our ships.”

“That was fast,” said Andrew impressed. “You would think they’d want to find out who we are before locking on their weapons.”

“It’s because of the Destroyers of Worlds,” explained Mara. “In times past, this would never occur.”

“I have a comm message from the Hanorian flagship,” reported Lieutenant Pierce from Communications. “They’re demanding to know who we are and where we’re going.”

“Let me speak to them,” said Mara, stepping to Communications.

Kurt nodded, curious to hear this exchange.

“This is Mara Liam of the Lakiam battlecruiser *Aurelia*. We are on a research mission to the galactic core, seeking knowledge of the Destroyers of Worlds.”

“What type of knowledge?” a gruff voice responded.

Lieutenant Pierce had changed the comm so everyone in the Command Center could hear.

“We seek any older world that may know of previous incursions of the black ships. Rumors on Lakiam and a few other worlds are that such knowledge may exist in the core worlds.”

“If it does, I have not heard of it,” the Hanorian commander responded. “My ship’s database does not recognize the other ship types with you. Can you please identify them for our records?”

Mara hesitated, looking first to Kurt, and then responded to the Hanorian. “The other ships are from Newton, which is far out in one of the spiral arms. It is a new world that has just reached Protector World status.”

Silence on the comm reigned for nearly a minute. “We have no such record of a new Protector World. However, with the advent of the Destroyers of Worlds, that is not surprising. I have heard a Lakiam fleet was successful in driving off the black ships in battle. Is that true?”

“Yes,” replied Mara. “Fleet Commodore Dreen led our forces in battle against the Destroyers of Worlds, destroying many of their small spindle-shaped cruisers as well as one of their motherships.”

“We have only had one attack in this region. A world of over four billion inhabitants was culled. There were no survivors.”

“Very seldom are survivors found after a Destroyers of Worlds attack,” replied Mara.

“I have added the ships with you as belonging to the Protector World of Newton. You may continue on your course to the core worlds. Good luck in your search.”

“Are there any black fleets in this region?”

“No, not at the moment. However, attacks in an adjoining sector have steadily increased, and we expect the Destroyers of Worlds to be in our region shortly. When we picked up your ships on our long-range scanners, running with a sensor-dampening field, we feared the beginning of such an attack.”

“Sorry about the dampening field,” replied Mara. “We used it as a preventative measure in the hope our fleet would not be detected in our travels by the black ships.”

“A wise precaution,” replied the Hanorian commander. “If you do find any information on the Destroyers of Worlds I would appreciate it if you would send a copy of that information to the Hanorian homeworld.”

“I will see to it,” promised Mara.

The comm fell silent, and Mara stepped back. “They should be leaving shortly. The Hanorians are well on their way to Enlightenment. Those warships have crews of less than ten on them. They are mostly automated with repair robots similar to the ones you have here on the *Star Cross*.”

“Just ten?” said Andrew, his eyes widening at the thought. “It seems to me that such small crews would make the ships vulnerable to boarding actions.”

Mara shook her head. “Not with the combat robots on board.”

“Hanorian fleet powering up their hyperdrives,” reported Lieutenant Brooks.

Kurt looked at one of the viewscreens, zoomed in on a Hanorian battlecruiser. The ship was pear-shaped and obviously very heavily armed. Several energy cannons were visible, as well as numerous hatches for hyperspace missiles. The space in front of the Hanorian ship seemed to shimmer, and then the vessel vanished.

“Hanorian ships entering hyperspace,” confirmed Lieutenant Brooks as the last Hanorian vessel vanished from the viewscreens.

“Glad that’s over,” Andrew said with obvious relief in his voice. “I didn’t want to get into a shootout with them.”

“There was never a chance of that,” said Mara, frowning. “We offered no obvious threat, and they recognized the *Aurelia* as a Lakiam warship. That alone ensured there would be no battle. Protector Worlds have never attacked one another.”

“Lieutenant Pierce, get us back on course. We must hold these delays to a minimum.”

Kurt wanted to get to the nebula as soon as possible. They had already been in hyperspace for a little over three weeks, and they still had at least two more to go before they reached the nebula. During most days Kurt scheduled one or two emergency drills across the fleet to keep his crews sharp. On long journeys like this, it was easy to become distracted and lost in boredom. The emergency drills helped to ensure that didn't happen.

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Prince Brollen gazed with satisfaction at the large fleet he had assembled to attack the next target world. He had summoned more of the spindle-shaped cruisers to increase the strength of his fleet. He was going to attack another Protector World, one of the more powerful ones. If he was successful, and he fully expected to be, then all resistance in this sector of the galaxy would collapse. He had ten harvester fleets standing by. Once the Protector World was destroyed and its inhabitants taken as food for the Vorn, the fleets would move in and harvest every world in the sector. An abundance of food species was in this region, and several should be suitable as sustenance for the Queens. Prince Brollen had already sent word to the Conclave Habitat, requesting additional harvesting fleets. He was concerned the harvesting was going too slow. If Queen Alithe granted his request, the number of harvesting fleets in this galaxy would be doubled.

*We are nearly ready to launch the attack, reported Military Commander Fraymot. All ships have been inspected and are ready to engage the enemy.*

*This will be a major battle, replied Brollen. This food species has the larger antimatter missiles, which can damage and destroy our ships. There will be losses.*

*Our fleet is large enough that a few losses will be inconsequential, responded Fraymot. We will attack in waves. The first two assault fleets will consist of our cruisers only. All motherships will stay back, protected by nearly one thousand of our cruisers, until the path to the food species planet has been cleared.*

Prince Brollen gazed at the multiple viewscreens on the front wall of the Command Center, his multifaceted eyes focusing on several motherships that were visible. As far as his eyes could see were Vorn warships. He had gathered an armada, a force powerful enough to roll over and harvest any world in this galaxy. Time to put this force to the test.

*Set course for the target world. It is time we sampled food species 111.*

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Over Andock Prime, Fleet Commodore Dreen had just finished speaking with Andock Fleet Leader Arlak Moor. They had signed a mutual defensive treaty, agreeing to come to each other's aid in the case of an attack by the Destroyers of Worlds. However, the agreement only related to worlds colonized by Andock Prime or Lakiam. The Enlightened Worlds protected by each were not included. Dreen intended to pay visits to the Parmonts and the Bascoms in the coming weeks as well.

Alborg stood in front of one of the Command Center's large viewscreens, focused on Andock Prime. "Amazing how all home worlds are so similar. The clouds, the land masses, and even the large oceans."

"I was in a class on galactic civilizations at the academy on Lakiam," commented Sheera Keenol, the communications officer. "One of the theories is that it takes a world like that to allow a highly developed civilization to come into being. Enough natural resources must exist to allow a civilization to advance from discovering fire, fossil fuels, nuclear power, renewable energy, and then finally fusion and antimatter. If a planet is lacking in resources, the civilization is in danger of collapsing into barbarism. Once that happens, in all likelihood the inhabitants will never recover."

Alborg nodded. "I've heard each civilization reaches a critical decision point. If they can get past it, they will continue on until they can travel to the stars. If they fail, then they become barbaric and, in many instances, die out completely."

"There is evidence of that on many such worlds across the galaxy," said Sensor Operator Laylem, joining the conversation. "I have seen several myself where all that remains are a few crumbling structures which are thousands of years old."

"That's one thing about time," Keenol said. "After a few thousand years even signs of an advanced civilization will be eroded away by the wind and the rain. On some worlds, who knows how many civilizations rose and fell."

"The Destroyers of Worlds have caused too much of that as of late," Alborg said. "From the records we have recovered, we know they have harvested our galaxy ten or more times over the last twenty-two million years."

Fleet Commodore Dreen had been listening. He wondered how many civilizations in the past had been ravaged by the Destroyers of Worlds. From the destruction he had seen that the black ships leave behind, Dreen could imagine all signs of an inhabited planet's civilization vanishing completely in

a few thousand years. On some worlds, new civilizations would rise, never knowing what had been there before. Beyond doubt this had occurred countless times since the advent of the Destroyers of Worlds. Dreen also wondered if the galaxy would eventually have fewer and fewer inhabited worlds after being ravaged by the black ships for so long. Dreen could well imagine, if the Destroyers of Worlds were not stopped, at some point the entire galaxy might be a barren wasteland.

His thoughts were interrupted as alarms sounded on the ship's sensor console. Laylem hurried to his station, pressing icons, seeking the cause for the alarms. He turned toward Fleet Commodore Dreen, his face pale and his hands trembling. "Several of our ships are reporting sightings of black ships on their long-range scopes."

Commodore Dreen's breath caught in his throat. All Lakiam warships had been equipped with special viewscreens, which could peer deeply into space, seeking anomalies.

"How many, and where are they?" Surely the Destroyers of Worlds were not attacking Andock Prime. It was held almost as strongly as Lakiam.

"Unknown," Laylem replied as he correlated the data from the other ships. "It could be just a few or an entire fleet. We'll know shortly."

"Commodore, the entire Andock fleet has been placed on full alert," Keenol reported from Communications. "I've received a confirmed report of large numbers of black ships spotted in the outer system, coming directly toward Andock Prime. Current estimates report four motherships and at least one thousand cruisers. There may be more that haven't been spotted."

Commodore Dreen took a deep and steadying breath. It looked as if the Destroyers of Worlds were launching an all-out attack on Andock Prime itself. He worried there were more black ships they hadn't spotted yet. "Contact our fleet and have them go to Alert One." Dreen was glad he had brought the fleet that normally accompanied the *Basera*. He had 475 battlecruisers with him, all with full loads of dark matter missiles. He had a disconcerting feeling he would need them all. The fleet was two million kilometers from Andock Prime, while the *Basera* was in orbit over the Andock capital world.

"Move us out to the fleet," he ordered. "Keenol, contact Fleet Leader Moor and inform him that we're joining our fleet. Tell him that we will assist wherever he needs us."

Fleet Commodore Dreen leaned back in his command chair as Keenol

sent the message. The Destroyers of Worlds had come to Andock Prime, and Dreen could not allow it to fall. If it did, all hope of an alliance of Protector Worlds against the black ships would disintegrate. If that happened, there would be no way to stop the Destroyers of Words from rampaging across the galaxy at will.

“Why would they attack Andock Prime?” asked Laylem.

“To set an example,” replied Alborg as he checked the ship’s weapons systems. “By destroying Andock Prime, they send a message that no Protector World can stand up to them. It will reverse the positive moral our defeating one of their fleets has sent across this region of our galaxy.”

“I fear Alborg is correct,” said Fleet Commodore Dreen. “This may be a direct reaction to us defeating their fleet.”

The Command Center grew quiet as all eyes turned toward the tactical displays which showed the enemy fleet. Everyone knew what was at stake in the coming battle.

Dreen waited anxiously as the *Basera* moved to join his waiting fleet. On the main tactical display, more red threat icons constantly appeared as Andock and Lakiam ships spotted more of the inbound enemy fleet. A chill ran down his back as over three thousand black ships were now being reported. The Command Center remained silent as the crew stared at the deadly red icons filling the tactical displays. Fleet Commodore Dreen felt his blood run cold. It would take a miracle to stop the black ships, and Dreen had no idea where that miracle could come from.

## Chapter Twelve

Fleet Commodore Dreen relaxed slightly as the *Basera* rejoined the fleet. Sliding into its position in the center of the formation, Dreen stared in growing consternation at the main tactical display. His heart sank, and his breathing quickened as he contemplated the disaster about to overwhelm the Andock System. The ships of the Destroyers of Worlds were advancing in three formations. The two leading formations consisted of their spindle-shaped cruisers. Behind them came another formation of cruisers with twelve of the massive motherships in the center.

“How many cruisers are in those formations?”

“One thousand each,” replied Laylem.

“From the way they’ve set up those formations, I would say the first two are aimed at overwhelming and destroying the Andock fleet and the defense grid,” commented Alborg. “The third with the motherships is aimed at culling the planet.”

“Black fleet contact with Andock warships in twenty minutes,” reported Laylem.

“The defense grid around Andock Prime has been activated,” added Keenol from Communications. “All noncombat ships capable of entering hyperspace have been ordered to leave the system. All other ships are warned to stay away from the planet.”

“Fleet Leader Moor is moving his fleets away from Andock Prime,” added Alborg, noting the movement in the tactical display. “He intends to meet the black ships in open space. I’m not certain it’s a wise decision to be so far from the defense grid.”

“Communication from the *Kallnar*,” reported Keenol as she listened intently to a message. The *Kallnar* was Fleet Leader Moor’s flagship. “He asks that we attack the black ships wherever we feel there is a weakness. He’ll engage the Destroyers of Worlds and then gradually withdraw to Andock Prime, where he can use the orbital defenses to force them back. He’s loaded the orbital defensive platforms with the two-hundred-megaton missiles. He’s hoping his fleet can inflict sufficient damage so the defense grid can keep them away from the planet.”

“Acknowledge the communication and inform Fleet Leader Moor we will do everything in our power to combat the black ships.” Commodore Dreen considered the best way to use his fleet. It was doubtful the Destroyers



of Worlds expected a Lakiam fleet to be in the system. They would not be expecting a dark matter missiles attack. Commodore Dreen wondered how he could use that to their advantage. "Alborg, any suggestions?" This was going to be a pivotal battle in the war against the Destroyers of Worlds.

Alborg spent a moment studying the tactical display. "Commodore, if we were to enter hyperspace and come out directly behind the rear echelon, we might disrupt this attack. I doubt if they expected to find any of our ships here. They know we have weapons which can destroy them. We can use that to our advantage. If they fear damage to their motherships, they may withdraw."

"We'll have the element of surprise," Dreen said as he considered Alborg's suggestion. "If we can disrupt this attack or slow it down, it will give time for other Andock fleets from nearby worlds to arrive."

Sensor Operator Laylem turned toward the commodore. "Several Andock warships have jumped into hyperspace in the last few minutes."

Keenol examined her communications console and then nodded as if she had found an answer. "It is as I expected. All hyperspace communication frequencies are jammed. The ships are jumping to escape the jamming so they can summon reinforcements."

"What of the Andock fleet?"

Laylem pressed several icons on his console as he scanned the Andock fleet, rapidly assembling as it moved out and away from Andock Prime. "I'm detecting 413 battleships and 1,267 battlecruisers."

Commodore Dreen leaned forward in his command chair. "The black ships will still have us outnumbered. Let's see if we can even up the odds a bit. Alborg, prepare to fire off three salvos of dark matter missiles. Each of the first two salvos is to target a different black ship. However, I want the entire third salvo focused on those motherships. Maybe we'll get lucky in all the confusion and take out a few."

"Jalad, as soon as the third salvo has been launched, I want to jump our fleet immediately away from the black fleet. I don't want to give them time to fire their black antimatter beams at us or those deadly spheres that steal a ship's power. If we do this fast enough, we can get in, hit the enemy, and then get out before they realize what we're doing. We'll only have this one opportunity to take them by surprise, so let's make this count."

Dreen wanted to take a shot at the motherships. Alborg was right. If they could knock out a few, the Destroyers of Worlds just might retreat rather

than risk losing more of their large ships.

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Prince Brollen watched in silence as Military Leader Fraymot sent the fleet forward toward the primary inhabited world of this system. This was a food species that had already fought several battles against the Vorn in the past. Each time the species had lost but learned, if they could bring to bear enough of their two-hundred-megaton missiles, they could damage or destroy a Vorn ship. However, in this battle, it would make little difference. Prince Brollen was prepared to lose a few hundred cruisers if necessary. They would be a small sacrifice to pay for what this victory would mean. Another world would be harvested by the Vorn, and a powerful food species will have lost their homeworld. It would send fear throughout this region, making future harvestings much easier.

*All ships are advancing*, reported Fraymot. He was in direct telepathic communication with the commanders of the fleet. A simple directed thought could send multitudes of ships toward a target or to shift formation.

*A large fleet of warships has assembled and is moving toward us*, reported the sensor operator. *A second force located away from the planet is turning toward us as well. They may be planning to join up with the larger force.*

*We still have the larger numbers*, reported Fraymot confidently. *Once we reach engagement range, we will use our dark antimatter beams and the globes of annihilation to destroy them.*

*Make it so*, ordered Prince Brollen, his triangular-shaped head turning toward the tactical displays. *I am anxious to taste this food species. My palate grows curious.*

*The second fleet has entered hyperspace*, warned the sensor operator.

*Perhaps they are fleeing the system*, suggested Fraymot. *They must know they have no hope for a victory.*

Even as he sent the thought, the space behind the Vorn fleet shimmered as 475 battlecruisers emerged from hyperspace.

Alarms sounded in the Command Center as Prince Brollen looked questionably at Military Commander Fraymot. Numerous threat icons were appearing behind the fleet. One of the ships appeared on one of the viewscreens.

*I recognize those ships!* sent Military Commander Fraymot, sounding distressed. *Those are the ships which possess the dark matter missiles!*

*What are they doing here?* Prince Brollen had not been expecting this. The systems of food species 236 were hundreds of light-years away.

*They're firing!* warned the sensor operator. *Detecting hyperspace missile launches.*

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Fleet Commodore Dreen gripped his command chair as the first missile volley launched. From each Lakiam battlecruiser, twelve dark matter missiles entered hyperspace to impact microseconds later against the energy screens of the black ships. The missiles seemed to vanish from their missile tubes as they flew unerringly to their targets.

"First missile volley launched," called out Alborg. "Second launching in ten seconds." It took a few precious seconds to load and retarget the second group of missiles.

On the *Basera's* main viewscreen, titanic explosions of antimatter energy washed across the rear of the Destroyers of Worlds' fleet formation. Several bright flashes of energy indicated where black ship shields had failed.

"Second missile launch," confirmed Alborg. "Targeting some heavily damaged black ships with force beams."

Commodore Dreen watched tensely as the viewscreens lit up with more explosions along the entire rear of the black fleet from the release of energy from the dark matter warheads. Each warhead exploded with the force of five hundred megatons. On the viewscreens, force beams could be seen, seeking out and targeting black ships hit by multiple dark matter missiles. Occasionally a black ship would die as its screen became overloaded. When that happened, the screen would burst, releasing all its stored energy, annihilating the black ship beneath it.

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In space, the spindle-shaped Vorn cruisers writhed in agony as their screens were overloaded with dark matter energy. Each time a screen failed, the Vorn cruiser was disintegrated from the titanic release of raw energy. In most cases the ship simply ceased to be, leaving glowing clouds of gas and a few wisps of burning plasma behind. Other black ships were heavily damaged as some dark matter energy penetrated their screens, ripping open ship hulls. These were quickly dispatched by Lakiam force beams. The second missile salvo arrived, striking more Vorn cruisers. A higher number of Vorn shields failed as they were quickly overloaded with energy. Massive flashes of light brighter than an exploding nova swept across the rear of the

Vorn formation, tearing it asunder.

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Prince Brollen's multifaceted eyes darkened in anger as he saw numerous Vorn cruisers dying under the deadly missile fire of the enemy fleet. It was instantly obvious to the prince that this enemy had discovered how to destroy Vorn ships. They were using their deadly missiles to wreak havoc on his fleet formation.

*Our ships are returning fire*, reported Military Commander Fraymot as he hurriedly sent telepathic orders to adjust the fleet formation to bring more weapons to bear against the enemy fleet pummeling the Vorn cruisers. The ships had to turn broadside to allow their black antimatter beams to lock on the enemy ships. This further frayed the Vorn fleet formation as they now had ships traveling at various speeds. Massive gaps appeared between ships.

*Third missile launch detected*, reported the sensor operator.

The deck suddenly heaved beneath Prince Brollen, sending him flying through the air to land painfully against a console.

Struggling to his feet, he could hear cries of pain around him. Normally the Command Center was quiet since telepathy was the prime method of communication. He could see several Vorn officers down; several seemed to be dead.

*What happened?* he demanded, glaring at Military Commander Fraymot, who was supposed to keep the *Reaper* safe from harm and would be deleted soon if this continued.

*We were hit by seven dark matter missiles*, replied Fraymot nervously, having witnessed Prince Brollen crashing to the deck. *A small amount of energy leaked through the shield. We have a major hull breach. Workers have been dispatched to initiate repairs.*

*The third missile barrage was aimed at our motherships*, reported the sensor operator, sounding stunned. *The Larn, Drall, and Nuce have been destroyed. The Barl, Xanthe, and Riven have been heavily damaged.*

*What of the enemy fleet?* Prince Brollen looked at a viewscreen which was focused on the shattered and burning remains of a Vorn mothership—the *Drall*.

*Jumping into hyperspace*, the sensor operator replied.

*Were we able to damage it?* Prince Brollen didn't want to think about the fact he was overseeing the greatest military disaster ever suffered by the Vorn since coming to this universe.

No, replied Fraymot. *We could only bring a few of our weapons to bear before the enemy fled.*

*They didn't flee!* screamed Prince Brollen in anger. Queen Alithe would be highly upset when she learned of the loss of three motherships entrusted to him. The force of his mental thoughts ravished the minds of the remaining command crew, who winced with pain. *This is what they did once before when we fought them. They will jump a short distance away, prepare for another attack, and then jump in again. When they do, we must be ready. Recall five hundred of our cruisers from the second wave to help protect our remaining motherships. Press the attack forward. I will not allow this to prevent us from harvesting this world.* Prince Brollen was incensed with anger and was determined to make an example of this world, particularly after what had just occurred to his motherships.

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Military Commander Fraymot hurriedly passed on the orders. He would not allow the enemy to surprise him like this again. He was well aware the last military commander to serve Prince Brollen had been deleted. Fraymot had no desire to join him.

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The Vorn fleet slowed its forward advance as cruisers from the second wave reversed course and quickly moved back to the third formation, taking up defensive positions around the motherships. Never in Vorn history, since coming to this universe, had three motherships been lost. The entire fleet sobered, seeing the glowing debris floating in space where only minutes before three of the supposedly indestructible ships had been.

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“We got three of their motherships!” cried out Sensor Operator Laylem jubilantly as he studied the incoming information over the sensors. “Not only that, we damaged at least three more.”

“What about their cruisers?” Fleet Commodore Dreen had not been expecting such results with their missile attack against the twelve Destroyers of Worlds motherships from the third wave of missiles. He had hoped maybe to get one but never three!

“Eighty-seven confirmed kills,” answered Laylem.

“We spread out our missiles too much,” Alborg said with a deep frown. “If we had hit the same targets a second time, we would have taken out far more of them, particularly now that we know how many missiles it takes to

disrupt their energy shields.”

“Of course,” replied Commodore Dreen in agreement. “But I wanted to cause as much disruption in their fleet formation as possible so the third wave could get through to the motherships.”

“It worked,” replied Alborg. “However, they’ll be ready for us next time.”

“They’re already adjusting their fleet formation,” said Laylem, pointing toward the nearest tactical display.

On the display, large numbers of the spindle-shaped cruisers were pulling back to the third Destroyers of Worlds’ fleet formation to add more support to the remaining motherships. “They’re not retreating.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen had hoped the black ships would withdraw if they lost a mothership or two. That gambit had failed. They must really be determined to harvest and destroy Andock Prime.

“We hurt them, and they know it,” Alborg said with satisfaction in his voice.

“The Andock fleet is nearly in engagement range,” said Laylem, expressing concern. “They’ll lose a lot of ships if the Destroyers of Worlds use their black antimatter weapons.”

Commodore Dreen studied the nearby tactical display and then reached a decision. “Jalad, I want the fleet to jump to this location.” Dreen indicated a point just off the left flank of the rear echelon of the enemy fleets. “Alborg, set up two missile strikes. Both strikes to target the same black ships. This time I want to take out as many of their cruisers as we can.”

“They’ll be ready for us this time,” warned Alborg as he set up the missile strike. “We’ll lose some ships.”

Commodore Dreen let out a deep breath. “I know, but it can’t be helped. We’re trying to save the alliance we’re putting together so we can save the galaxy. We can’t let Andock Prime fall to the Destroyers of Worlds or we risk losing everything.”

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In space, the Andock fleet reached engagement range. Instantly from the missile tubes of the battleships and battlecruisers two-hundred-megaton antimatter missiles began launching. Fleet Leader Moor had made sure every warship was packed full of those missiles. Even as the missiles launched, force beams and energy projectors opened up as well, pouring their firepower into the black fleet.

The forward formation of spindle-shaped cruisers, upon detecting the missile launch, fired their black antimatter beams, sweeping them across the approaching Andock warships. In the black fleet formation, hundreds and then thousands of two-hundred-megaton antimatter missiles exploded. The entire formation came alive with light. Occasionally enough would strike a black fleet cruiser to cause its energy screen to fail. In the black fleet, several bright flashes of brilliant light indicated the total release of energy from failed screens. In each case the black ship beneath the screen was destroyed. With all the missiles exploding and the energy they were releasing, a few black ships were bound to be annihilated.

In the Andock fleet, the deadly black antimatter beams penetrated the powerful defensive screens of the Andock ships, opening up huge sections in the hulls and causing catastrophic damage. Ship after ship died as they blew apart, sending glowing debris flying across space.

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On the left flank of the rear echelon of the black fleet, the Lakiam fleet roared out of hyperspace. A wave of missiles was launched before the first black ship could return fire. However, the Destroyers of Worlds had been expecting this, and black antimatter beams were quickly focused on the Lakiam ships. Four battlecruisers died almost instantly, and then twelve more as additional beams found their targets. Then the second missile wave launched. Additional Lakiam battlecruisers were blown apart as even more black ship beams were focused on the attacking fleet. The battlecruiser *Harmony* was cut in two as four black antimatter beams ripped open the ship. Moments later black ship antimatter missiles arrived, obliterating the two sections. In rapid succession seventeen more Lakiam battlecruisers died before the fleet could jump away to safety.

In the black fleet, the impacts of the two missile strikes were devastating. This time, instead of spreading the missile attack across the entire rear section of the black fleet, the Lakiam warships had focused on one flank and fewer vessels. Novalike flashes of light were numerous as the Destroyers of Worlds' flank almost ceased to be.

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Prince Brollen gazed at the incredibly powerful explosions which indicated the destruction of numerous Vorn cruisers. He also noticed that, this time, the attacking fleet had lost a number of vessels as well. Not as many as he had hoped, but perhaps enough to give them pause before attacking again.

*We lost 187 cruisers, reported Military Commander Fraymot grimly. We did destroy 34 of the enemy.*

Prince Brollen shifted his gaze to the viewscreens. The entire first wave of his fleet had joined battle with the main defending fleet. Flashes of bright light lit up the screens from exploding antimatter missiles. Enemy threat icons blinked out on the tactical display with increasing regularity, the result of Vorn cruisers using their black antimatter beams against the defending fleet. Occasionally an icon representing a Vorn cruiser would vanish. Prince Brollen studied the tactical display intently, then nodded in satisfaction as he saw the attacking fleet was losing ships at a much faster rate than the Vorn were.

*Continue to press the attack. I want that fleet in front of us crushed so we can close on the planet.*

Military Commander Fraymot hesitated and then sent a cautioning thought toward the prince. *The defenses around the planet are the heaviest we have encountered so far. When we reach the planet, we will face more of the two-hundred-megaton missiles that the defending fleet is using against us.*

*What are you saying?* demanded Prince Brollen, concerned that his new Military Commander was failing at his duties.

*I am just saying, if the fleet with the dark matter missiles continues to engage us, we might not have the ships we need to destroy the orbital defenses and defend the remaining motherships from attack while the planet is harvested.*

*We are Vorn, sent Prince Brollen, leaving no doubt as to his intentions. We will sweep away the defending fleet and those defenses, then harvest the planet. Move our fleet to the second wave and have those ships aid in our defense. If the fleet with the dark matter missiles attacks again, we will overwhelm it with our combined firepower.*

Military Commander Fraymot bowed slightly. *It will be done as you have ordered.*

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Fleet Commodore Dreen shook his head in dismay. Thirty-four vessels lost in just a matter of a few seconds. If they had stayed for a third missile strike, it would have been much worse. "How is Fleet Leader Moor doing?"

"He's lost nearly six hundred of his ships and is in full retreat toward Andock Prime," reported Laylem. Then the sensor operator shook his head. "At the rate he's losing warships, he won't have anything left when he



reaches the orbital defenses.”

“How soon before the first reinforcing fleets arrive?” Several Andock colony worlds with large defensive fleets were nearby.

“Another hour at least,” answered Laylem. “I’m afraid the Vorn will still have too many ships for the reinforcements to do any good.”

Commodore Dreen spent several long moments studying the nearby tactical display. Fleet Leader Moor was still pummeling the leading section of the Destroyers of Worlds’ fleet. For every black ship he destroyed, he lost at least ten of his own warships; not a very good trade off. However, it was much better than most Protector Worlds did against the Destroyers of Worlds.

“The motherships are joining up with the second formation of ships,” Alborg pointed out. “We will lose even more ships in the next attack. They will be expecting us to attack again.”

“Contact Fleet Leader Moor and see if he has any other ideas on how to slow down the black fleet.” If things continued as they were now, the Destroyers of Worlds would eventually reach Andock Prime and cull the planet of all major life forms. Commodore Dreen didn’t see a way to prevent this disaster from happening.

Keenol did as directed and then looked at the commodore in surprise. “He says he has set a trap for the Destroyers of Worlds, one they will not enjoy. He didn’t elaborate other than asking us not to launch another assault on the black fleet until his trap has been sprung.”

“I don’t understand,” said Dreen, confused. “What kind of trap can he possibly hope to use against the Destroyers of Worlds?”

“I think I know,” Alborg said as the nearby tactical display suddenly lit up with hundreds of green icons. “Computer-operated cargo ships have jumped in. They’re accelerating at full sublight toward the black fleet.”

“Why?” asked Commodore Dreen. “They’re unarmed. What can unarmed cargo ships do against warships?”

“They’ll ram them,” explained Alborg. “If those ships are fully loaded, the sheer mass they contain will allow them to crash through the shields of the black ships. Even if they are destroyed upon their impact with the screens, the kinetic force of their destruction will be equivalent to over fifty of our missiles. The screens will collapse, destroying the black ships.”

Commodore Dreen returned his attention to the tactical display. Every cargo ship in the system must have jumped directly in front of the Destroyers

of Worlds—so close they only had a few thousand kilometers to go before reaching their targets. For a few precious moments the black ships seemed confused, unsure whether to target the cargo ships or continue to blast away at the warships. Those few seconds were enough for the first cargo ships to smash into the screens of the black ships.

One of the viewscreens switched to a magnified view. An Andock ore carrier slammed into the screen of a black ship. A brilliant flash filled the screen and then died away. When it cleared, all that was visible were a few shards of wreckage.

The black fleet, recognizing the danger, instantly targeted the cargo ships, but they had waited too long. Cargo ship after cargo ship struck their targets in blinding explosions. All across the frontline of the Destroyers of Worlds' fleet, black ships died by the dozens and then by the hundreds.

"Alborg, we'll jump in. I want our first missile wave to blast us an open path to the motherships. Then I want the next four waves aimed at the motherships themselves. We will not withdraw until we've destroyed as many of them as possible." Commodore Dreen recognized this as the opening he had been hoping for. Victory was now within his grasp.

"We'll lose a major portion of our fleet," warned Alborg. "We'll take a lot of incoming fire by concentrating our missiles on the motherships."

"We will, but, after what the Andocks just did, if we can take out more of the motherships, this battle will be over." Commodore Dreen was certain the Destroyers of Worlds had already suffered far more losses than they had planned. If his fleet could take out two or three more of the motherships, he was certain the black ships would withdraw, giving Andock reinforcements time to arrive.

Dreen leaned back in his command chair. If they could force the black ships away from Andock Prime, it would be a major victory; then the alliance he envisioned would grow and become a reality.

"Jalad, put us directly behind the rear section of the black fleet. It's time they learn they can't attack a Protector World."

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Prince Brollen stared aghast at the carnage inflicted on the forward section of his fleet. He had never imagined a race using their spacecraft in such a manner. *What are our losses?* He couldn't blame Military Commander Fraymot for this debacle.

*We've lost 476 cruisers, another 312 are reporting moderate to heavy*

*damage. Our shields are not designed to stop a cargo ship of the size and mass used against us. Many of those ships are larger than our cruisers. From the scale of the explosions, they are also fully loaded, probably with mined ore or even full loads of water.*

*Can we still reach the planet?* Prince Brollen grew deeply concerned about the ramifications of this battle when word reached Queen Alithe and the Conclave Habitat. It was evident now he had erred in attacking this system practically with a fleet from food species 236 present.

Fraymot spent a moment examining the nearest tactical display. *We can still destroy the enemy fleet in front of us, but our forces will suffer additional losses. When we reach the orbital defensive grid, we will suffer even more losses. However, we still have sufficient forces to harvest the planet if no enemy reinforcements show up.*

*That is assuming they do not hit us with more of their cargo ships.*

*Our cruisers are no longer being rammed by cargo vessels. I believe the enemy has used all they had available.*

*Form our remaining fleet around the motherships and proceed toward the planet. We have lost too much not to harvest this world.* If he could harvest this Protector World, it would still be counted as a victory, though a very costly one. Even as he considered the full ramifications of this battle, alarms sounded on the sensor console.

*The fleet with the dark matter missiles is back,* Fraymot reported with deep concern.

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Fleet Commodore Dreen gazed at the nearest viewscreen, showing a magnified view of the forward section of the Destroyers of Worlds' fleet. It was shattered. The drifting wreckage of hundreds of vessels was visible. Not only that, Fleet Leader Moor had stopped his retreat and was now once more advancing on the black ships. Dreen could sense the tide of the battle turning.

"Missiles launching," reported Alborg. "The black fleet is in the process of adjusting their fleet formation, so there are still a lot of holes in it."

"Let's make them pay," said Commodore Dreen, his eyes narrowing. "This time we're not retreating." Dreen was determined to win this battle here and now!

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The first wave of missiles struck the black cruisers before they could adjust to the new configuration Military Commander Fraymot had directed

them to form. Dark matter explosions overloaded energy screens as they absorbed the massive amounts of energy being released. In just a matter of a few moments screens began failing. They burst like giant bubbles, and, when they did, titanic amounts of absorbed energy were released. Black ships died as they frantically turned, trying to meet this new threat. A few black antimatter beams flicked out toward the attackers. Three Lakiam battlecruisers were struck and quickly annihilated.

The second wave of hypermissiles launched. This time aimed deeper into the black fleet formation. Unfortunately too many cruisers still barred the way to the motherships. Yet more black ship screens were overloaded, and novalike explosions of energy and light marked their deaths. While this occurred, more black cruisers turned to bring their weapons to bear on the enemy vessels. Even a few spheres of annihilation were launched.

The third wave of dark matter missiles shattered the last black cruisers defending the motherships, opening a path for the next wave. In the Lakiam fleet, dozens of battlecruisers died as black antimatter beams blew them apart and spheres of annihilation drained the power of numerous vessels. Still Fleet Commodore Dreen refused to pull back as his fleet began to die around him.

The fourth wave of missiles—while decidedly weaker than the previous ones due to the number of ships lost—exploded among the remaining motherships. All three of the damaged vessels vanished under the fusillade of titanic explosions that shattered their energy screens. The three motherships simply disintegrated, leaving behind large fields of glowing wreckage.

In the Lakiam fleet, more spheres of annihilation attached themselves to energy screens and began draining them.

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Prince Brollen could scarcely breathe from all the smoke in the Command Center. Alarms blared, and members of the working caste moved sluggishly about, trying to clean up the wreckage. A few Vorn technicians appeared and began working to restore power to several damaged consoles.

*Report!* sent Brollen, gazing toward Military Commander Fraymot.

*The Barl, Xanthe, and Riven have been destroyed. The Larmal, Scythe, and Trield are reporting heavy damage. The enemy fleet defending the planet is engaging the lead elements of our fleet. The ships with the dark matter missiles are still attacking the rear of our fleet, though we are inflicting heavy losses with our weapons.*

*Can we still take the planet and harvest it?*

No, replied Fraymot. *We cannot destroy the orbital defenses with our remaining fleet.*

Defeat! Brollen detected a sour taste in his mouth, one he was not familiar with. *We must withdraw.*

*This battle will upset the Queens,* Fraymot said, his expression fearful.

*I warned them and others about the dark matter missiles. I made a mistake in not eliminating that threat earlier. It is now obvious we must deal with it sooner than I had planned or our harvesting in this galaxy could be put in jeopardy. Take the fleet into hyperspace. We will return to the staging system for repairs and to make plans on how to deal with the food species that possesses the dark matter missiles. It is evident now they must be destroyed at once.*

-

Fleet Commodore Dreen gasped in agony as green icons representing Lakiam battlecruisers blinked rapidly out of existence. On one of the viewscreens, the battlecruiser *Narran* was cut in two by several black antimatter beams. In a brilliant explosion, the battlecruiser blew apart, scattering debris in all directions.

“The black fleet is jumping into hyperspace!” called out Laylem jubilantly. “They’re pulling out!”

Even as Laylem spoke, the black antimatter beams vanished as the spindle-shaped cruisers ceased firing and entered hyperspace. In a matter of a few minutes the last black ship disappeared from the viewscreen. All but one—a large red icon.

“What remains?” demanded Commodore Dreen, gazing at the one remaining threat icon.

“It’s one of their motherships,” answered Laylem, perplexed. He made some quick scans with the ship’s sensors and then turned toward Commodore Dreen. “I believe it’s too damaged to enter hyperspace.”

Commodore Dreen couldn’t believe the luck of what had just fallen into his hands. “Contact Fleet Leader Moor and tell him to leave that ship alone. I intend to board it and capture it.” If he were successful in capturing a Destroyers of Worlds’ mothership, it could potentially reveal a treasure trove of information. “Alborg, prepare our combat robots. You will be leading a team to capture that ship.”

“You want prisoners?” As tactical officer, part of his duty was to command the combat robots.

“If possible,” replied Dreen. He wasn’t concerned about capturing prisoners; the ship’s computers alone would be invaluable. “Don’t endanger your boarding party. If the enemy resists, kill them!”

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The *Basera* slid closer to the Destroyers of Worlds’ mothership. Lakiam battlecruisers moved to completely surround the heavily damaged vessel. The ship was dumbbell-shaped, with two enormous globes at each end connected to one another by a short cylinder. The ship was painted a matte black, and no starlight reflected from its hull. Each of the globes was two thousand meters in diameter, and the cylinder connecting the two was four hundred meters long and three hundred in diameter. All across the ship’s hull, huge gashes indicated where dark matter energy had washed across the vessel. In several sections the deep gashes extended several hundred meters inside the ship.

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Several small shuttles left the *Basera* and docked with the mothership. Alborg ordered the combat robots to set explosive charges against the hatches as the airlocks between the vessels were not compatible.

“Blasting our way in,” Alborg reported over his comm unit which connected him with the *Basera* and Fleet Commodore Dreen.

“Keep in mind we’re still picking up intermittent power readings on that vessel,” warned Laylem as he watched sensors which continuously scanned the mothership.

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Alborg waited, standing behind twenty of the eight-foot-tall combat robots. Twenty more were on the other shuttle commanded by Wien Metz, a combat specialist. A loud explosion was heard, and the hatch fell open. The combat robots immediately moved inside, their arms held before them, pointing the twin stunners embedded in their palms forward. The passageway was tall and wide with very dim lighting. Alborg activated his combat glasses which allowed him to see as if the corridor was fully lit.

“Proceed. Engage any hostiles and immobilize them. If they return fire, the use of deadly force is authorized.” The robots were programmed to carry out this type of mission, though Alborg could not recall any ever being used to actually board another vessel before.

“We have gained access,” reported Metz. “We’re proceeding down a corridor. No resistance encountered.”

For several minutes Alborg and the combat robots moved deeper into the ship without encountering any signs of life, then suddenly the stunners on the leading robots activated with sharp buzzing noises which sounded like the release of electricity.

“Enemy encountered and stunned. No resistance,” reported the lead combat robot.

Alborg stepped forward and for the first time gazed upon a Destroyers of Worlds’ alien, lying upon the deck. It had a basic humanoid form with two legs and two arms. That was where the resemblance ended. The creature looked like a cross between a humanoid and a wasp. The head was covered with very short hair and triangular in shape with two antennae. Its eyes were those of an insect. Alborg could see two small wasplike wings on the creature’s back, and it had hands, each with seven thin digits. The enemy did not resemble any alien race Alborg was familiar with. He knew of no intelligent insectoid races.

“Are you getting this?”

“Yes,” replied Commodore Dreen. “Your video feed is coming in clearly. We see everything you do. Have the combat robots secure the prisoner. You can pick it up on the way back.”

Alborg quickly did as ordered and then had the robots moving forward again. Over the next few minutes they encountered more of what Alborg assumed were the crew. The creatures seemed listless and confused. In each case Alborg had them stunned and then bound.

As they moved deeper into the ship, the noise level increased. It was apparent to Alborg that the Destroyers of Worlds were attempting to repair their ship. He was concerned that, if the ship jumped into hyperspace, his mission might end in a disaster.

“I’ve found what appears to be the engineering compartment,” Metz suddenly reported. “Several different types of aliens are inside. One group is working on the equipment, and the other just hands them tools and otherwise cleans up.”

“A caste system,” suggested Commodore Dreen. “It is common among insects.”

“Possibly,” responded Alborg. “Metz, move your combat robots into the engineering compartment and secure it. If we control Engineering, they can’t take the ship into hyperspace.” This would eliminate one worry Alborg had. He also had no idea how big a crew was on this vessel and if any of

them were armed. There could be thousands on this ship.

“Moving in,” responded Metz.

Moments later Metz’s voice came over the comm. “We’re meeting heavy resistance. Some of the aliens in the compartment are armed. I’ve lost six combat robots, but we’ve taken out most of the resistance. We should have the compartment secured shortly.”

“Alborg, several of our other battlecruisers are launching more combat units. If this is a caste system, they obviously have a warrior caste. That’s what Metz is encountering. If they can take out our combat robots, that indicates they’re extremely aggressive and dangerous.”

“I agree,” responded Alborg. “We’ll move deeper into the ship to see if we can find the Command Center. Let me know when the other units arrive.”

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For the next several hours the fighting inside the ship intensified. More combat robots showed up, and soon over two hundred were on board the mothership. In several compartments the enemy put up a fierce resistance, destroying many of the combat robots. After considerable heavy fighting, Alborg found himself in the forward section of the enemy ship, facing a heavily reinforced door. They had been forced to fight their way through over sixty of the warrior caste in the corridor leading to this hatch. No doubt this had to be the Command Center.

“Blast it open,” ordered Alborg. His forces had been augmented by two more groups of combat robots and their commanding Lakiam officers. “Use stunners. This will be the command crew, and we want to capture as many alive as possible.”

An explosion shook the corridor, and the robots filed into the room beyond. Alborg could hear weapons fire until it was finally his turn to enter. Stepping inside, his eyes widened at the sight. Nearly half of his combat robots were down, and the room was full of heavily armed aliens. He noticed it was taking three or four hits from the robots’ stunners to knock them out.

“Switch to energy beams,” he ordered. The resistance in this room was too heavy to depend on the stunners.

Instantly beams of energy struck the enemy. They fell rapidly as the light combat armor they wore was not impervious to the deadly energy beams. What struck Alborg the most was how silent the enemy was. Very seldom did they cry out or yell orders to one another. Then the fighting stopped, and Alborg looked around; all the aliens were down and unmoving.



“Command Center is secure,” he reported to Commodore Dreen.

“Excellent,” replied Dreen. “Keep your forces in the Command Center and in Engineering. The other combat teams will finish sweeping the ship.”

Alborg nodded. He walked to the center of the room, where a number of the alien warriors had fallen. In the center were two aliens who were slightly different in stature. Both of their heads seemed slightly larger, and their antennae were longer. Gazing at them, Alborg realized these must be the officers in charge of the mothership. One moved slightly. With a pleased smile, Alborg realized this alien was only stunned. “Secure this being immediately,” he ordered. Not only had they captured the mothership, they also had one of its commanding officers!

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Fleet Commodore Dreen had just finished speaking with Fleet Leader Moor. The Andock fleet had suffered heavily, losing 807 battlecruisers and 217 battleships and all their crews. However, in the past hour, two fleet formations of over three hundred warships each had arrived in the system. The Lakiam fleet had also suffered heavily, losing 163 battlecruisers in the battle. The ships that had lost their power were getting it back online.

Already Dreen had sent several battlecruisers to Lakiam to bring additional scientists and technicians to study the Destroyers of Worlds’ mothership and to help interrogate the prisoners. Hundreds were being held on the ship under the guard of Lakiam combat robots and combat specialists. The Andock government had agreed to leave the mothership under Lakiam control as long as their own scientists and technicians could come on board. Each side would share everything they learned. Maybe this would be the turning point in the war.

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Prince Brollen gazed at the shattered remnants of his fleet. Five motherships, all of them damaged to some extent, and 1,200 cruisers. Only in the massive battles in their old universe had the Vorn suffered such losses.

*The Scythe did not make the transition into hyperspace,* reported Military Commander Fraymot.

Prince Brollen could not believe this. *Was it destroyed?* The Scythe had been under his command from the very beginning.

*The last report I received was that it was heavily damaged and attempting to enter hyperspace. It did not arrive at the rendezvous point.*

The tactical display of what was left of his fleet confirmed the missing

mothership had been destroyed. Seven motherships and nearly two thousand cruisers lost, he thought. Unless he could find a way to salvage what had just happened, even being one of Queen Alithe's consorts might not save him from deletion.

*Take us to the staging area, he ordered. We must plan an attack on the food species that possess the dark matter weapons. If we fail to destroy them, I fear the harvesting of this galaxy may come to an end.*

Moments later the black ships entered hyperspace. They had a long journey ahead of them. Prince Brollen stood in the Command Center, not communicating with anyone. His only concern was how to avoid deletion. In the back of his mind, a plan formed.

## Chapter Thirteen

Fleet Admiral Kurt Vickers was feeling anxious as the *Star Cross* dropped from hyperspace. So much was depending on this mission. In front of them was the nebula which supposedly held the Glaymon homeworld or worlds. The flagship's main viewscreens came to life, showing images of the other ships in the fleet. Since encountering the Hanorian warships, they had managed to avoid other spacecraft. They had traveled the old smugglers' route avoiding the heavily trafficked areas, until they were on the very edge of the galactic core. Kurt was amazed at the brilliance of the star field on one of the viewscreens. He gazed at the core and could easily see thousands of stars on this one screen. In this region of space, worlds were lit brilliantly just by starlight. No true darkness or night.

"Sensors are clear in our immediate vicinity," reported Lieutenant Brooks. "However, numerous vessels are on the long-range sensors."

"It will not be long before they notice our presence," cautioned Mara. She stood next to Kurt with her arms folded across her chest.

Kurt had made it a point to avoid Mara's quarters on the *Star Cross*. She was too alluring, and Kurt didn't want to risk doing anything that might upset Keera.

"I have Lomatz on the comm," reported Lieutenant Pierce. "He recommends we move immediately into the outer regions of the nebula where we will be masked from sensor scans."

"That would be wise," Mara said in agreement. "A number of Enlightened Worlds are in this vicinity, as well as two Protector Worlds."

Andrew stepped closer to Kurt. "Is it safe in the nebula?"

"Our energy shields will protect us from the radiation," answered Kurt. "Even if the shields fail, the armored hulls of our ships will provide adequate protection for a while."

"Only a few areas exist where the radiation is that intense," Mara said. "We should be safe."

"Take us in," ordered Kurt. "When our long-range sensors can no longer detect other spacecraft, we will come to a stop and decide upon our next move."

Kurt took a deep breath as he gazed at one of the viewscreens, revealing the nebula—over forty-two light-years long and fifteen at its narrowest. It glowed with a light blue color, due to the filters on the viewscreen. It almost

seemed to pulse, as if alive.

The eight ships of the fleet moved slowly into the nebula. The gas and dust in the outer region were not very dense, and the ships took a number of hours to reach an area with a thick-enough density to shield them from detection. Once the long-range sensors indicated they were safely hidden, the fleet came to a stop.

“Now what?” asked Andrew, the viewscreens revealing the faintly glowing gas and dust of the nebula.

“We wait,” answered Kurt. “From all the reports I’ve read, very few ships ever return once they enter this nebula. Let’s see if the Glaymons come to us.”

“That’s comforting.” Andrew looked at Mara for an explanation.

She let out a deep breath. “If this is, indeed, where the Glaymons are, they must be intercepting all the exploration vessels. By making it seem this nebula is too dangerous to enter, it helps to ensure their security. From what we’ve heard, hundreds of exploration ships over the years have vanished. Very few enter the nebula anymore as it has been labeled too dangerous to explore.”

“Were they destroyed?”

“No, Captain,” replied Mara. “No wreckage has ever been discovered.”

Andrew shifted his gaze to Kurt. “What makes you think, if these Glaymons exist, they’ll let our ships leave? It sounds as if they’ve stopped everyone else.”

“It’s a risk,” admitted Kurt. This was an aspect of this mission which greatly concerned him. If the Glaymons were intent on keeping their world or worlds a secret, they could very well refuse to let Kurt and his fleet depart. “Take the fleet to Condition Two. We’ll wait here for twenty-four hours and see if there’s any response to our presence.” Surely the Glaymons monitored the nebula, so they would know when ships entered. If Kurt’s assumption was correct, there would be a response to his fleet’s presence.

“We’re not detecting anything artificial on either our short-range or long-range sensors,” reported Lieutenant Brooks with a frown.

Mara turned to the sensor operator. “I suspect the science we’re dealing with is so advanced that we won’t detect anything until they show up.”

Kurt addressed the lieutenant. “How far can we scan with the long-range sensors in this nebula?”

“Short-range is normal. However, the long-range sensors are severely

limited to about two light-years. Even then, sections of the nebula where the radiation and gas density is elevated are stopping the sensors completely. There are three regions within one light-year I can't scan at all."

"They could be right on top of us, and we'd never know it," muttered Andrew, sounding concerned. "I recommend we keep our Marines posted in all key compartments. As much as I hate to suggest it, maybe we should deploy some of the combat robots as well."

Mara looked concerned at Andrew's suggestion. "We don't know what we may be dealing with, so we do not want to look overtly hostile."

Kurt considered what the two had said and then reached a decision. "Lieutenant Pierce, contact all our ships and have them deploy their Marines and combat robots to all key areas of their ships. Inform them this is a precautionary measure only."

"That might be a mistake," warned Mara frowning.

"It may be, but I want to keep our ships secure." Kurt gazed at the viewscreens feeling apprehensive. They were facing something that was totally unknown. What would a race that had been hiding for over twenty-two million years even be like?

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For several hours Kurt and Mara stayed in the Command Center. The sensors remained quiet as nothing unusual was detected.

"I'll be in my quarters, getting some rest," Kurt said to Andrew. "If anything is detected on the sensors, call me immediately."

"Yes, Admiral," Andrew replied as he moved to take over the command chair Kurt had vacated.

"Admiral, I'll call a shuttle and go to the *Aurelia*. I wish to speak with several of the scientists on board. Perhaps they will have an idea as to how to contact the Glaymons without venturing further into the nebula."

"Go ahead," answered Kurt. He would be relieved to have Mara off the *Star Cross*. Just her presence was distracting. He had noticed the male members of his crew, and even a few of the women, looking at her suggestively. Kurt could hardly blame them; Mara was extremely beautiful.

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It had been several hours since Kurt had retired to his quarters, while Andrew remained in the Command Center. Shortly the next shift would report for duty. Andrew yawned, feeling the effects of the long day and looking forward to eating a quick bite and then getting a few well-deserved

hours of sleep. He would also take a few minutes to record a brief message to his wife. While the message couldn't be sent, he would play them for her once they returned to Newton. He was also curious how Alexis was doing in school, and feeling nervous about this boy situation. He remembered how he was around girls at that age. While Alexis didn't have a boyfriend at the moment, she had gone to the school dance. It would only be a matter of time before they began calling.

"Captain, I'm picking up something strange on the short-range sensors," reported Lieutenant Brooks.

Andrew left the command chair and walked the short distance to the lieutenant's station. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure. The sensors can no longer see into several nearby areas."

"Put them up on one of the tactical displays." Andrew suspected it might be a few areas of gas or dust drifting close enough to interfere with the ship's sensors. There was a lot of that around the *Star Cross*.

On the tactical display, four nearby areas appeared, showing where the sensors were failing to penetrate. He watched them for a minute, and then his eyes widened. "Those things are moving. Lieutenant, plot their course from the time you first noticed them until now."

Moments later, the trajectory of the four areas had been plotted on the tactical display. All four were headed directly toward the fleet!

"Sound the Condition One alarms!" ordered Andrew, his expression showing concern. "Lieutenant Pierce, contact all our ships and order them to go to Condition One immediately. No one is to fire unless I give the order."

"Yes, sir," Pierce replied as she hurried to comply.

Andrew sat in the command chair and pressed a button on the command console in front of him. "Admiral Vickers, come to the Command Center. We have four unidentified objects closing with the fleet."

"On my way," Kurt responded.

The Condition One alarms had already awakened the admiral.

"Captain, look!" called out Lieutenant Mays in alarm.

On the main viewscreen, a massive ship suddenly appeared. It dwarfed anything in the small fleet—bigger even than Lomatz's two-thousand-meter-long command ship. The vessel was disk-shaped and covered with weapon turrets.

"That ship's power readings are off the scale," reported Lieutenant Brooks. "There are four of them, and they're all the same."

“Energy shield is at full power,” reported Lieutenant Mays as her hands moved across her console. “Weapons are charged if needed.”

Andrew looked closely at the nearest tactical display. The four monster ships had surrounded the fleet. “We’re obviously outgunned,” he said in consternation, feeling helpless. “Lieutenant Pierce, contact our other ships and tell them not to resist. No weapons are to be fired or aimed at those vessels. Missile hatches are to remain closed.”

“We’re leaving ourselves defenseless,” Lieutenant Mays quickly pointed out. “We don’t know if those ships are hostile or not.”

“Do you think our weapons can harm those vessels?”

Lieutenant Mays let out a deep breath. “No, sir. From the readings on my tactical console, the screens protecting those ships are the most powerful I’ve ever detected. Our weapons won’t penetrate them.”

“I’m picking up some type of energy buildup!” shouted Lieutenant Brooks. “They’re getting ready to fire.”

Andrew had just enough time to look at one of the viewscreens when a white light flashed through the Command Center. His last thought as he faded into unconsciousness was to wonder what they had gotten themselves into.

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Kurt struggled to open his eyes. He felt groggy and light-headed. With a loud moan, he forced his eyes open. He was in what appeared to be a hospital room. The walls were white; there were no windows, and the only chair in the room was next to his bed. He was also totally naked beneath the white sheet covering him.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Kurt tried to recall what had happened. He remembered Andrew telling him over the comm that four unidentified ships had appeared. After that a white light had flashed through his quarters and then ... nothing.

Kurt lay there for what he estimated to be over an hour. Then, on the far side of the room, a door suddenly appeared. One moment there was a smooth wall, and then an opening resembling a door was there. Through it walked a being that vaguely resembled a humanoid. No doubt this was a Glaymon—nearly seven feet tall, unusually thin, with a larger-than-normal head. No hair was on his head, and his eyes were round with no eyebrows. The being’s arms were long with hands ending in five slim digits. Kurt was pretty certain this was a male.

“Are you a Glaymon?” asked Kurt in a hoarse voice, realizing how

parched his throat was.

The being did not answer. He walked close to the bed and waved his hand over a small section of the wall. An opening appeared. After a low humming noise, a medium-size glass appeared. The Glaymon handed it to Kurt.

Kurt studied the glass seeing what looked like water in it. Dehydrated, Kurt took a long drink. Almost instantly his thirst vanished, and his energy level suddenly increased. Obviously the drink held more than water.

“Why have you come here?” asked the Glaymon in a very soft voice. “We do not care for visitors.”

Kurt sat up partially, then spoke. “The Destroyers of Worlds have returned. They have taken the populations of entire worlds to use as a food source. We seek a weapon to stop them.”

The Glaymon studied Kurt for a long moment before replying. “The Destroyers of Worlds cannot be stopped. For over twenty-two million years they have ravaged this galaxy, periodically harvesting its inhabited worlds for food. There is nothing you can do against them.”

“We must try,” answered Kurt. “Somehow we have to find a way to stop them. We came to this nebula in the hope your science might aid us. We have a weapon in mind which might destroy their ships. We hoped you could help us build this weapon. It would give us something to defend our worlds with.”

“The neutronium marble,” the Glaymon said knowingly, noting the surprised look on Kurt’s face. “We know of your plan. The minds of a number of your crew were scanned before we determined if you were a threat to us and if others knew of your destination.”

Kurt was dumbfounded. The science of the Glaymons was truly advanced, just as Kurt had hoped. “Will you help us?”

“No,” the Glaymon responded. “Our greatest defense against the Destroyers of Worlds is the fact they don’t know of our existence. We cannot do anything to endanger that. I am afraid you will have to spend the remainder of your days here with us, as so many others have in the past.”

Kurt’s eyes widened. “I ask to be allowed to present our case to your leaders.”

The Glaymon looked deeply into Kurt’s eyes. “I will speak to our leaders, but I should warn you. It will do you no good. Others have tried since we moved our civilization here. All have been refused.” The Glaymon



walked to a wall and again waved his hand over a small section. Instantly an opening appeared, and, reaching into it, the Glaymon took out Kurt's uniform. He waved his hand over another section, and a small table with a comfortable chair materialized. He placed Kurt's clothes on the table and then turned to face Kurt. "You may get dressed. I will send someone for you shortly." The Glaymon then turned and left the room through the door opening which instantly vanished, as if it had never been there.

Getting up, Kurt made his way to the table and quickly got dressed. Several things concerned Kurt about the Glaymons. The one who had come to his room had expressed little emotion and didn't seem to feel any empathy for what was happening to the civilized races of the galaxy. *What have I gotten us into?* thought Kurt. Never had he imagined such a situation. With a deep sigh, he sat in the chair to wait.

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Andrew sat in his room, eating some type of soup. The female Glaymon who had come in earlier had given him his clothes, some water to drink, and then placed this soup on a small table, indicating he should eat it. She had said very little, other than he would be summoned to a meeting later. It had been difficult to tell if the Glaymon was a woman. She was nearly flat-chested and her body only curved slightly. Her voice was soft, and only the tone suggested her gender.

Andrew took another spoonful of the very tasty soup, though he couldn't identify any of the ingredients. He paused, taking in the hospital room, or what he assumed was a hospital room. He had no idea what had happened to the rest of the crew or if they were even still alive. The last thing he remembered was the white light and then nothing else. Taking a deep breath, Andrew hoped he would be able to return to his wife and daughter. He was deeply concerned as both Mara and Lomatz had indicated that no one had ever escaped from the nebula. He had to hope Kurt could get them out of this.

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Kurt was growing impatient when the door suddenly appeared again, and the same Glaymon who had spoken to him earlier came in.

"Our ruling council has agreed to give you an audience. You will be allowed to state your case and be expected to answer any questions the councilors have. This will be your only audience with the council."

"What is your name, if I may ask?"

“You may call me Aalik,” the Glaymon answered. “Our names are not pronounceable in your language and are more similar to a symbol which marks our career choice. If you will follow me, I will take you to the council chambers.”

Kurt followed Aalik from the room and into a broad corridor. A few other Glaymons were visible, though they paid little attention to Kurt. After walking a short distance, they reached a large door which Aalik opened. Kurt stepped up to it and then looked at Aalik, confused. It appeared to be a massive elevator shaft but with no elevator, just open space. “I don’t understand.”

“Watch.”

Kurt turned his attention to the shaft and, after a moment, saw several Glaymons fly by, seemingly floating on air. As he continued to watch, more and more moved both up and down with no obvious means of support.

“It is a transport shaft. It nullifies gravity and uses small transport beams to take everyone to their destinations.” Aalik attached a small metallic disk to Kurt’s uniform. “Step into the shaft. There is nothing to fear.”

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Kurt forced himself to step into the shaft, halfway expecting to fall to his death. Much to his surprise, his feet seemed to touch a solid surface, though nothing was there. Aalik stepped behind him, and, after placing his hand on Kurt’s shoulder, the two of them started moving upward at an ever-increasing speed. For several long minutes they traveled with Kurt watching a number of Glaymons stopping and entering various openings to corridors.

“Inertia is neutralized in the transport shafts,” explained Aalik. “It allows us to travel very fast in order to get to our destinations.”

Kurt didn’t reply as they came to an abrupt halt. They stepped from the shaft into another brilliantly lit corridor. They walked down it and several others before finally reaching a set of large ornate wooden doors. They had huge symbols on them which Kurt didn’t recognize. Aalik opened one of the doors, indicating for Kurt to enter. With just one step, he stood in amazement. He was in a giant amphitheater shaped like a horseshoe with a raised stage in the center, upon which were several of his crew—including Andrew, Lieutenant Mays, and Captain Lindsey Hastings of the heavy battlecruiser *Cygnus*. Mara and Lomatz were there as well as a Glaymon in richly colored robes, standing before a podium.

“You are Fleet Admiral Kurt Vickers?” the Glaymon asked in a soft

voice.

“Yes,” replied Kurt, stepping forward to an empty seat next to Mara, which he assumed was for him.

“Take a seat, and we will begin this audience.”

Kurt complied as he gazed across the amphitheater. He could barely make out the end of the room. Thousands of Glaymons must be in attendance, watching. He had only expected to meet a few, not something like this. If this was their ruling council, how many Glaymons were there?

“You have brought eight ships into our domain,” the Glaymon at the podium said, turning to face Kurt and the others. “Studying the computers on your ships, you knew those who had come before had not left this nebula, yet you came anyway.”

“We came seeking you,” replied Kurt. “We seek knowledge which only your race may possess.”

“We are aware of that,” the Glaymon said, shifting his gaze to Lomatz. “We erred years ago in allowing this one to aid one of our scout research vessels. We very seldom venture from the protective environs of the nebula. We only do so when we believe the Destroyers of Worlds have returned.”

“I saw your warships,” said Andrew. “They looked very powerful. Can your ships destroy a black ship?”

“They can,” the Glaymon replied. “Our ships are powered by what we call Zero-Point Energy. We have the ability to overload their shields and destroy their ships if they enter this nebula.”

“If you have a way to destroy them, why haven’t you?” asked Kurt, confused. “The galaxy around you is dying, yet you do nothing!”

“You do not understand,” replied the Glaymon patiently. “The Vorn came to our universe from another over twenty-four million years ago to escape a great enemy destroying their civilization. In a final desperate battle, the Vorn Queens fled with their surviving ships into the heart of a black hole. They traveled through the singularity and arrived in our universe. The Vorn live in the space between galaxies in huge habitats that hold several trillion of their people. They possess a massive warfleet, much of which orbits their habitats at all times. The Vorn have a caste system controlled by their Queens. This ensures the system changes very little over the millennia. The primary Queen is their ruler and sets policy for the Vorn.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you won’t fight them.”

The Glaymon stared at Kurt for a long moment. “While we might

destroy the first wave of black ships, they would only summon reinforcements. If one thousand ships could not destroy us, they would bring ten thousand. If ten thousand could not do the job, then they would bring one hundred thousand. No victory is possible against the Vorn. We do not wish to engage in an unending war.”

Kurt’s mind felt numb at the numbers the Glaymon had mentioned. One hundred thousand ships, possibly more? Fighting the Destroyers of Worlds was like trying to empty an ocean using a thimble.

“You came seeking knowledge of how to destroy the Vorn,” the Glaymon continued. “Lieutenant Mays wants a neutronium marble and the ability to deploy it. She is quite correct that such a weapon would destroy a Vorn ship, even one of their motherships. Mara Liam wants weapons for her people so they can survive the onslaught of the Vorn. If not, she seeks to come to your world to allow her race to continue. Just as Lomatz has already resettled many of his people on Newton. They are correct in their assumption that your world may be overlooked by the Vorn. Many primitive worlds are bypassed during Vorn incursions. It allows new life to spread across the galaxy to become food during the next invasion.”

Kurt was amazed at everything the Glaymon knew. Their mind-scanning ability had already revealed the main reason for Kurt’s mission. He was fearful the Glaymon council had already made up their minds.

“All we ask is a chance for our people to survive,” said Kurt. “While the Destroyers of Worlds may, indeed, overlook our planets, a real possibility remains that they may not. Lomatz’s people, Mara’s people, and my own only wish to live. Is there something wrong in that?”

“No,” the Glaymon responded. “It is a noble cause, but one wherein our laws prohibit us from aiding you. For twenty-two million years we have lived inside this nebula. In many ways we have transcended life as you know it. I should inform you that nearly all Glaymons are now telepathic. We also have the ability to move objects with the power of our minds. Many other things have changed, but I do not believe you would understand. We are now as different from the races of this galaxy as the Vorn are to those of our universe.”

“There must be a way for you to help us,” insisted Kurt. “We will not tell anyone of your existence.”

“No, you won’t,” the Glaymon responded. “You will never be leaving here. This will be your home now. Even those in your home system who

know of your destination will eventually assume your quest was fruitless and that you perished in the nebula.”

Kurt slowly shook his head. “We have families and a duty to our people. While you may be afraid to face the Destroyers of Worlds, we are not.”

“Afraid?” said the Glaymon, shaking his head. “We are not afraid to face the Vorn. However, we know to face the Vorn may mean the end of us and of our destiny.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s quite simple. All the while we have been inside this nebula, we have been working on a method to return the Vorn to their universe. If we can do so, their threat will come to an end.”

“Is that possible?”

“We believe so,” the Glaymon responded.

“How soon?” If the Glaymons had this knowledge, perhaps there was still hope for the galaxy.

“Two million years. Some areas of research still must be completed before we can implement our final solution.”

A cold chill ran down Kurt’s spine. Two million years? He could not imagine a race which could think in those terms. “We can’t wait two million years. We need a method to fight the Destroyers of Worlds now! Billions of intelligent beings are harvested by the Vorn every day. If you can help us, at least we can give hope to some of the worlds of our galaxy. You can’t stand by and let the entire galaxy become food for these monsters. Assist us with the neutronium weapon. Give us something we can defend ourselves with. You can stay safe here in your nebula. No one needs to know of your existence.”

“The weapon you propose would indicate to the Vorn that a very advanced civilization exists somewhere in this galaxy,” responded the Glaymon. “They would seek us out and attempt to destroy us. If we are successful in completing our research for returning them to their universe, we would be saving all the future intelligent races of this galaxy and many others across this universe. This would be their last culling of our galaxy.”

“We have a right to survive!” cried out Kurt in anguish. The Glaymons had to help or all was lost. There was no guarantee the Vorn would miss Newton and Earth. “Please discuss it. See if you can find some way to give us viable defenses and weapons.” Kurt didn’t know what else to say.

The Glaymon turned and gazed across the massive amphitheater. There was nothing but silence. "Go and consider what has been said here today. We will meet once again in six days to consider this request." As the Glaymon finished speaking, the Glaymons in the audience vanished one by one until the packed amphitheater was empty.

"How?" asked Kurt, looking at Aalik. "Where did they go?"

"The Glaymons here were all holograms. The distance to travel is far too great for most of the members of the council."

"Why is the council so large?"

Aalik looked at Kurt and the others from his crew. "Come with me, and I will show you."

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Aalik led them from the council chambers and down several corridors to another transport shaft. Kurt wasn't surprised when he heard Andrew groan.

"Not again."

They stepped into the shaft and were taken upward. This time the trip was much longer, before Aalik led them from the shaft and down another brightly lit corridor. He paused at a large door and waved his hand before it; causing it to swing open. Stepping through they found themselves in a large garden area that stretched out for several kilometers.

"Where are we?" asked Kurt, looking over at Aalik feeling confused.

"Look around," directed Aalik.

Kurt took in his amazing surroundings, the horizon curving gently as far as the eye could see. Then his eyes opened wide in instant realization. He shared a knowing nod with Andrew.

"A Dyson Sphere," Andrew said in amazement. "You've enclosed your star with this megastructure and are using it for power."

"Yes," replied Aalik. "It took us over one million years and much of the matter which once comprised the nebula. The sun furnishes us unlimited power, and the living surface is far more than we will ever need. All the races who journeyed into the nebula have been given living areas upon its surface to renew their races. Over 274 civilizations, besides our own, share the sphere. Your people will be given a small part of the Dyson Sphere to live upon as well."

Mara turned toward Aalik. "Is there any chance the council will agree to help us?"

“No,” responded Aalik. “It has never been done before, and I do not expect it to be done now. This is your home. You will be safe here from the Vorn, and your races will continue.”

Everyone stood silently, looking around. The Glaymons’ science was beyond belief. Finding a Dyson Sphere was the last thing any of them had expected. Now it seemed as if none of them would ever leave. They would be like so many other exploratory missions of the past. They had vanished to never be heard from again.

## Chapter Fourteen

Kurt and the others spent a considerable amount of time gazing at the almost magical landscape around them. Just the knowledge that they were inside an actual Dyson Sphere was breathtaking. It seemed as if they stood in paradise. Kurt could feel a light wind blowing against his face; the temperature was warm but comfortable. In the distance, he could hear the sounds of birds calling to one another.

“Can your people build a neutronium bullet?” Lieutenant Mays asked Aalik, obviously unable to contain her curiosity.

Aalik turned toward the lieutenant. “Why worry about that if you never leave here? You must accept the fact this is your home now.”

“I need to know.”

Aalik looked thoughtful, as if we were speaking to someone. “I asked a scientist I know, and he said it is, indeed, possible. However, he suggests other substances would work just as well and achieve the same results.”

“What other substances?” asked Captain Lindsey Hastings. “Neutronium is the densest form of matter we know of.”

“You have yet to discover a number of exotic elements,” responded Aalik. “You must realize, when compared to my people, yours are but children. You will learn much when you reside among us.”

“Where are the rest of our crews?” Kurt was deeply concerned for the welfare of his people, as well as for Lomatz’s and Mara’s. No one had mentioned them.

“Still on board your ships,” replied Aalik.

“Outside the Dyson Sphere?” asked Captain Hastings.

“No, they’re safely inside a spacedock.”

“Can you take us there?” asked Kurt. He wanted to get to his ship so he could evaluate what had happened and what needed to be done next.

“Yes, the council has decided the best place for you is on board your vessels. If you are interested, later on I would be willing to take you on a tour of the Dyson Sphere, so you can see more of your new home.”

“I would like to take the tour,” said Mara. “Would it be possible for me to bring along several of the scientists in my crew?”

“Yes, bring as many of your people as you want,” answered Aalik.

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After traveling through several more corridors and taking two different



transport shafts, they arrived at what appeared to be a massive airlock. Once again Aalik waved his hands, and the huge metal door slid open. Beyond the first door were three more, which slid silently open as well.

“Follow me,” said Aalik. “Your ships are docked just beyond.”

Passing through the last of the large metal doors, Kurt stood frozen in shock. They were inside a vast metal cavern. He couldn’t even see the far side. It must be many kilometers in length as well as in height.

“How big is this thing?” gasped Andrew.

“It is but one of our many spacedocks and a smaller one, being sixty kilometers in length, twenty in width, and eighteen in height.”

Kurt looked around, scarcely believing what he saw. There were hundreds of disk-shaped warships, each much bigger than the *Star Cross*.

“How many warships do you possess?” If this was but one of many spacedocks and a smaller one, the Glaymons had a massive fleet.

“I’m sorry. That information is restricted. Perhaps once the council has made its final decision, you can be told.”

“Where are our ships?” asked Mara, as anxious to get to the *Aurelia* as Kurt was to board the *Star Cross*.

“A shuttle is coming to take you to them,” answered Aalik. “In another day or two I will contact you about the tour of your new home.”

Even as Aalik spoke, a small disk-shaped shuttle suddenly appeared and landed in front of them. A hatch opened, and a ramp descended to touch the floor.

Aalik indicated for them to enter, and, after a moment, they did so, leaving Aalik behind.

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The shuttle flew down the center of the spacedock, affording them a view of all the wonders that filled the massive construct. There were hundreds of the large disk ships as well as smaller ones. Shuttles could be seen going back and forth from various ships and airlocks.

“I don’t understand all the activity,” said Andrew, looking out one of the large observation windows in the shuttle. “Their fleet seems as if it’s ready to go into battle at a moment’s notice.”

“Why do they need all those ships if they don’t venture from the nebula?” asked Mara with a look of confusion on her face. “A lot of things don’t add up.”

Kurt agreed, but then he saw the *Star Cross* and the rest of the fleet in

the distance, docked securely to the walls of the spacedock with large clamps holding them in place. His ships were going nowhere without the Glaymons' permission.

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A little while later Kurt was once more on board the *Star Cross*. The crew bombarded Kurt and the others with questions about where they had been and what they had seen. Kurt was anxious to get to the Command Center to learn what information they could about the spacedock they were in. The ship's sensors should provide them some valuable data.

"We'll issue a statement later explaining everything," he told the various crewmembers, seeing the deep concern on their faces.

Reaching the Command Center, Kurt, Andrew, and Lieutenant Mays quickly went to their respective command stations.

"It's good to see you, Admiral," said Lieutenant Brooks with relief in her voice.

"Report," ordered Kurt. He wanted to know what had happened during his absence.

"We're in a huge spacedock," reported Lieutenant Brooks. "It's sixty kilometers in length, twenty in width, and eighteen in height. A large number of ships are docked inside it."

"How big were the warships that intercepted us in the nebula?" asked Andrew.

"Two kilometers in width and two thousand meters thick," reported Brooks. She called up some additional information on one of her screens. "They are powered by an unknown energy source, and we could not identify the weapons the ships are armed with. Inside this spacedock are 807 of those vessels."

"I don't like this at all," said Andrew, gazing at one of the viewscreens showing one of the disk-shaped warships. "If this is one of the smaller spacedocks, they must have thousands upon thousands of those ships. The Glaymons could stop the Destroyers of Worlds if they wanted."

"Aalik said they have changed over the countless millennia they've been in hiding," responded Kurt. "They have developed mental powers and who knows what else. Our goals may now be so different that, in many ways, we may not be able understand one another."

"Aalik indicated they had the technology to build a neutronium marble to use against the black ships," said Lieutenant Mays. "How can they refuse

to give us the weapon we need to defend our worlds against the Destroyers of Worlds?”

Kurt let out a deep breath. “At least they’ve agreed to talk about it. All we can do is wait and hope for the best.” What was frightening to Kurt was the fact that, if the Glaymons kept Kurt and his ships here inside the Dyson Sphere, they would never know what happened to Newton, Earth, much less the galaxy at large or their friends and families in particular. Back home Keera and Denise would be busy decorating the new house Kurt had purchased, readying it for his homecoming from this mission. A mission he might never return from.

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Prince Brollen was at the staging area for the Vorn fleets. He had spun a story about how two Protector World civilizations, had joined together to set a trap for his fleet, sacrificing hundreds of large cargo vessels, which helped to give credence to his claims. It was unheard of for a Vorn prince to lie or attempt subterfuge.

*These two food species must be eliminated before others join them,* Prince Ortumad sent from the Intergalactic Transport Vessel which was his permanent headquarters. Ortumad was responsible for the operations of the staging area and seeing that Collector Ships were routinely sent to the habitats with their loads of food pellets.

*They grow stronger every day,* replied Prince Brollen. He stood in the Command Center of the *Reaper*, currently under repair by some of the repair vessels kept permanently in the system. *We must summon a warfleet from the habitats to destroy the fleets of these two species as well as the powerful orbital defenses which protect all their worlds.*

*A warfleet?* replied Ortumad. *A warfleet has not been used against a food species since our arrival in this universe.*

*We have never faced such a threat before. We erred grievously in allowing extra time to pass in this galaxy so the food species would be more plentiful. Several of them have advanced to the point they have become dangerous.*

*I have seen the videos of your battle against these two food species. I believe you are correct in the danger they represent. I will send word to Queen Alithe at the Conclave Habitat that a warfleet is needed.*

*Until then I would recommend we do no harvesting in the regions of space these two Protector Worlds are responsible for,* Prince Brollen

suggested. *It will give them a false sense of security, perhaps believing after what they did to my fleet that we will not return. When the warfleet arrives, I will show them the error of their ways. They will become food for the Vorn.*

Prince Brollen was satisfied with what he had accomplished. An actual Vorn warfleet would shortly arrive. When it did, he would add thousands of Vorn cruisers to it and then proceed to the regions of space controlled by the two troublesome food species. He would make an example of their worlds. Normally a planet was only divested of its major life forms but left alone otherwise so new food species could someday arise. This time, after the harvesting, he would order the planets sterilized with nuclear fire. They would become lifeless husks, similar to the one the Vorn fleet now orbited in this system. Never again would life evolve on their surfaces.

Prince Brollen turned toward Military Commander Fraymot. *It has been decided. A warfleet will be summoned.*

*It will be an honor to see such a fleet in action,* replied Fraymot.

*How soon before repairs on the Reaper are completed?* The ship had been heavily damaged in the battle with the two food species.

*Two weeks and all repairs will be complete.*

*See to it,* ordered Prince Brollen. *When the warfleet arrives, I expect the Reaper to lead it.*

*It will be done,* Fraymot responded as he turned to go inspect the progress on the repairs.

Prince Brollen went to his quarters and opened up a sealed container, taking out several food pellets. The first was from a humanoid species harvested several months ago. He popped the pellet between his mandibles and crunched down on it. Invigorating strength flowed through his body. Crunching the second pellet, from the avian food species, he was rewarded with more strength. The taste was exquisite, and he felt drowsy. Two food pellets were more than he needed. However, he wanted the rest the overindulgence would give him.

Once renewed, he would work with Military Commander Fraymot on a battle plan to use against the two bothersome food species. He was also curious to taste the food pellets made of those two species. Already he had set aside several containers to be filled with specially chosen pellets to celebrate his great victory over them.

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Several days passed, and Kurt and some others were in a large Glaymon

shuttle, flying high above the Dyson Sphere. From what Aalik had told them, the Dyson Sphere was far enough from its sun to have the surface area of nearly ten million Earths. It was mind-boggling, and Kurt could well understand why the Glaymons would never need more living space.

A patchwork of colorful squares flew by underneath them into eternity, it seemed. These squares were slightly smaller than the total land mass of Earth. Some were covered in deep blue oceans, while others had massive mountain chains covered in mounds of snow, huge forests with trees larger than redwoods, deserts, flowing grasslands, and enormous river valleys. Every type of landscape found on Earth or Newton was repeated here hundreds of thousands of times, plus some environments which were completely alien.

“So you told us earlier that 274 different species of intelligent beings currently live on the Dyson Sphere,” Mara said, accompanied by four of her scientists from the *Aurelia*.

“By last count, yes,” answered Aalik. “Most of them have very advanced civilizations.”

“All from spacecraft crews who tried to explore the nebula?” asked Mals Bren, one of the scientists with Mara.

“Yes,” replied Aalik. “There were more, but some have died out, and others didn’t have sufficient population bases to reestablish their civilizations. In most cases they lived long and enjoyable lives before passing on.”

“And those still here don’t want to leave the Dyson Sphere?” asked Andrew in disbelief.

“Why would they? Everything they need is here, and it’s perfectly safe.”

“Can they expand to other sections of the sphere, or are they limited to a single world square?” asked Kurt. He could better understand now why the Glaymons had no interest in being found, but still, with their unimaginable population numbers, why not battle the Vorn?

“They are allowed to expand to a point,” replied Aalik, shifting his gaze to Kurt. “Most are encouraged to stay within one or two squares. Several of the more advanced races have been allowed to occupy ten.”

“How advanced are they?” asked Thule Rasht, one of the specialists with Mara.

“Similar to some of your Enlightened Worlds,” answered Aalik. “Some

have been here for millions of years.”

“So Enlightened World civilizations are here?” said Mara, raising her eyebrows.

“No, not as you know them,” responded Aalik. “We found out many thousands of millennia ago that the path to Enlightenment was a dead end. It causes races to stagnate and cease to develop.”

Mara looked stunned and fell silent.

“What type of development do you encourage?” asked Kurt. He wasn’t surprised to find out Enlightenment was a dead end.

“Diversity,” replied Aalik. “Even among my own people we try to remain as diverse as possible. We practice and encourage diversity in all its forms.”

“Do all your people possess the mental abilities you have described?”

“Not all abilities are shared,” admitted Aalik. “In some of the habitat squares, where our people reside, we have used genetic manipulation to keep our people similar to when we first came to this nebula. It gives us a gene pool from a younger version of our race to keep our people vital and inquisitive. That’s why most galaxies never develop weapons which can stop the Destroyers of Worlds.”

“Are you saying other galaxies have stopped the black ships?” asked Andrew, his attention coming more into focus.

“We believe a few have,” responded Aalik.

“Who?” Kurt asked.

Aalik paused, then responded. “Again the council will decide on what you are to be told.”

Kurt went silent for a long moment as he thought over what Aalik had just said.

Mara looked at Aalik with sudden suspicion. “Do all your people support the council’s decision to avoid participating in the war against the Destroyers of Worlds?”

Aalik looked surprised at Mara’s question. It was one of the first times Kurt had seen real emotion on the face of a Glaymon.

“A few wish we were more involved. Their numbers are quite small, and their voices seldom heard.”

“How many are there?” asked Mara. “Do they number in the thousands?”

Aalik hesitated. “No, they number in the billions. They occupy four

habitat squares with a total population of around eight billion.”

“Eight billion?” repeated Andrew, his eyes widening. “How many Glaymons are on the Dyson Sphere?”

“Twelve trillion of us are spread out over eight thousand habitat squares.”

Kurt’s breath caught in his throat. No doubt the Glaymons possessed the manpower, the ships, and the technology to defeat the Destroyers of Worlds, if they so desired. Their population was even greater than the most inflated estimate for the Vorn. “Can you arrange for us to meet with the leaders of those wanting more involvement against the Destroyers of Worlds?”

Aalik went silent for a long moment as if communicating with someone. “No, there will be no communication with those Glaymons. They very seldom travel beyond their world squares.”

Mara and Kurt looked knowingly at one another. These particular Glaymons might be willing to help. The question was, how could Kurt get word to them?

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Two days later Kurt was in his quarters on board the *Star Cross* when Andrew called him to the Command Center. Kurt found everyone staring at one of the long-range viewscreens. A disk-shaped vessel measuring about one thousand meters across was approaching the spacedock where Kurt’s fleet was.

“Who is it?” Kurt asked as he sat in his command chair.

“Unknown,” replied Andrew. “They haven’t responded to our hails.”

“Ship has stopped two kilometers from our position,” Lieutenant Brooks reported as she checked her sensors. “A Glaymon shuttle has left the vessel and is heading toward us.”

“I believe other Glaymon vessels are trying to communicate with it, but it’s refusing to respond to them as well,” added Lieutenant Pierce. “Several larger Glaymon ships are moving toward it.”

“Sounds like the other Glaymons don’t want whoever is on that ship to speak with us,” said Andrew. “It could be the Glaymons who wish to become more involved in the war, as Aalik mentioned.”

“Only one way to find out,” replied Kurt, hoping Andrew was right.

“Should I have some of our Marines and combat robots report to the shuttle bay?”

Kurt stared at the rapidly approaching shuttle. "It's too large to enter the bay. I suspect it will dock to one of the ports. Lieutenant Mays, gather a couple Marines, and let's go see who's paying us a visit."

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A short time later Kurt, Lieutenant Mays, and two heavily armed Marines stood near a starboard docking port, where Andrew had determined the Glaymon shuttle would dock. Kurt waited as the airlock cycled and then opened. Two Glaymons stepped inside. Both looked far different from the ones Kurt had seen so far. These were shorter, had a thin layer of hair on their heads, and their eyes were not quite so round. Their build was a little stockier and their fingers not as slim as the other Glaymons.

"You are Fleet Admiral Kurt Vickers?" one of the Glaymons asked.

Kurt was surprised to note the different inflections in this Glaymon's voice and how he was not like the other Glaymons they'd met so far. Kurt could sense emotions too. "Yes, I am Admiral Vickers."

"I am Marshton, and this is Valan. We represent the Glaymons who are opposed to the council's continued refusal to fight the Vorn."

"Aalik mentioned four population squares with over eight billion Glaymons, similar to those who built the Dyson Sphere. Is that where you're from?"

"Yes," replied Marshton, his eyes widening. "We did not know you knew of us."

"It came up on our tour of the Dyson Sphere."

Marshton nodded his understanding. "I fear that many of our people who are quite advanced in their mental abilities are easy to fool at times. They give out information too freely."

"We wish to speak to you about the Vorn," Valan said. "Is there a place we can speak in private? Your armed guards are not necessary. I can assure you that we are not a threat."

Kurt nodded. He turned to Lieutenant Mays. "Have Andrew contact Mara, Lomatz, and Captain Hastings. I want them here for this meeting."

"Yes, Admiral," said Mays, dismissing the two Marines.

Kurt turned to the two Glaymons. "Follow me to one of our briefing rooms, where we can talk. My second in command has reported that several of the larger warcraft of your people are approaching your ship."

"Don't worry. They won't do anything. I'm sure, by now, their commanders have reported our approach to your vessel. It will displease the



council, and they will file a complaint against us. Nothing more will come of it.”

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It didn't take long for them to reach the briefing room, and Kurt asked the two Glaymons if they could wait to begin until the others arrived. He also had Andrew and Lieutenant Mays attend. When the others finally appeared, Kurt quickly introduced them to Marshton and Valan.

Taking a deep breath, Kurt looked across the table at the two Glaymons. “Why have you requested this meeting? You indicated earlier it involved the Vorn.”

“I am sure you know, by now, that our people possess the ships and the weapons to fight the Vorn,” began Valan.

“We suspected that,” said Kurt. “We just don't understand why they don't.”

“I fear the majority of our race has lost most of their aggressive tendencies over the long millennia we have been in the Dyson Sphere. For twenty-two million years our people have hidden here inside the nebula.”

“Are you saying your people are incapable of fighting?” asked Mara. “It is the same in our galaxy with the Enlightened Worlds. They too are incapable of fighting.”

“It is not quite that bad here,” replied Marshton. “Our people are capable of fighting but only in self-defense. Our warships are primarily controlled by intelligent AIs, programmed to defend this nebula and the Dyson Sphere from attack. A few Glaymons are also on board to offer the AIs advice and take command if necessary. However, the AIs are so advanced that the likelihood of that occurring is infinitesimal.”

“What about your own people, the ones in the four habitats?” asked Kurt.

Valan smiled. “We are different. We still possess most of our aggressive tendencies. Our people greatly feared we would stagnate, and our culture would no longer be dynamic and capable of growth once the Dyson Sphere was completed. It was decided to keep a large group of Glaymons at an earlier stage of our races development. We possess a number of warships, and, while the AIs are in command, full crews of Glaymons are on board and fully capable of fighting if necessary.”

“Will you help us?” asked Kurt. Perhaps here was the help he had been seeking.

“That’s why we’re here,” Marshton replied with a slight smile. “With the appearance of your ships, we now have the necessary intelligence to do something about the Vorn. The rest of our people, those Glaymons who you have met, are intent on sending the Vorn back to their home universe. Their planned method would mean minimal risk to our people. However, there is no guarantee it will work, and we are still two million years away from making that attempt.”

“Why so long?” asked Mara. “Why can’t it be done now?”

“The science behind what we wish to do is extremely complicated, but the equipment to send the Vorn to another universe is ready. What we need next is to locate the bubble universe they came from.

“Two million years still seems impossibly long,” commented Andrew. “I would think it could be done much faster.”

“The biggest problem is sending them to the right universe,” said Valan. “We don’t want to force another bubble universe to have to deal with the Vorn and suffer the same fate as have so many galaxies in our universe. We know the Vorn fled their universe after near annihilation by a great enemy. We assume that enemy still has the capability to deal with the Vorn.”

“So why two million years?” asked Captain Hastings.

“We have scanned numerous bubble universes, and none match the one we believe the Vorn escaped from. In order for us to scan other universes, they must be touching the multiverse membrane which separates various bubble universes. We believe the Vorn’s universe will be touching ours in two million years.”

“What can you do to help us?” asked Kurt. Working with these Glaymons was the galaxy’s only real hope.

“It will be complicated,” replied Valan. “We have some leverage with the council. I think it can be arranged for a force of our ships to accompany you to your region of space. We can also help improve your weapons, like the neutronium marble Lieutenant Mays wants. However, I think we have a better option than neutronium.”

“What?” asked Lieutenant Mays. “I know a neutronium marble can destroy the Vorn ships.”

Marshton looked at Valan, who nodded.

“What about Zero-Point Energy?” suggested Marshton. “We can modify your main KEW gun to fire a round at nearly the speed of light. The round will actually be a container of Zero-Point Energy. When it hits the

Vorn energy screen, it will overwhelm the screen instantly, annihilating the Vorn ship beneath it.”

“Where would the energy come from?” asked Mara skeptically. “My people have studied Zero-Point Energy but have not been able to harness it as a viable power source for our ships.”

“We can install zero-point power generators on your ships. They will greatly increase your hyperspace speed and the force of your weapons. The power generators will also furnish the Zero-Point Energy charge for your KEW rounds.”

Kurt looked from one of the Glaymons to the other. “By coming with us, will you be endangering your people? Will the Vorn come here, as your council fears?”

“There is no danger to our people,” answered Valan, shaking his head. “Weapons installed on the outside periphery of the Dyson Sphere are capable of protecting us from the Vorn. Our people overall do not wish to be involved in galactic affairs so they have constantly found excuses not to do so. They are secure here in the safety of the Dyson Sphere.”

“If we agree to this, what’s our next move?” asked Kurt. “We’re supposed to meet with your council again in another few days.”

“We will take care of that,” promised Marshton. “We’ll also move your ships to one of our spacedocks for updating. You must also not reveal to the council what we spoke of. While many of my race are telepathic, they cannot read your minds.”

Kurt looked around at the others uneasily. “How long will it take to update our ships?” He didn’t want to spend months here. The people on Newton would think the worse if his fleet didn’t return on time.

Marshton smiled. “Only a few weeks. Our construction techniques are quite efficient.”

“Of our two current choices, I like this one the best,” said Lomatz, looking at Kurt. “So we may see the outside of this nebula again.”

“As much as I hate to agree with Lomatz, I believe he is correct,” said Mara. “This is our only chance to go home.”

Kurt looked at the two Glaymons. “Very well. Make your arrangements.”

Kurt wondered if he had made the right decision. They had found the Glaymons, but, by throwing in with Marshton and Valan, would it alienate the rest of them?

It was a risk he would have to take.

## Chapter Fifteen

Fleet Commodore Dreen was on Lakiam, elated at what had been accomplished. The capture of the Vorn mothership had divulged a wealth of valuable tactical information. They now knew that the Destroyers of Worlds called themselves the Vorn, where the Vorn staging area was for attacking this galaxy, and, even more important, the spatial coordinates of the Vorn home system.

“The Vorn must have some method of traveling through intergalactic space which we’re not familiar with,” said Jalad from the Helm. “At our normal hyperspace cruising speed, it would take us over six months to reach this region of interstellar space where their habitats are located.”

Commodore Dreen nodded in agreement. “Our scientists haven’t gone through all the data on the computers yet. Some of the files seem to be encrypted. Before we left Andock Prime, one of our scientists mentioned something about a Zero-Point Energy drive.”

Jalad’s eyes widened in surprise. “That might do it. Zero-Point Energy would furnish a tremendous amount of power. Even more than our antimatter chambers.”

“That will help us in the future. For now, at least the Parmonts and the Bascoms have signed the mutual defense treaty,” commented Alborg. “After our victory over the Vorn in the Andock System, many of the other Protector Worlds are now considering joining us as well.”

“It could have easily gone the other way,” Commodore Dreen said with a deep sigh. “If we hadn’t been in the system, I don’t believe Fleet Leader Moor could have saved Andock Prime. It would have been the end of our alliance and a horrible defeat.”

“To address that issue, we should have, with the mothership, a way to detect the Vorn in hyperspace,” added Laylem. “We have their equipment, which generates the masking field to block our scans of their drives’ radiation signatures. It should be simple to reverse engineer it and build a countermeasure, so we can detect their warships.”

“If we could do that and then place detection buoys throughout our region of space, we could trace their fleet movements and take the appropriate countermeasures,” said Alborg thoughtfully. “We could ensure we had the weapons and the fleet numbers in place beforehand to repel them wherever they showed up.”

“We could even defend the Enlightened World colonies we had to pull back from,” said Keenol from her communications console.

She was right. Dreen had felt guilty leaving defenseless so many Enlightened World colonies.

“Have any of the prisoners talked?” asked Alborg.

Dreen shook his head. “No. There has been very little cooperation. We do know they have three main castes and perhaps smaller subcaste units within the castes themselves. From what our interrogators have learned so far, we captured several of what they call the Royal Caste and Military Caste. All members of the Working Caste committed suicide when they were awakened. Most of the time the Vorn stand there, refusing to even acknowledge our presence.”

“So what do we do now?” asked Laylem.

“Develop a way to detect their ships through their masking field,” replied Commodore Dreen. “Once we can do that, we’ll meet the Vorn with superior numbers and enough dark matter missiles to stop them.”

“We’re forgetting one thing,” said Alborg. “We have no idea of their actual fleet strength.”

“No, we don’t,” admitted Commodore Dreen with a deep frown. “If that information was in the mothership’s computers, we haven’t found it yet. We’re not even sure if they have larger warships other than the cruisers that protect their motherships. What if they possess actual battlecruisers or battleships but haven’t committed them yet?”

Alborg went silent for a long moment and then spoke. “If I were the Vorn after the defeat we handed them, I would launch an immediate retaliatory strike. What we did gives hope to other Protector Worlds, something the Vorn don’t want.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen nodded in agreement. “I’ve been thinking much the same. The Vorn don’t want to see our resistance to them increase across the galaxy. If they can come back and smack us down and harvest our worlds, our prior victories will be meaningless.”

“Where will they strike?” asked Sheera Keenol. “What planet will they choose as their target? Will it be Andock Prime again?”

“No,” said Alborg, shaking his head. “Only one target makes sense. They will eliminate the threat posed by our dark matter missiles. They will come here and attack Lakiam.”

Sheera’s eyes grew wide. “They will attack Lakiam?”

“It makes the most strategic sense,” answered Alborg. “The Vorn are not fools and have been at this for millions of years. We have demonstrated we’re a threat, one that needs to be eliminated.”

Laylem turned toward the commodore. “You knew this?”

Commodore Dreen nodded. “I suspected it. Alborg has only confirmed it. I’ll meet with the Lakiam Council to discuss plans for our defense.” Dreen looked at the viewscreen which showed Lakiam. The blue-white world was home to the Lakiam race. Over sixteen billion Lakiams were scattered across the system on fourteen worlds and numerous moons. There were also 215 massive orbital habitats.

Jalad seemed to follow Dreen’s gaze, stating, “The Destroyers of Worlds are coming to destroy our civilization. They failed at Andock Prime with over three thousand ships. How many ships will they bring here?”

Fleet Commodore Dreen didn’t answer. He greatly feared the Vorn were gathering the most powerful fleet they could to harvest the Lakiam worlds. By saving Andock Prime, he might have doomed his own race.

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Aalik was with Kurt and Mara as they stood in front of the Glaymon Council once more. They had listened as the lead councilman spoke to them, once more asking Kurt to explain why he and the others had come to the Dyson Sphere. Aalik informed them that normally this would be done using telepathy, but they had chosen to speak aloud for their guests’ benefit.

“It is decided then,” the lead councilman said as he turned toward Kurt and Mara. “We will not support your war against the Vorn. However, the council has been petitioned by a more aggressive segment of our race. It is unfortunate that Glaymons Marshton and Valan learned of your presence and boarded your vessel. Everything would have been so much simpler if they had not. In accordance with our laws, your crews and vessels will be turned over to them. If they decide you may leave this Dyson Sphere, be aware that you can never return. If you ever try to enter the nebula again, our vessels will destroy your ships. This meeting of the council is adjourned.”

Kurt turned toward Aalik, who had remained silent the entire time. “Now what? I thought there would be more argument over us going to the other Glaymons.”

“You will be returned to your ships. In a few hours vessels controlled by the Aggressives, as we call them, will arrive and tow your ships to one of their spacedocks. What happens after that is between you and them. As for

arguing, a segment of our society has stepped in on your behalf. It was easier for the council to turn you over to them than to have to deal with the ethical problem you represent.”

Mara stood, studying Aalik and then spoke. “You’re the one who told the Aggressives about us.”

Aalik took a deep breath, the hint of a hidden emotion briefly crossing his face. “Yes, while the majority of our people agree with the council’s doctrine of noninterference in the galaxy, not all of us do. It is difficult for some of us to stand idly by while billions and eventually trillions of lives are taken by the Vorn as food. We find it disgusting, particularly when we have the power to stop it.”

Kurt nodded his understanding. “Then you do have the ships to stop the Vorn?”

Aalik nodded. “Yes, more than enough, but we no longer have the will. A much easier and safer path is to wait two million more years and send them to their own universe.”

It was a calculated risk going to the other Glaymons, but Kurt didn’t like the other option. To remain here with the Glaymons they were familiar with would doom Kurt and all the others to spending the rest of their lives in one of the habitat squares of the Dyson Sphere, leaving their families and Newton and Earth behind. “What would the Aggressives be willing to do?” asked Kurt.

“I don’t know,” Aalik said, “and I prefer not to. The Aggressives are restricted by our laws as to the assistance they can render, so I’m not certain how much help they will be. However, if anyone can help, it will be them.”

“Thank you,” said Mara, bowing slightly. “Will we see you again?”

“No,” replied Aalik. “My involvement in this is over. Now let’s get you to your ships.”

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A few hours later Kurt was on the *Star Cross*, waiting tensely as eight one-thousand-meter-long disk ships approached his fleet.

“The magnetic clamps holding us in place have been released,” reported Andrew, as the ship vibrated slightly.

On one of the main viewscreens, a disk-shaped ship halted in front of the *Star Cross* at a distance of two thousand meters. A blue beam of light reached out and touched the ship.

“It’s a tractor beam,” reported Lieutenant Brooks, her eyes widening.



“We’re moving.”

Looking at another viewscreen, Kurt could see the *Aurelia* also moving as a tractor beam latched onto the Lakiam battlecruiser.

“I guess we’re on our way,” said Andrew, folding his arms over his chest as he watched one of the disk ships on a viewscreen.

“Do you think they’ll let us go home?” asked Lieutenant Pierce, her focus on Kurt.

“Not until I get my neutronium marble or something better,” said Lieutenant Mays determinedly. “They promised to install a Zero-Point Energy device on the ship as well as other upgrades. If we fight the Destroyers of Worlds, I want those augmentations to the *Star Cross*’s weapons.”

“Let’s not jump to any conclusions,” Kurt said to his command crew. All of them were undoubtedly concerned about what would happen to them. “We’re being taken to another spacedock. Once we’re there, I’ll find out more about the future for us and our ships. I’m hoping we’ve found some powerful allies to help us against the Destroyers of Worlds.” These Glaymon Aggressives were Kurt’s last hope to keep Earth and Newton and their alliance worlds safe from the Vorn.

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The eight Glaymon disk ships towed the *Star Cross* and her fleet effortlessly to a set of massive space doors, which slid open as they approached. In moments the sixteen ships passed through and into space. Once safely away from the outer surface of the Dyson Sphere, the ships rapidly accelerated away from the spacedock.

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Kurt was surprised to see so little on the viewscreens. The surface of the Dyson Sphere seemed to be smooth except for some occasional small domes. Very little starlight was reflected due to the dust and gas in the nebula.

“I can’t imagine what went into building something like that,” Andrew said as he gazed in awe at the massive megastructure.

“I’ve read about it,” commented Lieutenant Mays, pointing at one of the viewscreens. “The time and engineering methods required is beyond imagining.”

“We’re nearing half the speed of light,” reported Lieutenant Styles.

“That was quick,” said Andrew, turning toward Kurt. “Much faster than what our own subspace drives can do.”

“Neutronium marble, here we come,” said Lieutenant Mays with a pleased smile.

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Over an hour later the fleet slowed and then headed toward the surface of the Dyson Sphere. Once again, two massive space doors slid open, and the sixteen ships entered and continued down the center pathway.

“Where are they taking us?” asked Andrew.

“Another spacedock,” Lieutenant Brooks answered as she checked her sensors.

“How big is this spacedock?” Kurt asked.

“Not quite as large as the last one. From my scans, it’s thirty kilometers in length, ten in width, and eight in height. “Also a lot of those one-thousand-meter-long disk ships are docked at various ports.”

Kurt looked at the viewscreens, confirming several disk ships as well as some huge openings, indicating possible ship construction bays.

“We’re slowing,” reported Lieutenant Styles.

Ahead Kurt could see what appeared to be the entrances to a series of ship bays. A few moments later the Glaymon vessel used its tractor beam to place the *Star Cross* securely in one of the bays on a large indented berth. The ship settled down without even a jar.

“We’re at rest,” confirmed Lieutenant Brooks. “If this is a repair or construction bay, it’s a large one. The sensors indicate it’s three kilometers long, one kilometer high, and two wide. All our ships are being placed inside.”

“Admiral, I’ve got an incoming communication from these Glaymons,” reported Lieutenant Pierce. “They request a meeting with all our commanding officers. They will send a shuttle to pick up everyone.”

“Acknowledge the message,” ordered Kurt. “Inform all ship commanders we will be attending a meeting with these Glaymons.” Kurt took a deep breath. Maybe now he would find out what the Aggressives were willing to do to help fight the Destroyers of Worlds. Just maybe he would also learn if they’d be allowed to go home. He hoped they hadn’t stepped from the frying pan into the fire.

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Kurt, Mara, Lomatz, Captain Lindsey Hasting, Captain William Heidle, Captain Julian Hermes, and Captain Jill Artemis all sat at a large conference table. The Glaymons—Marshston, Valan, and four others—were seated across

from them.

“Welcome,” greeted Marshton with a broad smile. “I am glad you accepted our invitation to come to us. We have much to talk about.”

Kurt studied the Glaymons. Four were obviously men, and two were women. He did notice the Glaymon women here looked more feminine than the ones where they had been held earlier. “You know we came here seeking a weapon to help defend us against the Destroyers of Worlds.”

“Yes,” said Valan with a slight nod. “We brought along several of our weapons specialists, who wish to speak to you about your neutronium marble idea and offer some other possibilities. We also need to bring you up to date as to what is happening in the regions of the galaxy you come from.”

One of the female Glaymons stood up. “I’m Gaylith. Shortly after your arrival, we placed some long-range communication devices outside the nebula. The Glaymons you have been with do not know we did this as it’s against the laws they have imposed and they would strongly disapprove. These devices allow us to monitor communications throughout most of the known galaxy.” Gaylith shifted her gaze to Mara. “You should know that the Vorn attacked the Protector World of Andock Prime with a massive fleet consisting of twelve motherships and over three thousand cruisers.”

“Oh, no!” cried out Mara, obviously imagining the worst. “If they’ve destroyed Andock Prime, then Fleet Commodore Dreen’s hope for an alliance against the Vorn has failed.”

“They did not destroy Andock Prime,” responded Gaylith.

“They won?” asked Mara, her eyes revealing her disbelief.

“Your Fleet Commodore Dreen was there with a fleet of Lakiam battlecruisers,” Gaylith continued. “In the ensuing battle, six Vorn motherships were destroyed, and one was captured. They also annihilated a large number of the Vorn cruisers, forcing the Vorn to retreat. This was an astonishing feat. We once took a damaged Vorn cruiser but never a mothership.”

“Due to the capture of the Vorn mothership,” Valan said with an intent look on his face, “we are willing to risk helping you. We believe your people have already accessed the ship’s computers and have discovered a treasure trove of valuable data about the Vorn. However, we also believe we can access some data which you cannot.”

“How did they win this battle?” Mara asked.

“The Andocks used an unexpected tactic against the Vorn. They

rammed hundreds of Vorn cruisers with loaded freighters, cargo ships, and ore carriers. The Vorn were not expecting such an attack. Your Fleet Commodore Dreen also assaulted the rear of the Vorn fleet formation at the same time, using his dark matter missiles. The Vorn were forced to withdraw or risk the total annihilation of their fleet.”

Kurt was astonished by what he heard. “So it is possible to defeat the Destroyers of Worlds in combat.” This made the second time that a fleet under the command of Fleet Commodore Dreen had done such. Kurt wanted to meet this Lakiam fleet commodore.

“To the best of our knowledge this is the first time in any of the Vorn incursions that they have been defeated so decisively. It has also created a dangerous situation for the Lakiams and the Andocks.”

“How so?” asked Mara, her eyes narrowing sharply.

“The Vorn cannot allow word of such a victory to spread across the galaxy without retaliation,” explained Marshton. “It would only stiffen resistance against the Destroyers of Worlds. In our opinion they will gather a massive fleet and return to either Andock Prime or Lakiam in order to set an example for the rest of the galaxy. They will leave nothing living behind.”

Mara’s face turned pale. “We must warn them!”

“You shall,” one of the other Glaymons said. “I’m Tasid, a weapons specialist. If you allow us, we will rebuild your ships and equip them with more modern weapons. We can provide you with an energy shield that is nearly impervious to Vorn weapons.”

“What about the neutronium marble that my tactical officer wants?” asked Kurt.

“What do you know about Zero-Point Energy?” asked another of the Glaymons.

“My people have researched it,” said Mara, sitting up taller in her seat. “So far we have not found a way to make it into a viable power source. The best we have are the antimatter chambers on our ships.”

“We have found a way to harness it as a power source,” explained Tasid. “What we propose is charging a power cell with Zero-Point Energy. This power cell will be encased in a special alloy we have developed. We can then use this as a round for your KEW cannons on your vessels. With some slight modifications, we can improve your KEW cannons until the Zero-Point Energy round is launched at nearly the speed of light. We estimate that a Vorn mothership struck by this round would be destroyed instantly.”

“What additional modifications do you want to make to our ships?” asked Captain Hastings.

Marshton took a deep breath and looked at Kurt. “We will totally disassemble your ships and put them together with all our improvements. We will upgrade your repair robots and combat robots. In addition we will install an AI on your vessels that could take them into combat if you wish. It will also be capable of directing any repairs that need to be done to your ships.”

Kurt could scarcely believe what he had just heard. “How long would all this take?” With the pending attack on Andock Prime or Lakiam, they needed to return as soon as possible.

Valan grinned. “We can do it all in two weeks. Plus, once we install your new hyperdrives powered by Zero-Point Energy, you can be in your home regions of space in just a few days.”

Kurt sucked in a deep breath. All this sounded too fantastic. “What’s in this for you?”

Another Glaymon stood. “I am Wael, what you would call a captain of one of our disk warships. When you return to warn the Andocks and Lakiams, some of our warships have requested permission to go with you.”

“How many?” asked Kurt, his eyes widening at the thought of having Glaymon warships with his fleet. This was certainly far more than he had hoped for.

“Nearly five hundred, maybe more,” answered Captain Wael. “We have waited a long time to fight the Vorn—or the Destroyers of Worlds as you call them. This may be our only opportunity to do so.”

Kurt found himself speechless. In coming here to find the Glaymons, he had hoped to return with a weapon that could combat the black ships. Never had he expected to return at the head of a Glaymon warfleet.

“There is one catch,” Valan said in a much grimmer voice. “Once our fleet leaves, it can never return. The other Glaymons will not allow it. What we are proposing violates some of our most important rules. Those of us who remain behind may even be punished.”

“What will they do?” asked Mara.

“I suspect they will want to reduce our numbers substantially,” replied Valan. “For many millennia they have wanted to put us into just one habitation square. Two billion Aggressives are sufficient to maintain the vitality of the Glaymon race.”

“I’m sorry,” said Kurt, realizing the massive sacrifice the Aggressives

were willing to make. “We should never have gotten you involved in this.”

“It was necessary,” answered Marshton. “For far too long we have neglected our duty to deal with the Vorn. That has now come to an end.”

Lomatz had remained silent through the meeting, but now he spoke. “Why not move some of your people out into the galaxy? Surely you have the means to do so.”

Marshton looked thoughtful and then slowly shook his head. “Our technology is too advanced. It would throw the economy of the entire galaxy into chaos.”

“What will happen to the crews of your warships?” asked Captain Hastings.

“We are still discussing that,” answered Valan, glancing at Marshton. “There are several options.”

Tasid reached forward and tapped the top of the conference table in front of him. Instantly a hologram appeared, detailing the interior of the *Star Cross*. “Let’s discuss the proposed modifications to your warships.”

Kurt looked at the hologram in surprise. It was a very detailed and exacting depiction of his vessel. He had no idea how the Glaymons had gotten such intricate information, and he wasn’t going to ask.

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Several days passed, and Kurt stood in the massive construction bay, gazing at the work being done by the Glaymons. All eight ships of his fleet had been torn down to their metal frameworks, and construction robots swarmed over them. Some of the robots were huge, capable of lifting massive beams and even complete sections of ship armor.

Marshton stood close to Kurt, watching the work with a critical eye. “Everything’s automated. Once we have a final design, we download it into the main construction computer, controlled by an AI. The AI then supervises the entire operation to maintain the maximum possible efficiency.”

“Will I even recognize my ship when it’s done?” Kurt nervously studied his entire fleet, reduced to pieces on the construction bay floor.

“For the most part, you will notice few differences. We had the ship disassembled, as it is simpler to run the new power conduits and to install better armor throughout the vessel. We’re leaving both antimatter chambers, though they will be drastically reduced in size. Our method of producing power from antimatter is more efficient than the Lakiams.

“A Zero-Point Energy module will be the ship’s primary power source,

with the antimatter chambers as a backup. Your weapons had to be redesigned and augmented to handle the extra power from the module. We will also add some replicator technology. Food and water can be replicated from the energy produced by the module or the antimatter chambers. You'll only need emergency supplies of those items."

Kurt watched a large construction robot rise into the air, carrying a large metal beam by use of tractor beams. Turning toward Marshton, Kurt asked another question. "Will my crew and I understand how the technology works on our ships?"

"The AI and the repair robots will. It's the same on our own vessels. While we do have scientists and engineers who are familiar with the mechanics of everything, they don't normally travel on the ships. We will make sure your people understand how to do basic repairs, but the more complicated work will be done by the AI or the repair robots. In time, if you want to assign some of your own engineers to follow the robots, they can be programmed to guide your people through the steps."

Kurt turned to the *Star Cross*. Several robots were placing a piece of hull armor on the ship's stern. "What changes did you make in the hull armor? It seems much thicker than what I remember."

"It is," replied Marshton, nodding. "It is also ten times more resistant to damage. If our calculations are correct, the new hull armor could resist a Vorn black antimatter beam for a few seconds. Long enough to get the energy shield back up."

"Is there any sign of the expected Vorn fleet in our galaxy?" Kurt was worried the Vorn might attack Lakiam before they were ready to return.

"No," replied Marshton. "We believe we still have another week or two."

Kurt nodded. "I hope so. We have to get to Andock Prime and Lakiam before the Vorn do."

Kurt hoped to turn over some of the new weapons technology to the Lakiams. Mara had assured Kurt, if he did, Fleet Commodore Dreen would use it to drive the Destroyers of Worlds from the galaxy. It would keep Earth and Newton out of the war and secure in their remote section of the galaxy. Kurt wasn't ready for either to become a major player in galactic politics, must less a galactic war. It would be decades yet before that was even a possibility.

Andrew was in what the Glaymons considered a cafeteria. He walked up to a replicator device set in the wall. “Ribeye steak cooked medium with a fully loaded baked potato and a large dinner roll.”

“What would you like to drink?” the replicator asked in a soft female voice.

Andrew still wasn’t used to computers speaking to him, particularly asking questions. “Iced tea, unsweetened.”

A slight humming noise came, and then his food magically appeared in the aperture. Supposedly this replicator and a few others had been modified to produce food that the visiting crews would be familiar with.

Still suspicious of the technology, Andrew took his tray and walked to a table where Lieutenant Mays, Mara, and Lomatz sat. Lieutenant Mays was eating a club sandwich, and Andrew had no idea what Mara and Lomatz were eating. What was on their plates wasn’t familiar to him.

“I checked on the *Golan Four* this morning,” said Lomatz as he took a bite of the Merton steak on his plate. “It’s unrecognizable. I hope they can put it together again. I spent a lot of money building it.”

“The *Aurelia* is much the same, though I have a few scientists and technicians watching the rebuilding,” added Mara. “Even they have told me that much of the Glaymons’ science is far beyond anything they can understand. This replicator technology is even being used in the construction. Entire sections of the ship appear from thin air. Then the construction robots swarm over it, installing instruments, connections, and various power leads.”

“I spoke to Tasid earlier about our new KEW rounds,” said Lieutenant Mays, eating chicken salad. “He said they did have the technology to mine a neutron star. However, the mass of the rounds alone would be extremely dangerous. If only one of our ship’s containment fields were to collapse or weaken, the entire ship would be crushed and end up smaller than a tennis ball.”

The description of the *Star Cross* and its crew being crushed was a chilling thought. “How easily will these Zero-Point Energy rounds be to produce?” asked Andrew.

“The KEW round will have a containment field that holds the Zero-Point Energy charge until it strikes a solid surface or energy screen. Either will cause the energy to be instantly released. A replicator on board the ship can produce the casings for the round as well as the parts for the containment field.”



“What if a containment field fails on the ship?” asked Andrew, still visualizing the *Star Cross* imploding.

“That’s the interesting part,” said Lieutenant Mays. “The new KEW cannon is designed so, if a round fails, the energy will be directed through the barrel and out the ship, causing no damage. The rounds also won’t be charged until they’re inside the cannon.”

“What about other rounds? Is there anything else they can build for us?”

“Yes,” said Lieutenant Mays, her eyes lighting up. “We can use several exotic substances that will be harmless on board the ship. Several have increased mass, but nothing we can’t handle. Unfortunately we don’t have the technology to build the rounds and will have to carry a supply with us, knowing they can’t be replaced.”

Mara looked across the table at Andrew. “If we are successful in taking these weapons to Fleet Commodore Dreen, we can defeat the Destroyers of Worlds.”

Andrew nodded. Looking around he saw a number of Glaymons sitting at other tables, eating and talking in their soft voices. In the last few days he had gone on a tour of their habitats. Their cities were awe-inspiring. Tall towers reaching above the clouds. The shapes and colors of their structures were almost whimsical. The taller buildings were connected by slim ribbonlike bridges with no guardrails. He had watched Glaymons walking across them with no signs of fear. He had visited several museums exhibiting their history, even describing the construction of the Dyson Sphere. It made Andrew wonder what this galaxy would have gone on to create had the Destroyers of Worlds never come.

With a deep sigh, Andrew took a bite of his steak. It was cooked perfectly and tasted like the real thing. It was a shame he couldn’t take a replicator to Emily. Regardless he was anxious to get home. This trip would be the longest time he had been separated from his family since Emily and Alexis had been kidnapped by the Profiteers. Thinking about the Profiteers brought a smile to his lips. With the Glaymons’ upgrades to the *Star Cross* and the other ships, no world in the Gothan Empire could ever again endanger Newton. Perhaps, sometime in the near future, they would have to visit Kubitz and Marsten and have them pay for what they did to Earth. It was an interesting thought, and one he would have to discuss with Kurt. It suddenly occurred to Andrew that they would have the power to exert their will over the Gothan Empire. After what they had put his wife and daughter

through, Andrew was determined to someday end the pirating ways of the Profiteers.

## Chapter Sixteen

Prince Brollen watched with deep satisfaction as numerous Intergalactic Transport Vessels exited hyperspace into the staging system. Each was covered with twenty of the powerful 1,200-meter-long battleships of the Vorn. When the last one exited hyperspace, fifty of them were in the system.

*One thousand battleships sent by the Queens, sent Military Commander Fraymot, his admiration evident. With these we will crush the pitiful vessels of the two food species that defeated our fleet.*

Prince Brollen watched the multiple viewscreens in the recently repaired Command Center as the battleships disconnected from the transport ships. *We have two thousand cruisers in the system with more waiting in Galaxy X241. We will annihilate the food species that possesses the dark matter weapons and harvest each of their worlds. We will sweep their systems clean of life, leaving radioactive cinders where their worlds once were. We will do the same to the food species in the system where we were defeated. They will suffer the same fate as the other. Once we have harvested all their worlds, resistance to us in this galaxy will collapse.*

*How soon do we depart?* asked Fraymot. *All our ships have been repaired, and we can leave as soon as you command it.*

*Tomorrow,* answered Prince Brollen, his triangular-shaped head moving until he faced the military commander. *I must meet with the commander of the warfleet and secure my authority. In this coming battle, there can be no doubt that I am the one leading our fleet to victory over the two food species. When we return to the Conclave Habitat, the food pellets from the two species will be used for a feast for all the Queens and the Royal Court.*

*As you command,* replied Military Commander Fraymot, bowing slightly. *The fleet will be ready.*

Prince Brollen returned his attention to the viewscreens, gazing at one of the battleships—a bulkier spindle shape with numerous weapons turrets. Far more than what the cruisers were equipped with. In addition, the weapons on the battleships were more powerful.

The fight against the two food species wouldn't be a battle; it would be a slaughter.

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Fleet Commodore Dreen was on Lakiam, meeting with the council. A number of the councilors had great concerns as Lakiam now appeared to be a

prime target for the Vorn.

“I knew, if we got involved with the Andocks, this would happen,” complained council member Brewl Darmas. “You have drawn the attention of the Destroyers of Worlds to us. I demand that you immediately resign and someone more qualified be put in charge of our fleet. Your wild ways will lead us away from Enlightenment. We must stay true to our values and our steady advancement toward that goal.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen gazed disdainfully at council member Darmas. The man was a fool and would lead Lakiam to ruin if he had his way. “You seem to forget that the Destroyers of Worlds have come before. They will leave no world untouched. No matter what, at some point in time, they will come to Lakiam. At least now, we won’t stand alone.”

“But Enlightenment,” cried out Darmas, looking woefully at the other councilors. “You are destroying our path.” He looked at Fleet Commodore Dreen, daring him to reply.

“What matters the path if we’re all dead,” replied Dreen, staring at the councilor. “We take the path of survival, and, if that turns us away from Enlightenment, then let it be so.”

“Blasphemy!” cried out Darmas, pointing a shaking finger at Fleet Commodore Dreen. “This council will remove you from command. You are not fit to lead our fleets!”

“On the contrary,” said Lead Councilor Harlus Atratis. “Fleet Commodore Dreen is the perfect person to lead our fleets. The path to Enlightenment will not save us. I am afraid the fleet commodore is right when he says, in order to survive, we may have to stray from the path.”

“But we have worked so hard toward Enlightenment,” said Darmas in a more subdued voice, his eyes wide and pleading. “How can we give all that up?”

“It’s called survival,” answered Fleet Commodore Dreen. “We do what we must. Perhaps Enlightenment is still in our future, but the Destroyers of Worlds must be dealt with first, and, in order to do that, we must stray from the path.”

“You have the full support of the council,” said Lead Councilor Atratis, shifting his gaze to the fleet commodore. “What do you need, and what can we do to help?”

“We have discovered the masking secret to the Vorn ships in hyperspace,” replied Dreen. “Already we are deploying special detection

buoys throughout our space and Andock space. The Bascoms and Parmonts will soon be doing the same. When the Vorn come, we will know. It will prevent them from taking us by surprise.”

“Will the Andocks actually come to our aid?” asked council member Darmas in a disbelieving voice. “The Andocks have never been a trustworthy race.”

“Yes, as soon as the black ships are detected, and we have determined Lakiam is their target, Fleet Leader Moor will depart with a force of two thousand warships. The Bascoms and the Parmonts will do the same. In total our allies will send four thousand warships to our aid.”

This silenced council member Darmas as he looked at the conference table in defeat. He mumbled something indiscernible and then became quiet.

“We’ve also stockpiled a considerable supply of dark matter missiles since all construction facilities are now operating around the clock. Our orbital defensive platforms above all three of our primary planets in the system will be supplied with a sufficient number for the expected battle. Even the orbital habitats that circle our three primary worlds will be armed.”

“What about our own ships? How many will there be?” asked council member Shriel Marl. “Should we recall all our vessels to ensure Lakiam remains unharmed?”

“We will have over three thousand warships in the system with another two thousand close by,” answered Fleet Commodore Dreen. “I’m hesitant to pull our ships from our other systems or the core systems of the Enlightened Worlds we are protecting. We have already pulled back from too many Enlightened colonies. The Vorn will not take us by surprise. If they come to this system, as I expect, we will destroy them!”

Lead Councilor Atratis stared for a long moment at Fleet Commodore Dreen. “I sincerely hope so,” he finally said. “Just remember, these are the Destroyers of Worlds. We must take nothing for granted. Lakiam must not become another victim.”

“We won’t, and Lakiam will be safe,” promised Commodore Dreen. “Now I must return to the fleet to make preparations, before the Vorn arrive.”

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Several hours later Fleet Commodore Dreen was on board his flagship, the *Basera*, in one of the ship’s smaller debriefing rooms, with Alborg and Captain Callast. In the center, a huge holographic depiction of the galaxy within one thousand light-years of Lakiam was displayed. Large swaths of it

were covered with small blinking yellow icons. Even as he watched, more yellow icons flashed, indicating the hyperspace detection buoys emplaced by both Lakiam and Andock vessels. More buoys were being mass-produced by the thousands and being positioned by special fleet cargo ships of both races.

“Two more days and all the buoys will be in position,” reported Alborg, standing next to Commodore Dreen. “It’s going much quicker than I expected.”

“It helps when we have two Protector Worlds working closely together.”

“The cargo vessels will be ready in six more days,” added Captain Callast of the battlecruiser *Destonn*. Commodore Dreen had asked Callast, a strategic genius, to come to the *Basera* for a strategy session.

“How many will we have?”

“Fourteen hundred,” replied Callast. “We took many of them from the breaker yards. We repaired their hyperdrives and sublight drives, and have loaded them with water. They will be computer-controlled with no living crewmember.”

“How close can we jump them to the Vorn fleet?”

“Two hundred kilometers,” replied Callast. “Any closer and the mass of the Vorn ships will disrupt the cargo ships’ drive systems. They’re not warships.”

Commodore Dreen nodded. They had raided the breaker yards in every Lakiam system for old and outdated cargo ships about to be broken apart and sold as junk.

Captain Callast walked around the holographic image, studying it. “So far no Vorn ships are in Lakiam or Andock space.”

“The Vorn may be lulling us into believing that, after their last defeat, they have gone on to easier harvesting grounds,” suggested Alborg.

Callast paused as he shifted his attention to Alborg. “I believe you’re right. They can’t know that we now have the means to track their hyperdrives.”

“Their sublight drives as well,” added Commodore Dreen. “We will have better tracking data in the next battle.”

Callast stepped up to the hologram and made an adjustment, showing only the fourteen planets of the Lakiam System. “The Vorn may try to sneak some of their ships into our system before the main attack.”

“The same as they did when they attacked the Bascoms’ home worlds

of Debent and Glasht,” replied Fleet Commodore Dreen. “We know how that turned out.”

“It won’t work this time because we can detect them,” said Callast. “We can use that to our advantage.”

“Continue,” said Dreen.

“Most likely the Destroyers of Worlds will bring their main fleet into the outer system to draw our attention,” Callast said, still studying the hologram. “When we respond to their initial appearance, the ships they think we can’t detect will move in and strike us at our most vulnerable moment. Probably as soon as we engage the Vorn main fleet.”

“As I would do,” said Alborg. “How can we disrupt it?”

Fleet Commodore Dreen gazed thoughtfully at the tactical hologram. “Most likely the Vorn will send in one or two smaller fleets. We could use the cargo ships against them. The cargo ships would stand a better chance of success against smaller numbers of the black ships.” Dreen was concerned that, if they used the cargo ships against the Vorn main fleet, the cargo ships would be destroyed before they could inflict any damage.

“We would have even a better chance of success if we could drop them from hyperspace behind the Vorn fleet or fleets,” Callast pointed out. “By the time they can turn to bring to bear their beam weapons and black spheres, the cargo ships will already be ramming.”

Commodore Dreen nodded his approval. “Captain Callast, put a plan together, assuming that one or two smaller Vorn fleets sneak into the system. We’ll plan on using the cargo ships and part of our fleet to annihilate them.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Callast. “I’ll work on it as soon as I return to my ship.”

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For the next several hours they continued to discuss strategy. Other ship captains were summoned to offer their opinions. When they finally finished, they agreed to meet every day to refine their defensive strategy for the Lakiam home system. When the Destroyers of Worlds came, the Lakiams would be ready.

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Prince Brollen gazed at the helpless planet his fleet rapidly approached. He had decided to harvest a number of worlds on the way to their primary target. It would give the massive fleet time to practice battle maneuvers, as well as for Military Commander Fraymot to become used to handling so

many warships. Military Commander Vasterus, in command of the battleships, had agreed to allow Fraymot to command the fleet since he had experience in battle.

*No defense grid protects the planet,* reported Military Commander Fraymot. *A small fleet moves away from the planet toward us. The ships are only lightly armed and most likely some type of automated drone.*

Prince Brollen studied the tactical display showing seventeen red threat icons nearing his fleet. *Destroy them, and let's begin the harvest.* He had twenty motherships with his fleet, and the harvesting of this planet could be done very quickly.

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In space, the seventeen small warships closed rapidly with the advancing Vorn armada. The ships were automated patrol ships which the planet used to keep the Profiteers at bay. They possessed six energy projectors and two force beams but only four missile tubes. The vessels were incapable of hyperspace travel, being built solely for system defense.

From the Vorn fleet, black antimatter beams flicked out, annihilating all seventeen vessels in seconds. Where the vessels had been moments before, only small clouds of debris remained. Without pausing, the Vorn fleet continued on their course and soon arrived at the planet. The fleet quickly encircled the planet as the motherships settled into a lower orbit to begin the harvest.

Frantic pleas came from the planet for the Vorn to spare them. All were ignored. A few cargo ships and passenger ships rose from the surface, seeking to escape. Vorn black antimatter beams ripped them apart, raining their shattered wrecks upon the planet.

From each mothership black beams swept down to move across the planet in a methodical pattern, ensuring no part of the planet was spared. In less than twenty minutes the three hundred million inhabitants were converted into food pellets for the Vorn.

*The harvest is complete,* reported Military Commander Fraymot.

*Bombard the planet with nuclear missiles,* ordered Prince Brollen.

From hundreds of Vorn cruisers, small nuclear-tipped missiles fell toward the planet. As the missiles struck, mushroom-shaped clouds rose above the surface, throwing debris, ash, and pollutants high into the air. Every visage of the Enlightened World civilization that once existed on the planet was erased in a matter of minutes.



*Radioactive levels have reached the point where life cannot exist,* reported Military Commander Fraymot.

On the main viewscreens, the planet's atmosphere darkened, and soon the rays of the sun would be blocked. The planet would undergo a long nuclear winter, and, even when the dust and ash cleared, the surface would be too radioactive for life to exist.

*Take us to our next target,* ordered Prince Brollen, more than satisfied with what they had done. He intended to hit at least three more targets and then proceed to the homeworld where the food species resided that possessed the dark matter missiles. That planet too would become a nuclear wasteland.

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Fleet Commodore Dreen read the reports coming in from several Enlightened World civilizations. The Vorn were on the move—only, this time, they were nuking planets into oblivion.

“They are coming here,” said Captain Callast as they studied a hologram of the galaxy, showing the location of the destroyed worlds. “We have vague reports of a massive Vorn fleet, consisting of thousands of vessels, harvesting and then laying waste to the planets afterward. I would say they’re practicing how to wield such a large fleet in battle. Once they’re satisfied they’re ready, they’ll attack Lakiam.”

“I agree,” said Alborg. “The worlds they’ve attacked are almost on a direct line toward Lakiam. I would estimate we have five, maybe six days before they arrive.”

Commodore Dreen drew in a deep breath. They had suspected the Destroyers of Worlds were coming to Lakiam; now they knew for certain. “I’ll send messages to our allies of the suspected attack.”

“We haven’t yet determined the ship types in the Vorn fleet,” added Alborg. “All the reports we’ve received just say it’s massive and can’t be stopped. Hundreds of worlds in its path are being evacuated. Unfortunately many inhabitants are being left behind since there’s not enough lift capacity to move so many inhabitants.”

“More inhabitants will die in the panic of the evacuations than in the Vorn harvesting of a few more worlds,” predicted Callast.

“But you can’t blame them,” replied Commodore Dreen. “No one wants to become food for the Vorn.”

“We’re as ready as we’ll ever be,” said Alborg as he adjusted the hologram to show the Lakiam System and the three primary inhabited

worlds. “The defensive grids above all our planets have been augmented with additional energy beam satellites as well as the new missile platforms.”

The new missile platforms had been Alborg’s idea. Each platform held sixteen hyperspace dark matter missiles. Six hundred such platforms were in orbit around Lakiam. They could be controlled by either of the two Command and Control Stations in orbit.

“The last of the cargo ships will be ready in two more days,” reported Captain Callast. “We’ll place them near the sun, and they’ll be powered down so the Vorn can’t detect them.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen nodded. “Very well, let’s discuss our ship deployments and make sure all our warships are ready.” Dreen changed the holographic display to show the Lakiam System and the current locations of all Lakiam fleet units. At the moment they were scattered across the system in small formations.

“I propose we have three separate fleets,” said Captain Callast. “Two small ones and then our main fleet. The two small fleets can be used to hit the Vorn’s flanks or to defend against a second or third fleet if necessary.”

For the next four hours the three went over in detail where every ship was to be deployed as well as the inbound fleets of their allies. Several times they paused to consult other fleet officers. In the end, they had a plan that offered the best hope to stop the Destroyers of Worlds. However, they were well aware that even the best of plans could go horribly wrong in the heat of battle.

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Prince Brollen watched as his fleet neared its next objective. After careful consideration, he had decided to harvest a planet protected by a major Protector World. It would be a test for Military Commander Fraymot as it would involve a major fleet battle as well as the taking out of a large and powerful orbital defense grid.

*Dropping from hyperspace,* reported the Vorn at the hyperspace console. *Twelve million kilometers from target.*

The nearby tactical display updated, showing the star system and its seven planets. Planet number five was inhabited, and, around it, a myriad of red threat icons appeared.

*Detecting 43 defensive platforms,* reported the Vorn at the sensors. *Also 396 warships.*

*It is as we expected,* sent Military Commander Fraymot. *This food*

*species is well-protected.*

*There are habitat domes on two of the inner planets,* added the Vorn at the sensors. *Detecting several large orbital habitats above the target planet as well as a very large shipyard.*

*Take us in,* ordered Prince Brollen, his twin antenna standing erect.

His triangular-shaped head moved toward the viewscreens, which showed some of the ships of his fleet, including a pair of the twelve-hundred-meter-long Vorn battleships. He had 3,400 of the spindle-shaped cruisers in the fleet with another 1,700 waiting at an assembly point closer to the primary target.

The fleet quickly accelerated and headed toward the planet and its defending fleet, which was rapidly forming up to meet the oncoming Vorn.

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High Commander Arbale stared in consternation at the massive Destroyers of Worlds' fleet that had exited hyperspace and was now accelerating toward Drasni Five. "How many ships?"

"Nearly 4,500," gasped the sensor operator with fear in his eyes. "For some reason the black ships have allowed detection of their fleet. Whatever they normally use to prevent scans of their vessels is turned off. And, from my review of previous reports of attacks by the Destroyers of Worlds, a new warship type is in the approaching fleet. Our scans indicate it is 1,200 meters long, and the power readings are off the scale. The sensors are also picking up twenty motherships."

"Why allow us to detect their fleet?" asked the second officer, confused. "They haven't in past attacks."

"They want us to know what's coming," Arbale said with a deep frown. "They wish to intimidate us."

"Well, it's working," commented the sensor operator.

High Commander Arbale spent a long moment studying the tactical display. His fleet was equipped with one-hundred-megaton antimatter missiles. He knew from earlier reports the amount of firepower needed to bring down the shields of a black cruiser. These larger vessels were another matter entirely.

"Stop the fleet. We'll engage the Destroyers of Worlds here."

"We're one hundred thousand kilometers from Drasni Five. The defensive platforms won't be able to support us," pointed out his second in command.

Arbale turned to look at his second officer. "We will stay here, fire two full waves of our missiles, and then withdraw to the grid. Once there, we will form up around the Command and Control Station and the shipyard. Perhaps, if we inflict enough damage, the Destroyers of Worlds will withdraw."

"Only the Lakiams and the Andocks have defeated the Destroyers of Worlds," commented the second officer tensely. "Perhaps it would be a wiser option to withdraw and save our fleet."

"It is our duty to protect the Enlightened Worlds," said Arbale with a hint of anger in his voice.

"Other Protector World fleets have left to live another day, to report on the black ships," his second in command argued.

"How can we ever hope to achieve Enlightenment if we fail to follow through with our sworn duties?"

"What good is Enlightenment if the black ships kill all the Enlightened people and those who protect them?" The second in command now stood to face his commander.

Commander Arbale stepped closer to his second in command, yet spoke louder. "We will not run like so many other Protector Worlds, leaving planets defenseless. We will stand and fight, and, if we are destined to join our ancestors today, then we shall."

The crew in the Command Center shared surreptitious glances and frowns.

"Enemy is closing in. Contact in twelve minutes," reported the sensor operator. "The motherships are in the center of their fleet. Those bigger vessels are scattered throughout the formation."

High Commander Arbale pressed a comm button on his control console. "All ships, stand by to fire. We will fire two full waves of antimatter missiles and then withdraw to the defense grid. Concentrate your fire on one area of an enemy ship's shield. Battlecruisers are to work in pairs, and, just maybe, we can bring down a few of their shields."

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In space, the two fleets rapidly closed. The defending fleet had formed up into a pyramid-shaped formation with the apex forward. The Vorn fleet formation was a huge globe with the motherships safely in the center. As the two fleets entered engagement range, the first wave of missiles left the defending ships.

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“Hyperspace missile launch,” called out the tactical officer. “Retargeting and preparing to fire second set of missiles.” On his console, twelve lights flashed on, indicating successful launches. The time from launch to impact was measured in microseconds.

On the main viewscreen, white flashes of intense light appeared in the oncoming Destroyers of Worlds’ fleet formation.

“Second missile launch,” reported the tactical officer as the next set of missiles left the battlecruiser.

“Pull us back,” ordered High Commander Arbale, his eyes focused intently on the black fleet.

“Enemy is firing,” warned the sensor operator, “their black antimatter beams!”

Arbale’s flagship shuddered violently. Alarms sounded, and officers shouted commands. The lights in the Command Center dimmed and then returned to full brightness.

“Weapons strike above Engineering,” the damage control officer reported. “We have four decks open to space and several fires in adjoining compartments. Repair teams are en route.”

High Commander Arbale turned to study the damage control console. Several of the fires were near vital areas. “Vent those compartments on fire to space.”

“But, High Commander, crew personnel are still there,” objected the second in command, his eyes wide with concern.

“If we don’t, we’ll lose the ship!”

The second officer hesitated.

“Do you dare to disobey at a time like this?” High Commander Arbale asked. “You were given a direct order, implement it!”

“Vent those compartments,” murmured the second officer, forcing the words from his mouth.

The damage control officer pressed several icons on his screen. His face was so pale it was nearly white. “Compartments vented. Fires are out.”

“Now get us to the defense grid before they can hit us again,” ordered Arbale. He didn’t want to think about how many of his crew he had just ejected into the killing vacuum of space.

His breath caught in his throat when he looked at the viewscreens, seeing the further decimation of his fleet. Battlecruisers were being cut in two by the black antimatter beams, and others simply exploded as too many

systems were compromised. On one screen, a battlecruiser was missing its stern, while, on another, a black sphere was draining the power from a ship's energy screen.

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Prince Brollen watched attentively as his fleet methodically destroyed the opposing warships.

*The beams from the battleships are tearing apart the defending ships, reported Military Commander Fraymot. While the beams from our cruisers take several seconds or even more, one strike from a battleship can destroy an opposing vessel.*

*How many ships did we lose from their missiles?* One thing Brollen had noticed from the recent battles, the enemy ships no longer attempted to use their energy weapons. Instead they resorted to powerful missile attacks.

*Only two,* replied Fraymot.

*How many enemy ships will make it to their defense grid?*

Fraymot turned to study a tactical display. *Less than fifty.*

*Very well, continue with the battle as I observe.*

Fraymot bowed slightly and then contacted a large number of Vorn ships telepathically. *Time to destroy the planet's defense grid and the remaining enemy warships.*

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The carnage the Destroyers of Worlds had inflicted upon High Commander Arbale's fleet stunned him. Only forty-two of his battlecruisers had made it to the defense grid, and most of them were severely damaged.

"The last passenger liner and cargo ship capable of hyperspace travel have left the system," reported the sensor operator. "They began jumping out as soon as the Destroyers of Worlds' fleet was detected."

"There are reports of wholesale panic on Drasni Five," reported the communications officer. "The few available deep shelters are overrun, and fighting on the surface has been reported."

"Fighting on an Enlightened World?" said the tactical officer, confused. "I don't understand."

"Life or death," Arbale explained simply. "Even someone who has become Enlightened wants to live. This situation will bring out the worst in even the best people."

"The Destroyers of Worlds' fleet is inbound," reported the sensor operator. "Engagement range in four minutes."

“We still have time to withdraw,” said the second officer, his glare focused on High Commander Arbale. “We don’t have to die here.”

“No, we will remain,” Arbale said, resigned to his death. “It is our duty as a Protector World fleet to stay and die for those who are incapable of defending themselves.”

“No, we will not die today,” the second officer responded as he pulled his sidearm and shot the high commander in the head.

The stunned command crew sat at their consoles, all eyes focused on the second officer in disbelief.

“Helm, plot a hyperspace jump to Nelum Seven. We’re leaving. Communications, inform any other ship that wishes to withdraw that they have permission to do so.”

The crew remained frozen, not sure what to do.

“Do it now, or we die here!” ordered the second officer with his handgun still clutched in his hand.

For a long moment the crew hesitated, and then the helm officer plotted the hyperspace jump. At the same time, the communications officer spoke to the other ships in a frantic voice.

A few moments later the flagship vanished into hyperspace, followed by over half the remaining battlecruisers. Those that remained were too damaged to flee.

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As the black fleet neared the planet, the Vorn battleships moved out of the formation and toward the defensive platforms and the remaining battlecruisers. Black antimatter beams shot out and tore apart the few remaining battlecruisers. In a panic, the commanding officers in the platforms fired their missiles at the nearest targets. Coordination was forgotten as each platform tried to save itself. Across the formation of battleships, bright explosions lit up their energy screens, which easily absorbed the antimatter energy, sucking it up as if it were nothing.

Defense platform after platform exploded or was simply cut into dozens of pieces as the black ships focused their fire on the platforms. In only a few minutes the last defensive platform vanished from the space above the planet. The Command and Control Station lasted a few more minutes, but then it too blew apart in a massive explosion, sending fiery debris raining down on the planet. The few orbital defense satellites were likewise eliminated. Their destruction briefly lit up the sky over the dark side of the planet in brief

flashes of light. Then it was over, and the planet lay helpless beneath the victorious Vorn fleet. Above the planet glowing debris was all that remained of the once powerful defensive grid.

The Vorn motherships left the safety of their spherical formation and moved into low orbit above the planet. The black beams flashed down, converting the two billion inhabitants into a black ash, which was whisked up into the waiting motherships and into the converters. Every major life form on the planet perished.

Prince Brollen stood in one of the converter rooms and, as soon as a suitable food pellet was ready, consumed it. While not the best he had partaken of, it was still passable. It would not suffice for the Queens, but, for others of the Royal Court, it would be acceptable.

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An hour later and the fleet was ready to depart. The planet had been turned into a radioactive cinder. The orbiting shipyard and the two large habitats had been destroyed with antimatter missiles, leaving scattering debris fields. Vorn cruisers had been dispatched to the other nearby planets, and the habitation domes found there were likewise annihilated. When the Vorn fleet left the system, nothing living would remain.

Prince Brollen gazed at the main viewscreen with his multifaceted eyes. He was pleased with the results of this harvesting. Military Commander Fraymot had performed as expected. *Set a course for the assembly area, where the rest of our cruisers await. They will join our fleet, and then we will set a course for our target world. It is time I sampled food species 236.* As a precaution, Prince Brollen had decided to increase the size of his fleet. He had already summoned two other large harvesting fleets.

A few minutes later the massive Vorn fleet entered hyperspace. It was time to destroy the most powerful of the Protector Worlds.



## Chapter Seventeen

Fleet Admiral Kurt Vickers stood in the massive construction bay, gazing at his recently reconfigured ship. The *Star Cross* was now 1,700 meters long and more heavily armed than ever. Not only that, additional armor had been placed around the Command Center and Engineering, making those two areas nearly indestructible. The Glaymons had assured him not even a Vorn black antimatter beam could damage those two areas of his ship due to its special armor.

“What about their black energy spheres?” asked Andrew, standing next to Kurt. “Can they still siphon off the power from the energy screen?”

“No, the new energy screen protecting your ship rapidly rotates through a series of energy frequencies,” explained Tasid. “It’s what you would call a heterodyne effect. It tends to disrupt the power absorption of the black spheres.”

“I’m worried about some of the new technology on board my ships,” said Lomatz, his yellow eyes showing his concern. “None of my technicians understand it.”

“In time they will,” promised Tasid. “The weapons technology isn’t millions of years more advanced than your own. We didn’t load up your vessels with superscience that would be forever incomprehensible. While we do possess such science on many of our ships, we did not apply them to your vessels.”

Kurt looked at Tasid. “What about replacement parts? What if some of this new technology breaks down?” Kurt had taken a chance on allowing the Glaymons such a free hand with redesigning the *Star Cross* and his four heavy battlecruisers.

“Lomatz’s ship, the *Construct One*, has been modified so it can produce the spare parts you might need,” replied Tasid. “Two Class One replicators are on board that can furnish any spare parts your vessels might require. Also twenty Glaymons are on board, fully familiar with the new equipment, and can show the ship’s engineers how to operate it. The ship also has a very powerful energy shield as well as two Zero-Point Energy modules. The extra module is required to operate the replicators.”

Andrew looked thoughtful. “It’s a good thing a few of your people will be with us on our ships. It makes me feel better in case something goes wrong. I can see our engineers staring blankly at a piece of equipment that

has failed with no clue about how to repair it.”

“We recognize the technology will take some getting used to,” replied Tasid. “Plus the AI will be new to you, but you will find the repair robots are now far more versatile.”

They were interrupted as Gaylith, the female Glaymon responsible for monitoring communications in the galaxy, came rushing up. “The Vorn are on the move. They’ve harvested five planets in a direct line toward Lakiam. They will arrive in the Lakiam System in five to seven days.”

“Damn,” muttered Andrew, shaking his head, then turned to Tasid. “Can we get there in time?”

“Yes,” replied Tasid, with a slight frown. “Considering the distance the ships need to travel, we can be there in a little over three days with the new hyperdrives, if we leave in the morning.”

“We?” Kurt asked Tasid.

Tasid grinned and nodded. “You didn’t think I was staying here? I’ve dreamed of fighting the Vorn all my life.”

“Not much time for a shakedown cruise or to test the new weapons,” commented Andrew. “What if something goes wrong?”

“Don’t worry. The AIs on your ships can handle everything if need be. All you have to do is tell them what you want. Most of your control consoles still look and operate the same. The weapons are just more powerful, and a new panel has been installed to handle the Zero-Point Energy rounds for the KEW cannons. Your crews will find the ships very similar to what they had.”

Kurt turned toward Andrew. “Let’s get our crews on board so they can familiarize themselves with the changes.”

“We’ve assigned ten Glaymons to each one of your warships,” said Tasid. “I myself will be on your flagship to assist in the Command Center. Others will be in Engineering and other crucial compartments of the ship.”

Kurt looked at Captain Waelt, standing close by. “How many of your ships are coming?”

Captain Waelt smiled. “More than I had hoped. We’ll be ready to depart first thing in the morning. When we do, we can’t turn back. So far, we’ve managed to keep it a secret as to what we’re planning. Once we leave the Dyson Sphere and exit the nebula, the secret will be out, and the Glaymon Council will be furious. They can’t stop us, but there will be serious repercussions for those who stay behind.”

“We’re prepared for that,” Marshton said with a grimace. “No doubt

we'll be called before the council and told that our numbers must be reduced. They may also want us to turn over our remaining warships."

"Will you do that?" asked Kurt. He couldn't believe what the Aggressives were willing to give up in order to help in the war against the Destroyers of Worlds.

"There will be a compromise," Valan said with a deep sigh. "In the end, we will agree to reduce our population to only one habitat square if we can keep our remaining ships. I'm pretty certain they will agree to that. We don't want to be left defenseless in case the Vorn ever find our Dyson Sphere."

"What will happen to your people in the three habitat squares you're giving up?"

Marshton laughed. "Did I mention that we are extremely long-lived? The average lifespan for a Glaymon is over 12,000 years. Those of childbearing age will all gradually move to the habitat square we're keeping. The others will be allowed to live out their natural lives in their current homes. Eventually, as the population gradually drops, due to deaths, we'll pull back to three habitat squares, then two, and finally the one. So, as you can see, it will be thousands of years yet before the sanctions really affect us. Of course, if you can find a way to defeat the Destroyers of Worlds, all that could change. That's our biggest hope."

Kurt looked at the *Star Cross*. Hard to believe it was now one of the most powerful ships in the galaxy. Only the ships possessed by the Glaymons were more powerful.

"One other thing," said Gaylith anxiously. "Some of the reports we're picking up indicate the Vorn have deployed a new warship, perhaps a battleship class."

"There is no mention of such a vessel in our research into the Vorn," replied Valan, shifting his gaze to Gaylith. "The damaged cruiser we recovered long ago did not contain information of a battleship in its computer files."

Captain Waelt's face creased in a frown. "We have no idea of the power of such a vessel. If they have deployed battleships, they wish to make an example of the Lakiams. This won't just be a battle for the Lakiam System. The Vorn will seek to harvest and destroy every Lakiam world and colony."

"If Lakiam falls, the entire galaxy will follow," commented Lomatz. "The other Protector Worlds will abandon the Enlightened Worlds completely and pull back their fleets to cover their core systems. The Vorn

could then harvest most of the galaxy with impunity, saving the Protector Worlds for the end. Then they will annihilate them one by one until no civilized world remains.”

Kurt looked at Captain Waelt. “We can’t let Lakiam fall.”

Kurt had originally hoped to travel to Lakiam and have Mara introduce him to Fleet Commodore Dreen and turn over some of the Glaymons’ technology to him. The Zero-Point Energy system alone might allow the Lakiams to eventually defeat the Destroyers of Worlds. Even the KEW cannon with some of the exotic rounds the Glaymons had furnished might be a game changer. But then the Aggressives had offered to send a fleet, and now, with the Vorn rapidly closing on Lakiam, Kurt unhappily realized he would be forced into playing a more active role.

“My ships will be ready in the morning,” replied Captain Waelt.

“I need to make a few more arrangements before we leave,” said Tasid. “It won’t take long, and then I’ll come to the *Star Cross*.”

Marshston looked at Valan and then spoke. “We have a few more preparations of our own to make. There may be a surprise for you in the morning.”

“A surprise?” asked Kurt, wondering what it could be.

“Yes, two more vessels will accompany you. They’re not quite ready, but I believe we can have them done by morning if we add more construction robots to the project.”

“I must notify all my ship captains that we’re leaving.” Kurt asked Valan, “Have you seen Mara today?”

“She’s on a tour of one of our major museums,” said Valan. “I think she believes that, by studying our past, it will help her to better understand some of our science. She even has several of her scientists with her.”

“Can you inform her that we’ll be leaving in the morning?”

“Yes,” replied Valan. “I’ll see to it immediately.”

Kurt shifted his attention to Andrew. “Let’s board the *Star Cross*. We have a lot to do before we’re ready to depart. It may be a long night.”

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Several hours later, Kurt was on board the *Star Cross* as the command crew worked with Tasid and several other Glaymons. While all their consoles were similar to what was there before, some subtle differences existed. The biggest one for Kurt was the small platform in front of his command console. Currently a beautiful Human woman stood upon the platform—the AI the

*Star Cross* had been equipped with. Her projection was a three-dimensional hologram, and she almost seemed real.

“All ship systems are operating within design specifications,” she reported in a soft feminine voice. “Supplies and munitions are on board, including new and updated hyperspace missiles.”

Kurt hadn’t known about the changes to the missiles until Tasid had casually mentioned it earlier. The missile warheads had been replaced with dark matter warheads, capable of exploding with a force of five hundred megatons, similar to the ones the Lakiams used. Tasid confided in Kurt that Mara had frowned when told the Glaymons had furnished the *Star Cross* and the other Human vessels with the missiles that, until now, only the Lakiams had possessed.

“Admiral,” Mara Liam is requesting your presence on board the *Aurelia*,” reported Lieutenant Pierce from Communications.

Kurt let out a deep sigh. He had been avoiding Mara as much as possible while the ships were rebuilt. Perhaps it would be best to pay her a visit before leaving the Dyson Sphere. Once they left, the fleet would not stop again until they reached Lakiam space.

“Andrew, keep the crew at it for another five hours and then send them to get some rest. I want everyone at the top of their game in the morning when we depart.”

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“No problem,” said Andrew, replacing Kurt in the command chair. Andrew looked at the AI and slowly shook his head. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to that.”

“I’m perfectly harmless,” the AI spoke in a sultry voice, her eyes focused on Andrew. “Your name is Andrew Randson, and you are the captain of the *Star Cross*. You’re married and have a daughter named Alexis. You also have a friend named Grantz that I am curious to meet.”

Andrew slowly shook his head. “Are you that familiar with the entire crew of the ship?”

“Yes,” the AI replied. “All the crew personnel records are available to me. However, this Grantz person sounds intriguing.”

“I’m not sure you want to meet Grantz. He might steal your program and sell you on Kubitz if he can get enough gold.”

“Gold,” said the AI, sounding confused. “I fail to understand why it’s so valuable. It’s a soft metal that doesn’t have that many uses.”

“It’s complicated,” replied Andrew. “When we have more time, we can discuss it. Now let’s go over the changes made to the ship, compartment by compartment. Also do you have a name?”

“Yes, Captain,” the AI replied. “You may call me Aleea.” She then began explaining in detail the changes made to the *Star Cross*.

Andrew let out a deep breath as he realized this would take a while.

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Kurt made it to the *Aurelia* and, after boarding, was told that Mara was waiting for him in her quarters. This didn’t please Kurt as he preferred to speak with her when others were present. Reaching her quarters, he knocked, and the door slid quietly open.

“Come in, Admiral,” said Mara.

Kurt stepped into her quarters and, as the door slid shut behind him, came to a sudden stop. Mara stood in front of him, holding two glasses that contained an amber-colored liquid. However, what she wore was what made him halt. A long translucent gown that left little to the imagination. Mara was alluring enough as it was, and this white gown made her look absolutely ravishing. Kurt could feel his heart beat faster and his face flush.

“We’ve known each other long enough that I thought we should take the next step,” said Mara, handing Kurt the glass in her right hand. “This is a Lakiam drink often shared among friends.”

Kurt took the glass, still not quite sure what Mara wanted. He also didn’t want to offend her, as the Lakiams were key to keeping Earth and Newton out of the war with the Destroyers of Worlds. However, her gown and her naked body underneath it, implied she might have some specific plans for the evening.

Mara turned, and, as she did so, the translucent gown offered a brief view of her breasts. If that gown was meant to get his heart racing, it definitely succeeded. Taking a deep breath, Kurt followed her, and they both sat on the comfortable sofa in the room.

“How is your crew adapting to the changes on your ship?” she asked politely as she took a sip from her glass.

“Slowly,” answered Kurt. “The *Star Cross* was only finished yesterday, and we’re still checking all the ship’s systems. What about the *Aurelia*?” Kurt took a hesitant sip of his drink, finding it warm and slightly sweet. It reminded him of a pineapple.

“My scientists are still confused about some of the technology. The

replicators are the most intriguing. The technology to create matter from energy is something many worlds have dreamed of for millennia. The biggest problem has always been the power source. While there have been devices that could create matter from energy, the energy cost was so extreme to make the devices useless. The Glaymons solved that problem with their Zero-Point Energy system.”

“What about the AI? I assume they put one on your vessel as well.” Kurt was acutely aware that Mara’s leg now touched his. He had some growing concerns as to Mara’s actual goal for this meeting. With what she wore and the way she was acting, he had a pretty good idea what she wanted.

“We have AIs on Lakiam, as many Protector Worlds do. They are quite common on the Enlightened Worlds. However, we never developed them to the point where they could be used on our warships. Our AIs have a set of strict rules that prevent them from doing harm, which would run counter to what a warship stands for. We do have very intelligent computers we use on our ships, but they lack sentience.”

Kurt became acutely aware of Mara’s extremely enticing perfume. He took another sip of his drink, wondering how to extricate himself from this delicate situation without offending Mara.

Mara stood up, placing her glass on a nearby table. Turning toward Kurt, she reached up and slid her gown off her shoulders, allowing it to fall to the floor at her feet. Her hands went to her hips, and she posed, gazing suggestively at Kurt.

Kurt’s heart raced. Mara was absolutely ravishing. There wasn’t a blemish anywhere on her body. He didn’t know if he had ever seen a woman as beautiful as she was. His gaze moved over her body, and, for a long moment, he was extremely tempted to take Mara up on her obvious offer.

“Mara, what are you doing?”

Mara smiled, taking the glass from Kurt’s hand and setting it down. “It has been a while since I shared myself with a man.” Taking Kurt’s hand, she pulled him up from the sofa. “None are suitable on my ship, and your rank is high enough so the sharing would be mutual.”

Mara took Kurt’s hands, placing them on her waist. She leaned forward, pressing her body against his.

With a sharp breath, Kurt forced himself to pull away. “Mara, we can’t. It wouldn’t be fair to Keera.”

Surprised, Mara stepped back looking confused. “Is that a problem?”

“Keera and I live together, and I’ve purchased a home on Newton, where someday we will be raising our children. I can’t be unfaithful to her.”

Mara ran her hand suggestively down Kurt’s chest. Then she sighed deeply and nodded. “I understand.” She bent and picked up her gown, putting it back on.

“I hope I haven’t offended you,” Kurt said, still breathing hard. Turning Mara down had been much more difficult than he had imagined.

Smiling, Mara shook her head. “No, I should be ashamed. I should have checked more into your culture’s morals when it comes to this issue. Casual sharing between acquaintances is normal on Lakiam, though I do not indulge often.”

“Neither of us has anything to be ashamed of,” replied Kurt. “You’re a beautiful woman, and, if not for Keera, I would have taken you up on your offer in an instant.”

“You are a man of principles,” responded Mara approvingly. “I believe Fleet Commander Dreen shares many of your views. I don’t believe he shares with casual acquaintances either. Of course you don’t know what you’re missing out on. Lakiam women have a reputation for being fabulous at sharing themselves.”

Kurt smiled. “I can only imagine.”

“I’ll let you get to your ship,” said Mara. “We both must be ready to depart in the morning.”

“The Destroyers of Worlds,” answered Kurt. “At least we have a number of Glaymon warships coming with us. Just maybe we’ll change the course of the war.”

“I hope so,” said Mara, with a more serious look on her face. “Lakiam and my people can’t be allowed to fall.”

Kurt turned to leave, and, as he reached the door, he heard Mara speak one more time.

“If you ever change your mind, my offer of sharing still stands.”

“I’ll remember that.” Taking a deep breath, Kurt left Mara’s quarters.

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Early the next morning the fleet readied to leave the large construction bay. The *Star Cross* was the first to head for the exit of the massive spacedock.

“Do you think Earth or Newton will ever have something like this?” Andrew asked as he gazed with envy at the viewscreens, showing the interior



of the giant spacedock.

"I doubt it," answered Kurt. "I think this is something only the Glaymons will possess. It would take a tremendous amount of resources to build a structure like this. More than most worlds will ever have."

"Perhaps not," said Tasid. He stood close to Kurt, watching the command crew work their consoles. Two other Glaymons were in the Command Center, ready to assist the crew if needed. "If we're successful in defeating the Destroyers of Worlds, then the worlds with civilizations in this galaxy will continue to develop. Someday there may be many Dyson Spheres."

"More Dyson Spheres?" repeated Andrew, his eyes widening at the thought. "It would definitely solve the problem of overpopulation."

"That it would," replied Kurt. "Lieutenant Styles, move us away from the construction bay. I want the other ships to follow us down the center of the spacedock to where we will exit."

"I can pilot the ship more efficiently," said Alea, wearing a standard fleet uniform.

Kurt took a moment to examine the AI, realizing how much she reminded him of Mara. Guilt still plagued him about what had nearly happened in Mara's quarters the previous evening. He had already decided it would be best if he didn't mention it to Keera. "I'm sure you can," answered Kurt. "But the crew needs to work the controls so they can handle everything in case there's an emergency."

On one of the viewscreens, the *Aurelia* and Lomatz's ship, the *Golan Four*, emerged from the construction bay. It took several minutes, but soon all eight ships of the small fleet were in formation and proceeding down the spacedock toward the massive space doors.

Kurt also noticed many of the one-thousand-meter disk ships of the Glaymons had detached from their docking ports or were rising from their berths on the floor.

"How many Glaymon ships are coming with us?" asked Andrew as they formed up behind the *Star Cross* and the other seven ships of the Newton fleet.

"I'm not sure," replied Kurt. "When I last spoke to Captain Wael, he indicated that nearly five hundred disk ships would be accompanying us. I got the impression from speaking to Marshon that perhaps one or two special ships might be coming along as well."

“We’re nearing the space doors,” Lieutenant Styles reported as he adjusted the ship’s speed slightly.

On the main viewscreen, the massive doors slid open, and the *Star Cross* exited, followed by the other ships of the fleet.

“Admiral, if you will, please allow the AI to pilot the ship for the next few minutes,” suggested Tasid. “It’s essential we get away from the Dyson Sphere as quickly as possible. Particularly when the other Glaymons see what we’re doing and realize what we’re up to. The Dyson Sphere has some very powerful defenses. While I don’t believe they would use them against us, it’s best if we don’t take the risk.”

“Very well,” replied Kurt. “Lieutenant Styles, turn over control of the ship to the AI.”

“Admiral, look,” said Andrew, pointing toward the viewscreens.

Kurt’s eyes widened in surprise. Other massive doors opened, and more of the one-thousand-meter disk ships exited. “That’s more than five hundred,” he said as the *Star Cross* accelerated.

“Yes,” Tasid replied with a smile. “Many more.”

“Admiral, I’m receiving a message from the Dyson Sphere,” reported Lieutenant Pierce, frowning. “We’ve been ordered to return to the spacedock immediately.”

Tasid stepped to the sensor console, closely examining the readings coming in. “No sign of any weapons powering up. They can’t prevent our leaving.”

“Stand by to enter hyperspace,” Aleea informed them.

“I have the lead councilman on the comm,” said Lieutenant Pierce. “He says, if we turn around now, he will be more accommodating, and the Aggressives won’t be punished.”

“They’re getting desperate,” said Tasid. “They know it’s too late to stop us now.”

A slight wrenching sensation ran through Kurt’s body as the ship made the jump into hyperspace. “Where did the rest of those ships come from? I wasn’t expecting that many.” He looked at Tasid, waiting for an explanation.

“Captain Waelt has spoken to many more of the captains of our ships. He can be very persuasive at times. Even I’m not certain how many he may have talked into joining us.”

“Damn, we’re traveling fast to be in the nebula,” Andrew said nervously, frowning at the AI.

“Nothing to be afraid of,” replied Aleea, smiling at Andrew. “I’m adjusting the course constantly to avoid the thicker dust, gas, and high-radiation regions. We’ll be emerging from the nebula in twenty-two minutes.”

While Kurt didn’t approve of the Glaymons hiding in the nebula without helping the exposed races, he did respect their wish to stay concealed. “Is there any chance the worlds outside the nebula will detect our presence once we emerge?” Kurt asked Tasid.

“No. We’ve modified your sensor-jamming device where, not only will it keep your hyperdrives masked, it will do the same for your ships once we drop from hyperspace,” explained Tasid. “All our ships are equipped with similar equipment. No one will detect us unless we want them to.”

Kurt nodded. He wondered how many other changes had been made that he didn’t know about. At least he and his crew had a few days before they arrived at Lakiam to learn what else had been done to his ship.

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The twenty-two minutes passed by quickly, and the *Star Cross* dropped from hyperspace. Kurt looked at the viewscreens, displaying myriads of stars. He didn’t realize how much he had missed that view until now.

“Sensor contacts,” called out Lieutenant Brooks.

“Your sensors have also been modified to scan through the jamming fields,” explained Tasid. He grinned and continued. “What good is a technology if you can’t find a way to work around it?”

“That’s a lot of ships,” Andrew said as he watched hundreds of large green icons appear on one of the tactical displays. Then suddenly two massive green icons blossomed on the display. “And those are the biggest green icons I’ve ever seen. What are those?” asked Andrew, his eyes narrowing sharply. “Are those ships?”

“Aleea, please place one of those two ships on a viewscreen,” ordered Tasid, addressing the AI.

On one of the main viewscreens, a massive football-shaped ship appeared, bristling with weapons and hundreds of small and large hatches.

“How big is that ship?” Kurt asked Tasid. This must be one of the two special ships he had mentioned the previous afternoon.

“It’s a colony ship,” replied Tasid as he gazed excitedly at the vessel. “It’s seven kilometers in length and three kilometers in diameter at its widest point. We built two of them in secret many years ago in preparation for some

of us leaving the Dyson Sphere. We never had sufficient reason to use them until now. Everything we need to carry on our civilization is on board those ships. In addition each vessel contains 33,000 Glaymons of childbearing age.”

“Where are they going to go?” asked Lieutenant Mays.

Tasid looked at Kurt. “We would like to take our colony ships to your region of the galaxy. It’s mostly uninhabited, and we can place our colony ships in orbit above a suitable world or star. They are designed to be lived upon for hundreds, even thousands, of years. When this is over, I’ll be glad to take you on a tour. A number of wide-open parklike areas are inside for our people to enjoy. They’re unlike any ship you’ve ever seen.”

“Admiral, I’m also picking up 907 of the one-thousand-meter disk ships as well as 22 more of varying sizes that are unidentifiable.”

“Fleet support ships as well as two larger ships containing repair bays for our vessels. There is also considerable manufacturing capacity on those ships to replace any missiles or KEW rounds your ships may need. We were not certain we could have all of these ships ready in time.”

“I have a message from Fleet Captain Waelt,” reported Lieutenant Brenda Pierce. “He’s ready to depart for Lakiam whenever you give the order.”

“*Fleet* captain?” Kurt turned toward Tasid.

“Yes, the other captains voted for Captain Waelt to lead our fleet.”

Kurt nodded. So much was happening so quickly it would take him some time to assimilate everything. “Aleea, set a course for Lakiam and coordinate with the rest of the fleet. I don’t want us to get separated.”

“No problem, Admiral,” Aleea replied smartly. “All ships will be entering hyperspace in seven minutes. Hyperspace formation will be globular with the two colony ships and the *Star Cross* in the center.”

Kurt looked at Andrew, who was still staring at the massive colony ship on the viewscreen. Neither knew quite what to say. They were bringing the Glaymons out of hiding. Once they reached Lakiam, the entire galaxy would know of their existence. Kurt hoped they were doing the right thing. The technology the Glaymons brought would doubtlessly shake the economy of the galaxy. Just the Zero-Point Energy modules alone would bring about a massive change. Kurt was only beginning to understand now why certain technology was prohibited to races below a certain level of civilization. From necessity, all that was about to change, or the Vorn would never be driven

from the galaxy.

## Chapter Eighteen

Fleet Admiral Kurt Vickers was in his quarters, speaking to Andrew and Dr. Willis. They had been traveling for over two days in hyperspace.

“How are things in your med bay?” Kurt asked Willis, who seemed a little flustered.

“I thought the equipment Keera had placed in my med bay was confusing,” Willis said with a long sigh. “What the Glaymons have installed is even worse. Even my hotshot intern doesn’t fully understand it. Did you know there’s a machine in there now that can scan a person’s injury, decide on the appropriate treatment, and then program medical nanites to cure a disease or mend a broken arm?”

“That sounds good to me,” commented Andrew. “What’s wrong with it?”

“It almost seems like magic,” muttered Willis, frowning. “I had a crewman fall down a flight of stairs yesterday, breaking his left leg and three ribs. That crewman is on duty today, fit as a fiddle. No signs of him ever being injured. I had him on a medical scanner, and you could see the bones actually mending. What do I need doctors or nurses for if a machine can do everything?”

Kurt smiled, understanding the doctor’s frustrations. “We’re all adjusting to new equipment.” He looked at Andrew. “Have you figured out how fast the *Star Cross* is traveling in hyperspace?”

Andrew looked sheepish. “I just asked Aleea. She said we were traveling at over 460 light-years per hour.”

Kurt nodded. “That’s over seven and a half light-years in a minute.”

Dr. Willis’s face turned pale. “I wish I didn’t know that. What if we hit something at that speed?”

“We won’t,” Kurt assured him. “Our sensors have been enhanced by the Glaymons. They can detect anything in our path up to thirty-two light-years distant. That gives Aleea plenty of time to make a course adjustment if needed. Not only that, the Glaymons have some very detailed galactic survey maps. Our course to Lakiam should take us well around all known hazards.”

“An AI,” said Willis, folding his arms over his chest. “What will they come up with next? Like I said earlier, sometime in the future, all of us will be replaced with robots and AIs. And then what?”

“Many of the Protector Worlds are already like that,” said Andrew.

“The Hanorian ships we encountered, their crew size was around ten on each battlecruiser, according to Mara.”

Dr. Willis looked at Kurt. “What will you do if we survive this battle with the Destroyers of Worlds? I understand before we left on this mission you bought a new house.”

Kurt nodded. He had been wondering what Keera and his sister were doing as far as decorating the house and adding furnishings. “Yes, I did. Keera and Denise are working on it while we’re gone. Keera’s sister-in-law is helping as well.”

Andrew only shook his head. “You left three women in charge of decorating your house? I hope you had plenty of money in your account because I can promise you that they’ll spend every bit of it.”

Kurt laughed. It was a good feeling. “Keera’s not a spendthrift. I think she got that from her time on Kubitz.”

“How are Meesa and Dalen doing?” asked Willis.

Kurt remembered the doc had examined and spoken to both of them when they had left Kubitz.

“Better now,” answered Kurt. “Living on Newton is a big change for them, compared to Kubitz.”

Dr. Willis nodded. “I can imagine.” Willis looked at Andrew. “I wonder what your buddy Grantz has been doing while you’ve been gone? Who’s looking after him?”

“Why does everybody think he’s my buddy?” asked Andrew with a deep frown. “Grantz has one priority, and that’s accumulating gold. I feel sorry for Ambassador Tenner since he has to deal with him every day. I’m just glad he’s spending most of his time on Kubitz and not on Newton.”

“Grantz has his uses,” Kurt said, coming to the Profiteer’s defense. “He’s retrieved a lot of valuable information for us. He even saved our lives that time our Humvees were ambushed.” Kurt shifted his gaze to Andrew. “You would have died from your injuries if Grantz hadn’t summoned Avery Dolman.”

Andrew reluctantly nodded. “Perhaps, but I still don’t trust him.”

Dr. Willis stood to leave. “Can we win this battle against the Vorn?”

Kurt took a deep breath. “I don’t know. We have no idea of the size fleet we’ll be facing other than it’s very large. We’re not certain what the Lakiams have done to prepare their system to resist the Vorn. On the plus side, all our ships have been heavily modified, and the Glaymons are certain

that our weapons can destroy a Vorn warship. We also have over nine hundred Glaymon disk ships with us that are more advanced than any other ships in the galaxy.”

Willis nodded. “When we return to Newton, I’ll need some time off. When we left home, I didn’t expect to be in a battle like what’s ahead of us. I had hoped for a peaceful voyage. I guess I should have known better.”

“None of us expected this,” Kurt said in agreement. “We just have to play the cards we’re dealt.”

“True,” Willis said, and then his eyes narrowed. “But you’re a terrible poker player.”

After Dr. Willis left, Andrew turned to Kurt. “Can we win? I really want to get home to Newton.”

“I guess that’s what everyone in this fleet would like to know. We’ll be in Lakiam space tomorrow afternoon. Maybe then we can get some answers. Our long-range sensors should tell us what the Lakiams are doing to prepare for the coming of the Vorn.” Kurt was apprehensive; a lot was riding on what would occur over the next few days. If Lakiam were to fall, no other Protector Worlds were powerful enough to stand up to the Vorn.

Andrew stood, his duty shift was about to begin. “I don’t think Emily or Keera would be pleased with what we’re about to do. When we left to seek the Glaymons, I never imagined we would be fighting the Destroyers of Worlds in a massive fleet battle.”

“None of us did,” replied Kurt. Andrew was right about Emily and Keera. Perhaps, if this battle went their way, it wouldn’t be necessary to get involved in galactic affairs again. They could stay on Newton and live out the rest of their lives in peace.

Later, once Andrew left, Kurt took several photos from his desk drawer. One was of the new house with him and Keera standing in front of it. His sister Denise had taken the photo. The other was of his sister’s family. In the photo, Bryan held his baseball in his hand. Kurt hoped that, in a few more days, he would be on Newton, spending time with Keera and his sister’s family, and playing catch with Bryan in the backyard of his new home. But first he had to deal with the Destroyers of Worlds and hope the *Star Cross* and its crew survived.

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Prince Brollen nodded in satisfaction at the massive fleet he had gathered to attack food species 236. He had left nothing to chance. He had



augmented his fleet more than he had originally planned. His fleet currently consisted of thirty motherships, one thousand battleships, and 5,500 cruisers. Even if food species 236 put up a powerful resistance, Prince Brollen's fleet would overwhelm them and then harvest all their worlds. This would be the largest battle the Vorn had fought since coming to this universe. It would not only seal his position as a consort but make him the most important military leader of the Vorn. He would be second in rank only to Queen Alithe.

*Fleet is nearly ready to depart, reported Military Commander Fraymot. Our long-range scouts indicate the target system is heavily defended with large fleet units. It also possesses the most powerful planetary defenses we have yet to encounter. The same with the size of the enemy fleet.*

*It won't make a difference, replied Prince Brollen dismissively. Our battleships are indestructible, and they will annihilate the fleets of this food species. Their worlds will be harvested, and they will become food for the Vorn.*

*Our battleships are truly mighty, responded Fraymot.*

*How long will it take to arrive at our target?*

*Two days, answered Fraymot. We will exit hyperspace in the outer system, and scan their fleet and defenses for any possible traps. Once I am satisfied with what our sensor scans show, we will begin our attack. The battle should be over quickly.*

*What about cargo ships? I don't want any of our vessels rammed.* The use of cargo ships to ram by food species 111 had been a shock. He wouldn't allow that to happen again.

*All ships' military commanders understand the danger posed by a loaded cargo vessel ramming their energy screen. If cargo ships are detected, they will be targeted immediately with our black antimatter beams. They will be annihilated before they can reach the fleet.*

Prince Brollen gazed at the viewscreens, filled with ships from his fleet. As far as the prince could see were hundreds of Vorn warships. *Are we prepared to split the fleet as we discussed earlier?*

Since the enemy could not detect Vorn ships in hyperspace, and the Vorn sensor-masking field made it impossible for ships to be detected in normal space, a plan had been put together. Two fleets of five hundred ships each would split off from the main formation before the rest of the fleet arrived in the home system of food species 236. The two fleets would enter the system undetected and wait until the battle was in progress. Once the two

opposing fleets engaged in battle, the two smaller fleets would attack the defending fleet on its flanks. The surprise of the two fleets hitting the defending fleet unexpectedly, along with the firepower of the battleships, should ensure a quick victory with relatively few losses of Vorn ships.

*All has been taken care of,* responded Military Commander Fraymot. *It will be a great victory, and Queen Alithe will be very pleased with you.*

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Later, in his quarters, Prince Brollen inspected his personal collection of food pellets. One entire wall of his quarters contained over one hundred small square containers kept at a low temperature so as to preserve the pellets indefinitely. On the front of each case was the food species number and a brief description. His goal was to have over one thousand such cases when the harvesting of this galaxy was complete.

Stepping to one container, he opened it and took out one of the small gray pellets. Placing it between his mandibles, he chomped down on it, grinding it up and swallowing. This particular pellet had a slight sweet taste to it, and almost instantly he could feel a surge of invigorating energy flowing through his body. This would be the last time he ate before the battle. He had plans for feasting on a number of food pellets from food species 236. It had become a ritual to taste the food pellets of newly harvested worlds as the first pellets were processed in the converter chambers. This coming feast would be special, as this particular food species had become quite troublesome. That was about to end.

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Late the next day Fleet Commodore Dreen was summoned to the Command Center. He had been resting in his quarters, knowing the Vorn could show up at any time.

“What do we have?” he asked as he stepped into the busy Command Center.

“They’re coming,” Laylem reported from his sensor console. “The new hyperspace detection buoys picked them up just a few minutes ago. They’re about twenty hours out and coming fast. Current distance is 1,200 light-years.”

Commodore Dreen frowned. “I didn’t think we had any detection buoys out that far.”

“You can thank the Bascoms for that,” said Alborg from Tactical. “They planted a number of buoys in what they thought would be the most

likely approach vectors for the Vorn. We got lucky.”

“All members of the alliance have been informed,” added Keenol.

“Alliance fleets should be in position within twelve hours,” reported Alborg.

“Sheera, contact Captain Callast and inform him we have detected the Vorn, estimated arrival time is twenty hours. Alborg, put up a counter on the main viewscreen.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen sat and gazed at the tactical display, showing an expanded view of the Vorn fleet from the sketchy data sent from the hyperspace detection buoys.

“Estimates show over six thousand Vorn vessels,” reported Alborg as he studied some information on one of his computer screens. “We have confirmation of a new ship type, possibly a battlecruiser or battleship. Also a large number of Vorn motherships are at the heart of the formation.”

“Let’s set our battle plan into motion,” ordered Commodore Dreen. “We’re making the assumption that the Vorn don’t know we can detect their ships. That gives us a big tactical advantage.”

“They’re still Vorn, and our ships are no match to theirs in one-on-one combat,” Jalad said to the fleet commodore. “The firepower that fleet represents is tremendous. It’s also troubling that they have this new ship type.”

“We’ll stop them,” replied Commodore Dreen. “Sheera, contact the council and tell them the Vorn are inbound. Then contact Lakiam Space Control and have all noncombat ships begin evacuations. I want them out of the system in the next ten hours.” Dreen also was greatly concerned about this unknown new ship type. They were barely able to destroy the known Vorn cruisers. What would it take to destroy one of these larger warships?

“What about our other worlds?” asked Sheera. “Should I send messages to them as well?”

“That’s up to the council,” replied Dreen. “However, notify all fleet units in all our star systems that we’ve detected the Vorn and expect a major fleet battle in twenty hours.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen studied the tactical display for a few more minutes, then he stood. “Inform me if there are any changes. I must speak to some of our fleet captains as well as send some messages to Fleet Leader Moor and a few others.” Dreen wanted to make sure everyone understood their part in the coming battle. Special hyperspace transmission relays tied all

the main worlds of the alliance together. It allowed communication in a matter of hours, where otherwise it would take days.

As Fleet Commodore Dreen made his way to his quarters, he couldn't help thinking about Mara. She was a distant relative and was off somewhere working with a primitive race in a remote section of the galaxy. He wondered if she realized how lucky she was to be away from all this. As he reached his quarters, his mind refocused on the job at hand. He hadn't planned on going into battle against over six thousand Vorn ships. The larger battlecruisers or battleships would be a big problem. He needed to come up with a plan to deal with them, or he wouldn't be able to hold the Lakiam System.

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Fleet Admiral Kurt Vickers gazed with deep concern at the massive Vorn fleet inbound toward the Lakiam System. "How do we defeat that?" The *Star Cross* had detected the hyperspace detection network, and Aleea had tied into it so they were seeing the same data as the Lakiam fleet was.

"One ship at a time," replied Tasid. "From the complexity of this detection network the Lakiams and their allies have put up, it's evident they've reverse engineered some of the technology on the captured Vorn mothership. I hope, when this is over, we're granted access to it. It could reveal a lot about the enemy we're up against."

"I still think I should be allowed to go to Lakiam and tell Fleet Commodore Dreen about what we've brought with us," said Mara, her eyes focused intently on Kurt. She had come over from the *Aurelia* to speak with him and Tasid. "It could make a big difference in the battle."

"No," replied Kurt, shaking his head. "Our biggest advantage is that no one knows about us. We'll let the battle begin and see what develops. When the time is right, we'll take our fleet in and attack the Vorn. I'm sure your Fleet Commodore Dreen has made some special arrangements to deal with the Vorn fleet."

"The Vorn battlecruisers or battleships will be the problem," said Tasid, sounding concerned. "No doubt the Zero-Point Energy rounds we've created for the *Star Cross* and your four heavy battlecruisers can destroy them. I'm not so certain about our own vessels until we see what effect our energy weapons have."

"What about our energy screens?" asked Andrew. "Can they stand up to these larger ships?"

"They should," answered Aleea. "There's a lot of redundant capacity

built into the screens. It would take several of these larger Vorn vessels acting together to penetrate one.”

“The energy screens we equipped your ships with, as well as the ones on our disk ships, are the most powerful that we know of,” Tasid informed them. “The Vorn’s smaller spindle-shaped cruisers don’t have the power to penetrate the shields. As Aleea said, we’re not so certain about the larger Vorn vessels. If their size is an indication of their increased firepower when compared to their smaller cruisers, we should be safe in one-on-one combat. Against more than one ship, I’m not so certain.”

“We’ll just have to make sure none of our ships engage more than one of the Vorn’s larger ships at a time,” said Kurt. “If that occurs, we’ll have orders in place for that vessel to pull back until more of our ships arrive so we can even up the odds.”

Tasid gazed at the tactical displays for several long moments. “It’s strange to think we’re shortly going into battle. In the long history of the Glaymons, only in the days of the first Destroyers of Worlds’ invasion did any of our ships ever meet a Vorn ship in combat. Immediately after that first contact, we sought a place for our people to hide. The Vorn weren’t even finished harvesting this galaxy before we moved into the nebula. At first our people lived in massive colony ships, and eventually we settled on a few barren worlds, building enormous habitat domes. Then we set out to build the Dyson Sphere.”

“But you survived,” said Mara. “If not for your survival, what chance would we have today against the Vorn?”

Tasid nodded. “I only wished we had done something to stop their reign of terror many millions of years ago. I fear my race is responsible for the deaths of countless trillions of innocents over the long history of the Vorn incursions.”

“Your people did what they thought was right,” said Kurt. “Who knows if anyone else would have done differently?”

“Admiral, there’s a lot of ship movements in some of the star systems,” reported Lieutenant Mays. She studied several tactical displays. “From what I’ve determined, the Andocks, Bascoms, and the Parmonts are all sending ships to aid Fleet Commodore Dreen against the Vorn. This will be one hell of a battle.”

Mara looked surprised and then smiled. “So he was successful in building an alliance against the Vorn!”

“It looks like it,” Kurt said as he turned and examined the fleet movements Lieutenant Mays had pointed out.

“If we can stop the Vorn at Lakiam, the alliance will only grow,” Mara said excitedly. “With the help of the Glaymons, we can drive the Destroyers of Worlds from our galaxy.”

“How long do we wait until we move in?” asked Andrew.

Kurt’s fleet had arrived in this empty star system a day ago. The two large colony ships and the support vessels had moved out, orbiting around the star in deep space where they wouldn’t be detected. The colony ships and the support ships had sensor-dampening fields in operation too. A vessel would have to pass very close to even see one. As far as those ships were from the star, the likelihood of that happening was pretty close to zero.

Kurt looked at the viewscreens, displaying the ships in his fleet. Fleet Captain Waelt had placed himself and the Glaymon warships under Kurt’s command. The *Golan Four* and the *Construct One* were out near the colony ships. There were no plans for Lomatz’s ships to take part in the battle. The *Aurelia* was floating in space close to the *Star Cross*.

“We’ll make a hyperspace jump to the edge of the Lakiam System as the Vorn get closer. I want to engage them on a moment’s notice. When the battle commences, we’ll watch as the tactical situation develops, and then we’ll engage the Vorn. I want a rapid attack upon the Vorn vessels, focusing on those larger warships. If we can take them out, then Fleet Commodore Dreen can handle the rest with some assistance from us.”

“Fleet Commodore Dreen will have plans in place to cause the Vorn as much trouble as possible,” said Mara, confident in Dreen’s ability to punish the Destroyers of Worlds’ fleet. “He will never let them near Lakiam.”

“Mara, when we jump in, it’s essential you contact Fleet Commodore Dreen and tell him who we are. He must understand that my fleet is to be allowed free reign in whatever needs to be done.”

“When we jump into the system, I’ll locate the *Basera*. It’s Fleet Commodore Dreen’s flagship. I’ll jump to its location and report in.”

Andrew stared at the tactical display and all the red threat icons representing Vorn ships. “I can’t believe we’re about to go into battle against the Destroyers of Worlds.” Andrew paused for a moment, shifting his gaze to Kurt. “What if we can’t win?”

Tasid grinned. “You’ve never seen one of our disk ships in battle. All will be commanded by our AIs. They are very efficient, and I seriously doubt

if the Vorn have ever encountered anything like them before.”

“Tasid is correct,” said Aleea, her eyes seeming to gleam with excitement. “I have been trained to operate a warship as efficiently as possible. For example, I estimate that the fighting efficiency of the *Star Cross* would increase by 72 percent if I were allowed to command the ship.”

Kurt was startled by the efficiency increase Aleea stated. “Perhaps someday I’ll take you up on that. For now, I think it best to allow my crew to operate the vessel during the battle.” He didn’t feel comfortable with giving the AI so much authority over the *Star Cross*. Perhaps sometime in the future he would feel differently.

“As you wish,” said Aleea, sounding disappointed. “Just remember, I’m here if you need me.”

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Prince Brollen was growing concerned. They were nearly to the target system, and the long-range sensors were picking up a lot of ships moving toward the system of food species 236.

*Fraymot, is there any indication that our hyperspace sensor-dampening field is malfunctioning?*

*No, answered Fraymot. The dampening fields on all our ships are functioning properly. The food species should not detect us.*

The prince focused his multifaceted eyes sharply on the various ship movements on the tactical display. Something wasn’t right! Already the two smaller fleets of five hundred cruisers each had left the main Vorn formation and would shortly be dropping from hyperspace to take up waiting positions for the coming battle. If food species 236 could detect the approaching Vorn ships, how had they gotten the technology? It would also mean they would be aware of the two smaller fleets.

*Is it possible they are tracking us?*

*No, answered Fraymot decisively. Most likely they have been following our other attacks and have deduced they are the target. It would not be difficult to compute a probable arrival time for our fleet based on our harvesting of other planets along the way. The vessels we see on the tactical displays are most likely the result of that surmise.*

*This fleet battle will be much larger than expected, sent Prince Brollen. Our losses may be considerable. Is our fleet powerful enough to destroy these other fleets coming to the aid of food species 236?*

*You forget about our battleships, Fraymot responded with confidence.*

*They alone are capable of annihilating everything that now opposes us. We will be victorious. We will destroy the fleets coming to aid food species 236. It will make harvesting their worlds easier as there will be fewer ships to resist us.*

Prince Brollen nodded his understanding. *So, instead of fighting a number of smaller battles, we will be fighting one large battle instead. A battle for control of this entire quadrant of Galaxy X241.*

*We will be facing fleets from four Protector World food species if our long-range sensors are correct,* Fraymot sent. *Once they are destroyed, it will leave hundreds of worlds defenseless and ready to harvest. All our motherships will be overloaded with food pellets.*

This answer satisfied the prince. He could already picture the food cubicles in his private quarters full and overflowing. *We will fight the battle as planned. You are quite correct in that the enemy fleets have nothing that can destroy one of our battleships. We will be victorious, and, with thirty motherships, this will be the greatest harvest of worlds in the history of the Vorn. We will fill a large number of Collector Ships from this region alone. The Queens in the Conclave Habitat will be overjoyed when we bring this bounty home.* It would also firm up his position as a consort of Queen Alithe's. Perhaps, when he returned with the Collector Ships, it would be time for him to mate with her. His progeny would become a major part of the Vorn species. All that needed to be done was fight this battle and begin the harvest.



## Chapter Nineteen

Fleet Commodore Dreen took a deep fortifying breath as the two smaller Vorn fleets dropped from hyperspace and immediately moved toward Lakiam. Laylem had been tracking them ever since they left the main formation.

“Target one comprises 512 ships and another 507 in target two,” reported Laylem. “Ships are inbound toward Lakiam at 27 percent sublight. Main fleet should be dropping from hyperspace in forty-six minutes.”

Alborg looked intently at the tactical displays showing the Vorn ships. “The two smaller fleets have none of the larger ships in them. They’re all the small spindle-shaped cruisers we’ve fought before.”

“From the looks of things, they still believe their sensor-jamming field is working,” added Laylem. “I don’t believe they have any idea we can detect them.”

Commodore Dreen had to agree. The Destroyers of Worlds’ fleets were passing close to several Lakiam patrol vessels and were completely ignoring them. “Sheera, contact Captain Callast. He is to focus the cargo ships and his fleet on target one.” Captain Callast had 814 Lakiam battlecruisers under his command. Dreen was hopeful that, when Callast’s fleet was combined with the cargo ship attack, it would be sufficient to annihilate the 512 Vorn ships in target one.

“Message sent,” replied Keenol.

“Send a message to Captains Veen and Swiffe. They’re to hit the rear of the primary Vorn fleet as soon as I engage the front echelon.” Captains Veen and Swiffe were in a nearby star system, holding their ships powerless so they would be undetectable to the Vorn. Each captain had a fleet of 1,100 Lakiam battlecruisers under their command.

“Messages sent,” replied Keenol. “No sign of hyperspace jamming as of yet.”

“No, there won’t be,” predicted Alborg. “The Destroyers of Worlds don’t believe we can detect them. They won’t jam transmissions until their main fleet drops from hyperspace.”

“Only it won’t work this time,” said Keenol. “Thanks to the Vorn mothership we captured, we know how they were jamming our hyperspace transmissions. Once they try, we will send out a countersignal that should interfere with their jamming frequencies. If it works, and it should, we can

communicate normally.”

“We’ve neutralized a number of their advantages,” said Alborg. “Let’s hope it’s enough.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen spent the next few minutes contacting the Andock, Bascom, and Parmont fleets, informing them of the appearance of the two smaller Vorn fleets and the expected arrival time of the main force. It didn’t take long to put his battle plan into motion.

Commodore Dreen took a moment to confirm he had done everything possible to repel this attack. As he studied the tactical displays and replayed in his head how he thought the battle would go, still one major disconcerting problem remained. No one knew how powerful the battleships were in the Vorn fleet. Dreen had decided to call them battleships due to the expected amount of firepower the vessels possessed. What worried him was what would happen if the dark matter missiles couldn’t destroy those bigger Vorn vessels. For a moment he toyed with the thought of using the cargo ships against the battleships. However, he strongly suspected the big ships would destroy any cargo ships that came near them. After what had happened in the Andock System, the Vorn would be on the watch for such an attack.

With a deep sigh, he realized all he could do now was wait. He had done all he could do; now they had a battle to fight.

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Prince Brollen waited as the fleet neared the system of food species 236. All the fleet movements in nearby systems still made him anxious. He was not familiar with the emotion and did not care for. He walked over and gazed intently at a tactical display. The enemy had divided their fleet into three units. This concerned him as it matched exactly the three fleets the Vorn possessed. Surely it was just a coincidence. There was no evidence the food species was tracking the Vorn fleet. There had been no response to the two Vorn fleets already in the system.

*Fraymot, when we drop from hyperspace, I want our fleet to remain in its globular formation. I still feel something is wrong.* The globular formation was the best defensive formation he had available. Ships could be aligned so their weapons covered the entire area around the fleet, leaving no blind spots.

Fraymot turned toward Prince Brollen, confused. *Why? The battleships ensure our eventual victory.*

The prince responded, *Nevertheless, when we drop from hyperspace, we will hold our position and let them come to us. In previous battles against this*

*food species, they used short hyperjumps to attack our fleet. By staying in the globular formation, we will prevent them from doing that as, wherever they jump, we will have weapons that can destroy them.*

*As you command,* replied Military Commander Fraymot with a slight bow.

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In Fraymot's opinion, the prince was making a mistake, but Fraymot dared not say so. It was always better to go on the offensive rather than the defensive when beginning a fight. However, by doing as the prince suggested, it would allow the food species to decide the tempo of the coming battle.

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Fleet Commodore Dreen's muscles tensed as the main Vorn fleet dropped from hyperspace. For the first time, Lakiam sensors could get a good read on the larger enemy ships.

"Twelve hundred meters," reported Laylem. "From the power readings I'm picking up, I would estimate each vessel has four times the firepower of one of the smaller spindle-shaped cruisers."

"Four times," said Alborg, his eyes widening in consternation. "I assume their shields are equally more powerful. That'll cause problems with our dark matter missiles. It might take over fifty to overload their shields."

"It wouldn't matter if it were ten times," replied Fleet Commodore Dreen, dismayed at the power of the Vorn battleships. He reached forward and activated the comm unit on his command console, which put him in instant contact with all Lakiam fleet units. "All ships, commence attack as per plan ZETA. Good luck and good hunting." Time to put his battle plan into operation.

"Entering hyperspace in twelve seconds," reported Jalad. "All ships will emerge in standard offensive formation." The formation was ten ships high and two hundred ships in length with no reserve. It would be a virtual wall of ships hurtling toward the Vorn vessels.

Commodore Dreen braced himself for the *Basera* to enter hyperspace. Moments later a slight wrenching sensation in his body confirmed that the ship had made the jump, and would soon exit near the Vorn fleet.

"Captain Callast is sending in the cargo ships," reported Laylem. On one of the tactical displays, hundreds of green icons appeared behind the unsuspecting Vorn fleet, deeper in the system.

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In space 1,400 cargo ships laden with water emerged from hyperspace four hundred kilometers behind the rear of the Vorn fleet. At the same time Captain Callast jumped in with his fleet of 814 battlecruisers.

As soon as the cargo ships' systems stabilized, they activated their subspace drives and accelerated toward the unsuspecting Vorn fleet. One hundred and seven cargo ships exploded as their old drives and power systems failed catastrophically. Many of the ships had been repaired just to the point where they were barely spaceworthy. Jumping into hyperspace had been more than they could handle.

The Vorn fleet had thought it had gotten into the system undetected and was not prepared for the unexpected attack. Their ships were running with reduced power and their shields at a minimum to ensure their sensor-dampening fields would block all possible scans of their vessels. The sudden appearance of hundreds of cargo ships behind the fleet and the emergence of a fleet of powerful battlecruisers in front of it took the Vorn military commander totally by surprise.

In moments the cargo ships began slamming into Vorn energy shields. In brilliant novalike explosions, the spindle-shaped ships died. Recognizing the threat, the Vorn's energy shields suddenly snapped to full power, and their black antimatter beams fired. In bright flashes of light, hundreds of cargo ships exploded as they were ripped apart short of their targets.

In the Vorn formation, a water-laden cargo ship crashed into the energy shield of a Vorn cruiser, releasing all the pent-up kinetic energy from its speed and mass. The resulting release of energy quickly overloaded the energy screen, disintegrating the spindle-shaped cruiser as the energy wave struck it. All across the Vorn fleet formation, ships died at an appalling rate as cargo ships completed their suicide runs. While hundreds of the cargo ships were being destroyed, many more struck their targets.

Since the Vorn were occupied with the cargo ships, Captain Callast fired off his first wave of dark matter missiles. They smashed into already-stressed energy shields, bringing down many and releasing their stored energy. More novalike explosions spread across the unraveling Vorn fleet formation. Seeing the results of his attack, Callast quickly ordered a second strike. The Vorn fleet was vulnerable, and he intended to destroy it!

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Prince Brollen reeled in shock as he watched one of the small fleets he

had sent ahead dying before his eyes. The tactical display was full of red threat icons, appearing behind the Vorn fleet and then ramming its vessels. Not only that but an enemy fleet had appeared directly in front of the Vorn force and was launching dangerous dark matter missiles.

*This is impossible!* sent military Commander Fraymot as he stared at the tactical display, displaying the ongoing annihilation of one of the smaller fleets.

*They were tracking us the entire time,* replied Prince Brollen, his multifaceted eyes focusing on Fraymot. *How is that possible?*

*They could not have been,* answered Fraymot as alarms sounded, indicating more ships exiting from hyperspace.

Prince Brollen stared at one of the other tactical displays as 2,000 enemy battlecruisers appeared in front of his fleet. *The Scythe! It wasn't destroyed. It must have been captured.* It was the only explanation for the enemy to be able to track his fleet.

Military Commander Fraymot looked in panic at the prince. *The computers on the Scythe would tell the food species where the staging area is as well as the location of the Conclave Habitat!*

With a sinking feeling, Prince Brollen realized the Vorn's greatest secrets may have been revealed.

*Enemy launching missiles,* warned the Vorn at the sensors.

*Fraymot, fight the fleet. We will worry about the Scythe later. Call our second fleet to join us.*

*What about our other fleet?*

Prince Brollen looked at the tactical display, showing the now shattered fleet. *It has been lost. We will remain here and allow our battleships to bring us victory.*

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Taking a glancing blow on its energy screen, the *Destonn* shook violently in response to a black ship's black antimatter beam.

"How many of them did we get with the cargo ships?" Captain Callast was aggravated that so many of the cargo ships had suffered mechanical problems.

"Confirmed at 362," reported the sensor operator. "Most of the others have been damaged to some extent."

"Keep hitting them with our dark matter missiles," ordered Callast. "Many of their shields must be near the saturation point from all the energy

released by the exploding cargo ships.”

On a viewscreen, he saw a Vorn black antimatter beam tear one of his battlecruisers apart. Even though the Vorn fleet was on the verge of destruction, it was still dangerous. On another screen, he could see the shattered remains of the Vorn fleet. Massive explosions lit up space where dark matter missiles detonated against the enemy’s energy shields. Occasionally a brilliant flash of light would indicate the failure of one of those shields as the ship it had protected was annihilated.

“We’re losing a lot of battlecruisers,” the sensor operator reported.

Captain Callast clenched his teeth. “Continue to press the attack. I want every one of those Vorn ships destroyed regardless of the cost!”

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Fleet Commodore Dreen gripped the armrest of his command chair as six of his battlecruisers exploded from the attack of just two Vorn battleships. At the same time, more friendly green icons appeared. Captain Veen and Captain Swiffe had arrived and moved in to attack the rear of the Vorn formation. Moments later Andock, Bascom, and Parmont ships exited hyperspace and quickly formed up to join in the battle. The third fleet Commodore Dreen had been holding in reserve jumped in too, bolstering the main fleet formation by another eight hundred vessels.

“All commands, work in groups large enough to overload their energy shields,” Fleet Commodore Dreen broadcast to all fleet captains. “We must destroy as many of them as possible and as quickly as we can.”

“That’s nearly ten thousand warships we have,” reported Laylem, his eyes widening at the number.

For several minutes the battle intensified. Then Alborg turned toward the fleet commodore with growing concern. “Our weapons can’t destroy their battleships. We’ve hit several of them with over fifty dark matter warheads, and it didn’t faze them.”

Commodore Dreen looked at one of the tactical displays. Lakiam, Andock, Bascom, and Parmont warships were being destroyed in large numbers. If something didn’t change shortly, he wouldn’t be able to keep the Vorn away from Lakiam. “Try one hundred then. We must find a way to bring down their shields.”

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In the Vorn fleet, Prince Brollen watched with relief as his battleships blew apart ship after ship in the enemy fleets.

*We are facing over nine thousand enemy warships,* reported the Vorn at the sensors.

*Doesn't matter,* Military Commander Fraymot replied dismissively. *We are losing cruisers, but the enemy has failed to damage even one of our battleships. It is as I expected. Our battleships will annihilate the enemy fleets, leaving their worlds open to harvest. It will be a great victory for the Vorn.*

*It will indeed,* the prince replied. However, he was still greatly concerned about the capture of the *Scythe*. When this battle was over, it would be essential that he find its location and recover it. No food species could be allowed to possess one of the Vorn motherships.

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Captain Callast watched as the last Vorn cruiser blew apart when its shield ruptured, releasing a torrent of uncontrolled energy.

"That's the last one," the sensor operator reported.

"How many battlecruisers did we lose?"

"Two hundred and eighteen."

Callast sucked in a deep breath. Those were heavily armed warships and still the Vorn took them down. "Stand by to go into hyperspace. Set a course for Fleet Commodore Dreen's fleet."

Callast could see the battle in the outer system wasn't going well. All he could do was reinforce Fleet Commodore Dreen and hope for the best.

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Fleet Admiral Kurt Vickers had moved his fleet to just outside the Lakiam System. They had been watching the battle and assessing the situation.

"One of the Vorn fleets has been annihilated," reported Lieutenant Brooks as she checked her sensors.

"But they have not destroyed any of the Vorn battleships," said Tasid. "I was afraid of that."

"I don't understand why they didn't use the cargo ships against the larger Vorn ships," said Aleea. "It would have been a better tactical move."

"Because it wouldn't have worked as well," replied Andrew. He had been watching the battle and talking it over with Lieutenant Mays. "The battleships are far enough inside the Vorn formation where they would have destroyed the cargo ships before they became a danger. This way the Lakiams took out an entire Vorn fleet consisting of the smaller cruisers. That

in itself is a major victory.”

“Mara wants to know when we’re going in,” reported Lieutenant Pierce. “She’s growing impatient.

Kurt turned toward Tasid. “What if we pair up your ships where it’s two against one? Can two of your ships take out a Vorn battleship?”

“I believe so,” replied Tasid, looking to Aleea for confirmation.

“I project a 92 percent probability that they can,” the AI responded.

“Very well. Lieutenant Pierce, contact Fleet Captain Waelt and inform him that he is to engage the Vorn battleships with his ships working in pairs. Tell him we believe two of his disk ships can take out a Vorn battleship.”

Kurt waited as the message was sent.

“He agrees and is passing the orders on to his fleet. He says he can go into battle at any time.”

“Very well. Contact the *Aurelia* and tell Mara she needs to speak with Fleet Commodore Dreen. Tell her what our plans are, and we will be jumping ten minutes after she departs.”

Moments later the *Aurelia* vanished from the viewscreen as it jumped into hyperspace.

“The *Aurelia* has entered hyperspace,” confirmed Lieutenant Brooks.

Kurt nodded. He pressed the comm button, connecting him to the other Human ships. “All ships go to Condition One. Combat is imminent. I repeat, combat is imminent.” They had been at Condition Two while they watched the battle.

“We’re ready,” confirmed Andrew. “All stations are manned. Marines and combat robots have been deployed.”

Kurt looked at Lieutenant Mays. “I guess we’ll find out how these new Zero-Point Energy rounds work in the KEW cannon.”

“They’ll work,” answered Lieutenant Mays with a wolfish grin. “One round, one destroyed Vorn battleship.”

“I hope so,” replied Kurt as he watched the counter nearing zero. Nearly time to engage the Vorn.

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Fleet Commodore Dreen was desperate. On one of the viewscreens, he watched as a Vorn spindle-shaped cruiser died when its energy screen was disrupted, releasing its stored-up power on the black ship it was supposed to protect. But not so with the bigger battleships.

“We’ve lost over 212 battlecruisers in the last six minutes,” reported



Laylem. “The other attacking fleets have lost even more.”

“Fleet Leader Moor has lost nearly four hundred,” reported Keenol from Communications.

“It’s those battleships,” muttered Alborg as he launched another wave of dark matter missiles from the *Basera*’s missile tubes. “We can’t find a way to bring down their shields!”

Commodore Dreen pursed his lips, trying to think of a solution. Perhaps it would be best to pull all the fleets back to Lakiam. It would give them the extra firepower from the defensive grid. That would effectively double the number of missiles that could be launched at the Vorn fleet. Reaching a decision, he was about to give the order when Sheera interrupted him.

“Commodore, the *Aurelia* has just jumped in, and Mara is requesting to speak to you immediately.”

“Mara?” said Alborg, shaking his head. “She should have stayed away. What can one more ship do?”

Commodore Dreen reached forward, activating the comm channel. “Mara, why did you come back? Can’t you see we’re in the middle of a battle?”

“A battle you can’t win against those Vorn battleships,” replied Mara.

“We don’t know that yet,” answered Dreen. “We’ll pull back to the defensive grid and add its firepower to the fleets. Perhaps then we can bring down their shields. If we can hit those battleships with enough dark matter warheads, they’re bound to collapse.”

“Black fleet launching their black spheres,” warned Laylem. “If we’re going to do something, it needs to be now.”

“I didn’t come alone,” replied Mara. “The Humans from Newton and I found the Glaymons. A Glaymon fleet is about to jump into the system and attack the Vorn. Their primary target will be the Vorn battleships. Keep the Vorn fleet bottled up until they arrive. It should only be another few minutes.”

“The Glaymons,” said Alborg in shock, turning to Fleet Commodore Dreen. “They’re just a myth.”

“Please believe me,” pleaded Mara. “I didn’t come all this way to see Lakiam destroyed. The Glaymons can save it!”

Dreen made a quick decision. In all the time he had known Mara, she had never misled him. “All ships,” he announced over the ship-to-ship comm. “Use short hyperjumps to avoid the black spheres. We have another fleet

preparing to enter the system that claims they can destroy the Vorn battleships. Do not fire on them. I repeat, do not fire on them.”

“The Glaymons?” said Alborg, shaking his head. “Commodore, we’re risking a lot. What if Mara’s wrong? The Glaymons are a myth. No one has seen them for millions of years.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen looked at Alborg. “What do we have to lose? If nothing happens in the next few minutes, we’ll pull back. Until then we’ll see what Mara’s friends can do.”

A few more minutes passed, and suddenly hundreds of orange icons appeared in and around the Vorn fleet. Orange meant the ships were unidentified and not in the *Basera*’s database.

“Contacts!” yelled Laylem excitedly, his eyes growing wide in disbelief. “The ships are disk-shaped and one thousand meters across. The power readings are totally off the scale. Whatever those ships are using for a power source, it’s much greater than the Vorn’s.”

Alborg looked at the tactical display in disbelief. “This can’t be real.”

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Fleet Admiral Kurt Vickers gasped as the *Star Cross* exited hyperspace within twenty kilometers of the Vorn fleet. The viewscreens were suddenly filled with deadly spindle-shaped vessels.

“Find a battleship and target it,” Kurt ordered Lieutenant Mays. He wanted to know how their weapons would work against the Vorn.

“Target located,” reported the lieutenant. “Preparing to fire Zero-Point Energy round.” The *Star Cross* vibrated slightly. “Round fired.”

Kurt looked at the viewscreen which was focused on a Vorn 1,200-meter-long battleship. The vessel was spindle-shaped but bulkier than the smaller cruisers. As he watched, the Zero-Point Energy round struck the ship’s shield. A brilliant light expanded across space, dimming the viewscreens automatically. When it cleared, all that was left of the Vorn ship was a tangled mass of glowing wreckage.

“Target destroyed,” reported Lieutenant Brooks jubilantly.

“It worked,” said Andrew, staring at the viewscreen in amazement.

“Of course it worked,” said Tasid. “The amount of energy generated by the Zero-Point Energy round will destroy anything it encounters.”

“Loading next round,” added Lieutenant Mays, a devilish look in her eyes.

“Are our battlecruisers still with us?” asked Kurt as he studied the

tactical display. He had a plan in mind, and he would need all four of the heavy battlecruisers.

“Yes, Admiral,” replied Andrew, indicating one of the tactical displays. “They’re in a box formation around us. What are your orders?”

“Move us toward the motherships. If we can take them out, this battle will be over.” The *Star Cross* shook slightly, and Kurt looked questionably toward Lieutenant Mays.

“Multiple black antimatter beams are hitting our energy screen, but it’s still holding at 93 percent.”

Kurt smiled ruthlessly. Time to teach the Vorn a lesson they will never forget.

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Fleet Commodore Dreen stared in amazement as he watched the disk-shaped ships annihilate the Vorn battleships. The Glaymon ships were working in pairs, bringing to bear unbelievably powerful energy beams to overload the Vorn screens and bring them crashing down. Vorn battleship after battleship was being destroyed.

“All ships,” spoke Commodore Dreen over the ship-to-ship comm. “The disk ships that have jumped in to aid us are the Glaymons. I know that sounds fantastic, but they are here. The other five unidentified vessels are the Humans from Newton. They’re a new Protector World. All ships are to focus on the smaller Vorn cruisers. Leave the battleships to the Glaymons and the Humans.”

“Commodore, the Newton ships have some type of kinetic energy weapon that’s firing a round of unbelievable power,” announced Alborg as he studied the data coming across his console. “One round can totally annihilate a Vorn battleship. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Commodore, the Humans have adjusted their course. They’re already deep inside the Vorn fleet,” added Laylem. “They’re on a direct course for the Vorn motherships.”

“How are their energy shields standing up to the Vorn’s black antimatter beams?” asked Jalad as he moved the *Basera* toward its next target.

“I don’t know,” said Laylem. “But according to the sensors, the Vorn beams can’t penetrate the Glaymon or Human shields. They must have an unbelievable power-generation system.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen allowed himself to feel hope. The tide of the

battle was changing. With growing anticipation, he realized they now had a chance to win.

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Prince Brollen reeled in shock as another battleship was blown apart on one of the viewscreens. *Who are they?* his thoughts screamed into the command crews' minds. *Where did they come from?*

*Unknown*, answered Military Commander Fraymot as he struggled to maintain control of the Vorn fleet.

Panicked military commanders were demanding orders and instructions about how to deal with these new ships that were destroying the Vorn battleships with such impunity. The large disk ships possessed beam weapons that were unstoppable by energy screens. They either overloaded the screen or drilled right through it. Fraymot suspected they were two different types of beam weapons.

*Zero-Point Energy has been detected*, reported the ship's sensor operator. *All the new ships that have jumped into the battle are powered by it.*

Looking at one of the viewscreens, the prince studied one of the new ships. Never had he seen such a vessel. If powered by Zero-Point Energy, they posed a serious threat to the Vorn.

*It's a food species we have never encountered in this galaxy*, reported Fraymot. *The species must be highly advanced.*

*One we must have missed in a past harvesting of this galaxy*, replied Prince Brollen, a growing anger filling his thoughts. On another screen, a Vorn battleship was cut in two by the powerful beams of one of the disk ships.

*There is a second ship type as well*, the Vorn at the sensors reported, putting it up on a viewscreen. The second ship was vaguely similar to the warships they currently battled in this system. As they watched, a flash of light appeared and then impacted the energy screen of a nearby Vorn battleship. The screen was instantly overloaded and dimmed. When it cleared, the Vorn battleship was a tumbling mass of wreckage.

*It's some type of Zero-Point Energy projectile*, Military Commander Fraymot reported as he received information from other ship commanders.

Prince Brollen grew extremely concerned. The Vorn had Zero-Point Energy drives on their Intergalactic Transport Vessels. It was also used in the habitats in the home system. But nothing as small as the weapon being used against their battleships. With dawning realization he knew, somewhere in

this galaxy, was a race that had stayed hidden from the Vorn for an unknown number of cycles. Perhaps even through multiple harvestings of this galaxy. If this was true, this evolved race could be a major threat to the Vorn, even the habitats. Prince Brollen suddenly realized the danger he had placed his entire species in by allowing the capture of the *Scythe*. That must be the reason for this race to suddenly attack the Vorn. For the first time since the Vorn had come to this universe, other species would know where the Vorn race lived. Inadvertently Prince Brollen had placed their habitats and the Vorn Queens in danger.

*Those five strange warships are on a direct path toward the motherships,* the Vorn at the sensors reported.

*None of our weapons can penetrate their shields,* added Military Commander Fraymot, sounding desperate. *We have attacked them with multiple ships, and all have failed. Even the black spheres of destruction are powerless against them.*

Prince Brollen stood paralyzed as his plans and his future came crashing down around him.

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Fleet Commodore Dreen could scarcely believe his eyes as the Glaymon and Newton ships cut right through the Vorn formation, destroying black ships as if they were nothing. For the first time, the Vorn were on the receiving end of what they had done in so many systems.

“This is our opportunity to set an example,” exalted Dreen, realizing what was at stake. “If we can destroy this Vorn fleet, the other Protector Worlds will rally to our alliance. If these Glaymons will continue to help us, we can drive the Vorn from our galaxy and ensure they never return.”

On the viewscreens, a number of Lakiam battlecruisers lay powerless in space where they had been struck by the black spheres. Lakiam tugs were already latching onto the ships to pull them to safety. Other Lakiam battlecruisers working in pairs were attacking the smaller Vorn cruisers.

“I estimate the Vorn have already lost over 432 of their battleships,” reported Laylem. “The others are retreating whenever a pair of Glaymon vessels draw near. They’re afraid of the disk ships!”

A cheer broke out in the Command Center as everyone realized that victory was within their grasp.

“What about the Newton ships?” asked Commodore Dreen. “Where are they now?”

“Almost in range of the motherships,” replied Laylem. “Those five vessels are under increasingly heavy attack by Vorn cruisers and battleships trying to block their path. Their shields look as if they’re on fire! So far it’s not having any affect.”

Those five ships were the key to victory. If they could close with the motherships and destroy them, the Vorn would break off and retreat. Looking around the Command Center, Dreen noticed all eyes were on the tactical display, focused intently on the Newton ships.

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The *Star Cross* shook violently, and several red lights appeared on the damage control board.

“We have some leakage through the energy shield,” reported Aleea. “We’re being hit by hundreds of black antimatter beams, and the shields are not designed to withstand such an onslaught. Shields are currently holding at 42 percent.”

“How soon can we fire on the Vorn motherships?” asked Kurt. The motherships were the key.

“I can’t get a lock,” replied Lieutenant Mays, sounding frustrated. “They’re just too many Vorn ships between us and the motherships.”

“I can hit them,” said Aleea. “Turn over control of all five ships to me, and I’ll destroy the Vorn motherships.”

The *Star Cross* shook again.

“Admiral, Captain Hastings and the others report their ships are taking damage,” reported Andrew. “We must do something now, or we won’t make it to the motherships.”

Kurt looked at Tasid.

“You can trust Aleea,” he said. “She will do as she says.”

“Very well,” replied Kurt, looking at the AI. “Do it. Lieutenant Pierce, inform the other captains that Aleea will be taking control of their ships through their ships’ AIs and computers.” Kurt was taking a risk, but, if he didn’t, he might lose his fleet, and the motherships might escape.

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In space, the five ships suddenly began weaving in a complicated dance aimed at making it more difficult for the Vorn ships to target them. At the same time Aleea watched carefully, waiting for moments when the movement of the small fleet would allow her to take a shot at the Vorn motherships. The *Cygnus* was the first to lock briefly on a mothership. It was

all the time Aleea needed. Instantly the ship's KEW cannon fired. Moments later the *Vega* locked on. Once again a Zero-Point Energy round was fired at a mothership.

Inside the center of the Vorn formation, two novalike explosions engulfed two of the massive motherships, blowing them apart.

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Prince Brollen stared in disbelief as a pair of his motherships died and then a few moments later another.

*The five enemy ships have reached engagement range, reported Military Commander Fraymot, the worry evident on his face. Our shields are useless against this weapon.*

The prince stared at the viewscreens and then turned to the tactical displays. This was a military disaster. He realized he could not win. The disk ships and the five other ships currently assailing the motherships would destroy his entire fleet. A cold chill swept through his body as he realized defeat was imminent.

*Retreat, he ordered as another mothership died in a flash of brilliant light. There is no victory for us here. We must return and inform Queen Alithe of this new enemy.*

*Sending the order, Fraymot responded as he sent a telepathic message to all the remaining ship military commanders.*

-

Fleet Commodore Dreen watched in elation as the Vorn fleet began jumping into hyperspace to flee the Lakiam System. "Keep firing until the last ship is gone," he ordered. Dreen wanted to inflict as much damage on the Vorn fleet as possible.

"The Newton ships have destroyed seven motherships so far," Laylem said exuberantly.

On the main viewscreen, a brilliant flash of light lit up the center of the Vorn fleet formation. When it died down, one of the Newton ships was missing as well as a number of the Vorn ships that had been attacking it.

"What happened!" demanded Commodore Dreen.

"The Vorn finally managed to overload one of the Newton ship's screens," answered Alborg somberly. "From the data, the Vorn managed to focus the firepower of over two hundred of their ships upon the vessel."

"What are the other Newton ships doing?" Dreen was certain they would pull back now since the Vorn were retreating.

“Still pressing their attack,” replied Laylem. “The Vorn have lost three more motherships!”

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Fleet Admiral Vickers flinched as the heavy battlecruiser *Vega* exploded, sending flaming debris across space.

“I’m sorry,” said Aleea in shock. “The Vorn managed to overload the *Vega*’s shields before I or the *Vega*’s AI could move it out of the way.”

“The Vorn fleet is jumping out,” reported Lieutenant Brooks.

“We took out two more of their motherships,” added Andrew.

“Keep attacking,” Kurt ordered Aleea. “We knew there was a risk coming this deep into the Vorn formation. Let’s make them pay as steep a price as possible.” Kurt would mourn the loss of the *Vega* and its crew later.

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The *Reaper* made the transition into hyperspace, leaving behind the system of food species 236. All ships were supposed to rendezvous at a dead star system 307 light-years distant. The prince wanted to put as much distance between what remained of his fleet and the new enemy as he possibly could. Once the fleet made it to the rendezvous, he would assess the damage, make what repairs were needed, and then proceed to the staging system, where Prince Ortumad waited.

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“That’s it,” reported Andrew as the last mothership vanished into hyperspace. “We got fourteen of them!”

Kurt’s eyes widened as he looked appreciatively at Aleea. “I think you proved your point about how you can handle my ship as well as the fleet. How many ships can you control at once?”

“Eight,” answered Aleea promptly, looking pleased with Kurt’s praise. “Any more than that and my tactical ability degrades. The ships’ computers are also a lot of help as most of the time I’m only telling them what to do.”

“I hate losing the *Vega* and Captain Heidle,” said Andrew. “He was a good officer with a fine crew.”

“As soon as we can, we’ll have memorial services for those lost in the battle,” announced Kurt. He also would be writing personal letters to the families of the *Vega*’s crew.

“Admiral, I’m getting a message from Fleet Commodore Dreen. He would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience,” reported Lieutenant Pierce.



“Inform him it will be a few hours as we have some damage to repair. We must also rendezvous with the Glaymon ships.” Kurt looked at Tasid, who appeared dazed from the battle. “Tasid and Fleet Captain Waelt will be coming with me as well.”

Tasid turned to Kurt. “Now what do we do?”

“We meet with Fleet Commodore Dreen and speak with him,” answered Kurt. “If he can establish this alliance of Protector Worlds, then he will have a force capable of fighting off the Vorn, especially if we give them a little help.”

“What kind of help?” asked Tasid.

“That’s what we must decide. Why don’t you and I go to my quarters and discuss what we’re willing to offer the new alliance in the matter of technology and weapons.”

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Fleet Commodore Dreen gazed at the now empty viewscreens. The Vorn were gone, and the last of the Vorn’s damaged cruisers had been destroyed. All that were left were Lakiam and alliance ships, and also the vessels of the Glaymons and the Humans from Newton.

“We won,” said Alborg as if he didn’t expect to still be alive.

Commodore Dreen looked at his tactical officer and nodded. “Yes, we did.”

“Laylem, how many ships did the Vorn lose?”

“I just finished correlating the data from our ships as well as the Andocks. Still working on the Bascoms and the Parmonts. At the moment it looks as if the Vorn lost 14 motherships, 643 of their battleships, and 2,411 cruisers.”

“Our own losses?” They would be high. Dreen had witnessed the deaths of too many warships and their valuable crews.

“We lost 907 battlecruisers. The Andocks lost 512 ships, the Bascoms 207, and the Parmonts 302. A lot of other ships are damaged.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen let out a deep and heavy breath. A lot of good people had died in this battle. However, it could have been a lot worse if the Glaymons and Newton Humans hadn’t shown up. He looked at another viewscreen, focused on one of the large disk ships. Now he had to figure out how to deal with a race much older than any Enlightened Race in the galaxy. For the first time in his life, he felt intimidated. How do you deal with a race as old as the Glaymons?

“Sheera, contact the *Aurelia* and ask Mara to come on board the *Basera*. She and I have a lot to discuss before I meet with the Glaymon representatives and the Newton Humans.”

Commodore Dreen gazed again at the viewscreens. Dozens of Lakiam ships out there were still powerless from encountering the black spheres of the Vorn. Rescue operations remained ongoing, and shuttles were launching to search the wreckage for survivors.

“Commodore, I have Lead Councilor Atratis on the comm. He wants to know what’s going on.”

With a deep sigh, Dreen wondered how he would explain this. A half-mythical race had just appeared out of nowhere and saved the Lakiam System and perhaps the entire galaxy from destruction.

## Chapter Twenty

Fleet Commodore Dreen waited expectantly in the large briefing room for his guests. The battle was over, and Lakiam was safe. Mara sat at the table with a slight all-knowing smile on her face. He had spoken with her for over two hours, and most of her answers had been extremely vague. All he knew was that the Humans, along with some others, had found the Glaymons somewhere in the center of the galaxy. She wouldn't reveal exactly where they were hidden or how many of them there were. All she would say was that Dreen would have to get his information from Fleet Admiral Vickers and the Glaymons. Dreen couldn't help but wonder if something was going on between this Fleet Admiral Vickers and Mara. Her eyes seemed to light up whenever she mentioned his name.

The door to the briefing room slid open, and Alborg stepped in, followed by one of the Humans and what were obviously two Glaymons. From the uniform the man was wearing, Dreen quickly surmised this must be Fleet Admiral Vickers.

Mara rose and quickly introduced the three to Fleet Commodore Dreen.

"I'm pleased to meet all of you," said Dreen, indicating for everyone to take a chair. Mara had arranged for the seating arrangements, making sure the appropriate-size furniture was available. Dreen hoped this meeting went well as a lot was riding on it. It had been all he could do to prevent members of the Lakiam ruling council from being present. "Before we start this meeting, I want to express my gratitude as well as that of the Lakiam ruling council for helping us in our hour of need."

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Kurt listened to Fleet Commodore Dreen, a Lakiam who seemed very confident and sure of himself.

"We are here to help against the Vorn," began Kurt when Fleet Commodore Dreen stopped speaking. "I have spoken to the Glaymons, and they are willing to make some of their weapons technology available for use on your warships."

"We saw your weapons," replied Commodore Dreen. "They're very powerful. Even more powerful than what the Vorn possess. That's been our biggest problem. We can't match them in firepower, ship for ship. Anything you can do to aid us will be greatly appreciated."

Kurt felt a little uncomfortable. Fleet Commodore Dreen wouldn't like

what he was about to say. Tasid and Fleet Captain Waelt had asked Kurt to do most of the speaking. “You must understand that Glaymon technology is far more advanced than anything else in our galaxy. For that reason, they feel it is unwise to introduce it to the galaxy at large. What they’re willing to do is give you the technology to drastically improve the antimatter chambers you currently use to power your ships. This will increase the output of your beam weapons by nearly 200 percent. They are also willing to furnish you with special rounds for a kinetic energy weapon that is capable of destroying Vorn vessels on contact.”

“The same one you used against them?” asked Dreen, his eyes widening at the thought.

“No, that one is too dangerous,” replied Kurt. “The round the Glaymons are willing to furnish is weaker but will still take down a Vorn’s energy screen. We’ll also give you the design for the necessary KEW cannon to fire the round.”

“We’ll have to modify our ships,” said Dreen with a frown. “I understand the hesitancy about introducing advanced technology as we have the same rule.” He turned to Mara, who looked at the table. “Will the Glaymons be taking an active role in the fighting? We may have defeated a major Vorn fleet today, but I greatly fear there are many more we haven’t seen yet.”

Kurt looked at Captain Waelt. They had discussed this as they rode in the shuttle.

“We prefer that Lakiam and the other Protector Worlds do most of the fighting,” Waelt said in a soft voice. “However, we are willing to have some of our ships accompany your fleets once this new alliance of yours is established.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen nodded. “I had assumed Mara told you about the alliance I am building. So far we have three other Protector World civilizations that have joined, though I expect many more will be coming forth after our victory today.”

“That is our hope,” replied Kurt.

“I noticed in the battle the Vorn black antimatter beams and their black spheres had no impact on your energy screens.”

“We can share with you the technology to protect your ships from the Vorn weapons,” said Tasid. “However, as you saw with the loss of the Human ship *Vega*, even those shields can fail.”

“Is there anything else you require of us?” asked Dreen. “We are in your debt.”

“We would like access to the Vorn mothership you captured,” answered Tasid. “We believe we can open more of its computer files than you have. It is one of the reasons we agreed to be in this war. The mothership can provide tactical data we’ve never had before.”

Fleet Commander Dreen nodded. “Some files seem encrypted which we could not open. I’ll arrange with the Andocks to allow you unlimited access.”

“Then I think we have the basis of a general agreement,” Kurt said, surprised that Fleet Commodore Dreen had been so reasonable. “I think now we should work out the finer details.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen nodded. “Let’s get to it.”

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For the next several hours the group worked out the details of an agreement between the Lakiams and the Glaymons. At no time did Tasid or Captain Waelt mention the Glaymon colony ships or other vessels. For now, and possibly forever, that would remain a secret.

When they finished, Fleet Commodore Dreen looked at Kurt, confused. “What does Newton want? Your ships took out fourteen Vorn motherships.”

Kurt took a deep breath. “We’re a relatively new Protector World. At the moment we have four systems under our protection. For the time being, we’ll focus on our region of the galaxy.”

Fleet Commodore Dreen nodded his understanding. “Mara has told me about where you’re from and the problems you’ve had with the Profiteers. The Gothan Empire has been a bed of pirates and black marketeers for generations. Someday we’ll have to do something about that. The region where Newton is located is considered a backwater area with few inhabited worlds. In that you are fortunate as it should not attract the Vorn.”

“It wasn’t always so,” Tasid said with a sad look on his face. “Many millions of years ago it was home to a great civilization. They inhabited hundreds of worlds, and the Vorn destroyed them. It is why so few inhabited worlds are there now.”

Kurt was surprised to hear this. Tasid had not mentioned anything about this before. Kurt would have to ask him more about this mysterious race later.

“If no one here has any objections, I would like to make Mara the official liaison between Lakiam and Newton,” said Dreen. “I must get approval from the council, but I don’t expect any problems.”

Kurt looked at Mara, seeing a pleased look on her face. “That’s acceptable.”

“This also helps to protect Mara,” explained Dreen, shifting his gaze toward her. “I realize she has information that the council wants. By becoming an official liaison, it protects her from revealing sensitive information that needs to remain a secret.”

Kurt nodded. Mara had detailed knowledge about the Glaymons and a few other things.

The meeting ended with plans to sign a formal document in the Lakiam council chambers the following day.

As they were leaving, Mara stopped Kurt. “I guess I’ll be returning to Newton. Does that please you?”

Kurt nodded. “You don’t have to accept this post if you don’t want to.”

Mara smiled. “No, I want to. There are still a few things I would like to do. While we’re on Lakiam, I want to take you on a tour of our world. It will give you a good idea of what yours may become someday.”

“I would like that,” replied Kurt. He liked Mara more every time he was around her. He just hoped this didn’t develop into a problem someday. He still found Mara extremely captivating, and he wasn’t certain where that might lead.

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Once the others left, Fleet Commodore Dreen turned toward Alborg, who had remained silent during the meeting. “What do you think?”

“The Glaymons seem to be reclusive. I noticed they allowed Fleet Admiral Vickers to do most of the talking. They only joined in when Vickers couldn’t answer a question. No doubt they are who they claim. The technology they are willing to share should level the playing field against the Vorn. It will take some months to get our ships converted, but, once we do, we won’t have to fear the Vorn anymore.”

“What about Fleet Admiral Vickers?”

Alborg frowned. “He reminds me of a younger you but willing to take more risks, coming from a race much younger than normal to be a Protector World. I believe they assumed that status because they had no other choice.”

“Your views are similar to mine,” said Dreen. “My biggest concern is the fact that a race so inexperienced and young seems to have access to the Glaymons and their technology. That is something we may have to deal with at a later date. However, for now we have a war to fight with the Vorn, and

the Newton Humans and the Glaymons have given us what we need to do so. I'll contact Fleet Leader Moor and the leaders of the Bascom and Parmont fleets, and have them come to the *Basera* to discuss the Glaymons. We must make plans to immediately expand the alliance."

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Several days later outside the galaxy, Prince Brollen stood with Prince Ortumad and watched silently as Military Commander Fraymot was led to a disposal chute. The two members of the Military Caste escorting Fraymot opened the door and pushed Fraymot in. The former military commander did not resist. At a gesture from Prince Brollen, the chute was activated, and Fraymot vanished as he was fed into one of the ship's reactors.

*He failed miserably as a military commander, sent Prince Brollen. He did not follow orders and risked the entire fleet.*

*It is well that he has been disposed of, replied Prince Ortumad. The Vorn have no room for failures or members of the Military Caste who cannot follow orders.*

Prince Brollen turned toward Ortumad. *His failure to believe that the food species could track our ships resulted in our defeat. I mentioned the possibility to him, and he denied it.*

*That is unfortunate, responded Ortumad. Queen Alithe will be extremely disappointed when she learns what has transpired.*

*More important is the fact we have learned of a new and serious threat to our existence.*

Yes, replied Ortumad. *This older race that attacked your fleet in the system of food species 236. I have watched the videos of the battle, and their ships are very powerful. It may be best for us to recall all our harvesting fleets until it is decided what needs to be done. We have harvested a sufficient quantity of food pellets to get our race by for a few months.*

*I agree, replied Prince Brollen. It might even be necessary to halt the harvesting in this galaxy and go to another.*

However, what Prince Brollen failed to mention was the fact that, if this ancient race, who had intervened on the behalf of food species 236, discovered the location of the Conclave Habitat and the other Vorn habitats, even the Queens might be in danger. He had made it a point not to reveal to Prince Ortumad that the *Scythe* had been captured. For now he would keep that secret to himself and see how things played out.

By shifting the blame of the failed attack to Military Commander

Fraymot, Prince Brollen had given himself a reprieve and had also disposed of the one Vorn who knew the *Scythe* had been captured. That would give him time to plot his next move. Perhaps he could use his influence with Queen Alithe to turn their efforts toward another galaxy. If Galaxy X241 was no longer being harvested, the ancient race would have no reason to attack the habitats and the Vorn Queens.

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Fleet Admiral Kurt Vickers gazed thoughtfully at the viewscreens in the Command Center of the *Star Cross*. They were in the system of Epsilon Reticuli, some fifty-nine light-years from Earth. The star was an orange-red giant about six times the diameter of Sol. No habitable planets were in the system, though a planet slightly larger than Earth was in the habitable zone. It was in an eccentric orbit due to a large gas giant in the system.

“This star system will work fine,” said Tasid as he gazed at the viewscreens, showing several distant planets. “We’ll put the two colony ships in orbit around the star at a sufficient distance to ensure they are not detected by any exploratory missions that might venture here. They’ll also be protected by sensor-dampening screens so no one can detect them.”

“How long will you stay?” asked Kurt. The majority of the disk ships had accompanied the colony ships to this system. Fifty disk ships and several support vessels had remained behind in the Lakiam System to aid Fleet Commodore Dreen in his ongoing war with the Vorn.

“Indefinitely,” replied Tasid. “We can’t go home, and we would like to stay in contact with Newton. Your people may be useful to us in the future, and, through you, we can monitor the rest of the galaxy without getting too involved. It’s best that, to the galaxy at large, they only see the few warships we will provide the Lakiams.”

“Will you stay in your colony ships or try to terraform the planet in the liquid water zone?”

“While we can’t build another Dyson Sphere, we can build a large habitat suitable for future generations. This system has sufficient resources to allow us to do that. I have spoken to several of the scientists in the colony ships, and they believe it can be done in a few years. It will give us a permanent and spacious home.”

Kurt nodded. He was pleased the Glaymons had elected to make this system their new home. Having such a powerful fleet this close to Newton and Earth would be comforting. Tasid had also promised to help Newton in



acclimating to some of the new technologies that were being introduced. That included Protector World technology as well as a small amount of Glaymon tech. Kurt was determined that, when Newton and Earth once more stepped out into the main part of the galaxy, they would meet the other technologically advanced races as equals.

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Later Kurt watched as Tasid and the other Glaymons left the *Star Cross*. For the first time his crew would be operating the ship without the assistance of or any advice from the ancient race.

“Don’t worry,” Aleea said with a supporting smile. “I can use the repair robots to fix any problems on this ship. The other AIs can do the same for theirs. I can also teach your engineers how everything works.”

Kurt nodded. He was only now realizing just how beneficial it would be having Aleea on the *Star Cross*.

“Andrew, set a course for Newton. It’s time we went home.” The other three heavy battlecruisers and Lomatz’s two ships had already headed back. They hadn’t come to this star system as the Glaymons wanted to limit the number of people who knew where they had gone. Even on the *Star Cross* it had been limited to the primary Command Center crew.

Moments later the *Star Cross* entered hyperspace for the short trip to Newton. Kurt paused to reflect on what had been accomplished on this mission. The Glaymons had been found, and a defense treaty signed. Newton had been recognized as a Protector World, and a major Vorn fleet had been defeated. Keera would be aggravated to learn what all she had missed out on. She would also be extremely upset when she discovered all the danger Kurt had been exposed to.

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The *Star Cross* exited hyperspace close to Newton Station. The station had been expecting the battleship or Kurt would have dropped from hyperspace farther out. A flight of Lance fighters made a quick flyby, passing close to the port side of the ship.

“Newton Station says welcome back,” reported Lieutenant Pierce from her communications console. “Colonel Simms wants to know if you want to dock immediately. He has a docking port available.”

“Yes,” answered Kurt. “I think we’re all ready to get off the ship and to our homes for a while.” On one of the viewscreens, he saw Lomatz’s two ships in close orbit to the station. When Kurt had the chance, he wanted to

talk to the weapons dealer about a number of things. One was ensuring that none of the Glaymon technology on Lomatz's ships made it to Kubitz.

Kurt watched as Newton Station grew larger on the viewscreen. It was good to be home.

"I assume we're not going anywhere for a while?" asked Andrew as he watched Lieutenant Styles maneuver the large battleship up next to the station.

"I think our adventures are over for the time being," answered Kurt with a smile. "Fleet Commodore Dreen has what he needs to combat the Destroyers of Worlds. His alliance will grow rapidly once word of the defeat of the Vorn fleet gets out. When other worlds learn of the presence of Glaymon warships, there will be a stampede to join the Lakiam alliance."

"So we'll stay out of the war?"

"We're going to try. We have a lot of new technology available to us. Not only Lakiam and other Protector World advances but even some the Glaymons are willing to share. I'm curious to see what Earth and Newton will be like in another twenty years." Kurt was determined to keep Earth and Newton out of galactic politics for as long as possible.

"I wonder when Mara and the *Aurelia* will show up?"

Kurt grinned. "I understand that Fleet Commodore Dreen has commissioned her a new ship to be used for her diplomatic mission to Newton. It should be ready in a few months, and she'll return then."

"Keera won't like that," predicted Andrew, cocking his eyebrow. "You should marry Keera before Mara returns. That would solve that problem."

"What problem?" said Kurt, feigning ignorance.

Andrew shook his head. "You know what I mean. Mara's a beautiful woman, and she knows how to use her charms. You better be careful around her."

Kurt nodded. "I'll be fine." He noticed the ship had docked. "Let's get off the *Star Cross*. I suspect Emily is waiting for you on board the station."

As Kurt left the Command Center, he noticed Alea with a sad look on her face. "What's wrong?"

"Will I be alone on the ship?"

Kurt laughed. "No, a few people will always be on duty, including here in the Command Center." This seemed to cheer up the AI, so Kurt turned and left, heading for the docking port.

Kurt and Andrew stepped into Newton Station together. A number of people waited there to greet them as well as the rest of the crew.

“Andrew!” a gruff voice called out.

“It can’t be!” muttered Andrew, watching Grantz shove his way through the crowd toward them. Andrew looked at Kurt. “How did he get to Newton again? I thought we told Ambassador Tenner to keep Grantz on Kubitz.”

“It’s Grantz,” replied Kurt, shrugging his shoulder. “It’s what he does.” No doubt the Profiteer had probably bribed someone to bring him to Newton.

“Andrew, do I have a deal for you,” began Grantz as he reached Kurt and Andrew. “There’s a new pleasure house on Kubitz that’s up for sale. I thought, between the two of us, we could purchase it. It will be a sweet operation and will enrich both of us.”

“Pleasure house?” a female said from Andrew’s side. “What’s this about a pleasure house?”

Emily was here. “I don’t know what Grantz is talking about,” Andrew stammered. Once more the mere presence of the greedy Profiteer was going to get him into trouble.

Kurt left Andrew and headed toward the Command Center of the station. He had a few details to cover with Colonel Simms and then he would go to Newton on the first available shuttle. He realized how much he had missed Keera. In the background, he could hear Andrew and Grantz arguing with an occasional interjection by Emily. It was good to be home!

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Later that day Kurt was inside his new house, allowing Keera to lead him excitedly from room to room, showing him what she and Denise had accomplished while he had been gone. The house had a definite feminine element but not too bad. Kurt decided he could live with most of it. There might be one or two items he would change later.

“Uncle Kurt!” yelled Bryan, coming through the front door along with Denise and Alex. “You’re back!”

“Yes, I’m back. How’s school been going?” Kurt was pleased to see Bryan. Something about him always seemed to brighten up his surroundings. Kurt suspected it was Bryan’s boundless youthful energy.

“Boring,” said Bryan, shaking his head. “Why do I have to learn English? I can already speak it just fine.”

Denise walked to the kitchen island and put down a big bucket of fried

chicken with all the trimmings. "I didn't think you would want to cook on Kurt's first night here."

"This will be great!" replied Keera, grinning.

"It's not time to eat yet," announced Bryan with a serious look in his eyes. He had his glove and ball in his right hand. "We're going outside and play catch first."

"Okay, but only for a little while," replied Kurt as he looked at Keera. He knew she was pleased he was home, though he hadn't told her yet what all had transpired.

As Bryan led Kurt outside, he paused and looked at his uncle. "Did you kill any aliens this time?"

Kurt smiled. "We'll talk about that when you're older. Right now let's see how well you've learned to catch that ball."

As Kurt and Bryan played catch, Kurt couldn't help but wonder what was still in his future. The Glaymons were nearby, and they were bound to have a big influence on Newton. The elections on Earth were over, and Ellen Lambert had won, as Governor Spalding had predicted. The Profiteers still existed, and someday they would be punished for what they did to Earth. The peaceful time Kurt longed for on Newton wouldn't last. However, for now, nothing was pressing to worry about, and he would enjoy his family and Keera.

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Later that night, Kurt and Keera were preparing for bed. Kurt watched as Keera entered the bedroom dressed in a black see-through gown.

"Do you like this?" she asked as she slowly turned around with her hands on her shapely hips. "Meesa helped me pick it out."

"I think it looks great," replied Kurt as he took Keera into his arms. "I've missed you."

Keera kissed him passionately as they fell onto the bed. She paused and gazed into his eyes. "Promise me one thing."

"What's that?" asked Kurt as he ran his hands down Keera's back.

"Don't leave for that long again."

Kurt looked into Keera's eyes. "I won't," he promised. "I'm home, and I have no plans to go anywhere."

Keera nodded, pleased with Kurt's answer. Standing, she allowed her gown to fall to the floor, Kurt's gaze roaming over her body. Moments later they were lost in passionate lovemaking as they forgot about the world

around them.

## Epilogue

Days later, deep in intergalactic space, Prince Brollen spoke to Queen Alithe. He had told her about the ancient race coming to the aid of food species 236. *In my opinion, we should abandon our harvesting of this galaxy and turn to another.*

Queen Alithe stood close to Prince Brollen. *No other nearby galaxy possesses the food that Galaxy X241 does. If we stop the harvest, we will have to delete most of the Worker Caste and perhaps others.*

Prince Brollen considered what Queen Alithe had said. *If we continue the harvest of Galaxy X241, we must commit more ships. Many more than what we have committed so far.* He would also have to deal with the fact that food species 236 might know where the Conclave Habitat was located.

*We have the ships,* replied Queen Alithe as she reached out and touched Prince Brollen on his shoulder. *Will you lead our fleets to victory over the food species of Galaxy X241 and this ancient race?*

Yes, replied Prince Brollen as the urge to mate swept over him. He looked questionably at Queen Alithe.

The Vorn Queen reached out, taking Prince Brollen's hands. *Come with me to the mating chamber. It is time for the two of us to join and create the next generation of Vorn.*

Prince Brollen was elated as he followed Queen Alithe. He had succeeded even above his wildest expectations. In time he would return to Galaxy X241 with the largest harvesting fleet ever put forth by the Vorn.

The harvesting had only just begun.

The End

If you enjoyed *The Star Cross: Galaxy in Peril* and would like to see the series continue, please post a review with some stars. Good reviews encourage an author to write and also help sell books. Reviews can be just a few short sentences, describing what you liked about the book. If you have suggestions, please contact me at my website, link below. Thank you for reading *Galaxy in Peril* and being so supportive.

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# The Originator War Book One

This is an excerpt from the next book in the Lost Fleet series. The Originator War will be a trilogy and will bring to an end the Slaver Wars series.

On the far side of the galaxy, the empire of the Ralift was preparing for war. It had been brought to their attention the Shari and the Humans had discovered a Dyson Sphere in Shari space that was millions of years old. The sphere held technology far in advance of anything else in the galaxy, even the AIs.

“How soon before your fleets are ready to travel to Shari space?” asked the AI hovering before the Ralift council. Not all of the AIs had perished in the great battle at the center of the galaxy where the AI’s great project had been destroyed by the Humans and Altons. A number of them had fled to Ralift space to consider their next step in conquering this galaxy as well as others. Taking control of the Dyson Sphere could well set them back on their path of galactic domination and spreading their influence across the galaxies.

“Our fleets will be ready in four more weeks,” replied the Ralift who was in charge of shipbuilding. “The last of the upgrades should be finished by then and crew training completed.”

“What of the Borzon?”

“They too are nearly ready. The fleets from our two empires will overwhelm the Shari and Humans, and the Dyson Sphere will be ours.”



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(All dates are tentative)  
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