CHAPTER 1

Old Terra

The Imperial Palace

"Every month it gets worse. All I'm seeing now are glimpses. My visions used to be so precise. The Kytun are still so far away. From what I've been able to see, they shouldn't reach the northern edge of the galaxy for almost 300 years. But their presence is already limiting my vision there. I used to be able to walk down the streets on any planet in the Empire. I knew how the people felt. I knew their loves, desires, and what they feared. Now, I'm losing contact with them. The north is going dark just as rumors keep coming in of the appearance of strange creatures using some type of mind control. I need answers, theories . . . anything! They can't be here already. Frack!" Empress Alexandra Dubonnet shouted, as she stood on the outer terrace of her private quarters and pounded her fists on the snow-covered stone railing.

She had been unable to sleep after a session high within the Star Window, perched at the peak of the Galactic Tower, gazing on the night sky. There she drank the wine of Sheppard and left her body. Her galactic empire unfolded before her. Every place, every person, every event, all within her grasp . . . at least they used to be. Now, she sensed far less. All she found was increasing darkness, a sense of dread, and little solid information.

"So long since I've heard from him. It's been over 100 years . . . and nothing! Does he even know they're coming? I've sent summons everywhere. I bet he's out hunting Grall. Just what I need . . . more fracking teeth!" she said, as she reached into a pocket of her leather coat and retrieved a gold-tipped tooth twice the size of her thumb. She began to throw it from the terrace, longing to hurl this memory deep into the valleys below. Then she paused, remembering the day he gave it to her.

She stared at the tooth; the surface laced with cracks. The gold tip shone brightly, impervious to the passage of time.

"What kind of man pulls teeth from his kills as souvenirs? I've received gifts from every human planet in the Empire. Most of them were one-of-a-kind and priceless. What does he give me, this lifelong friend of mine? A fracking gold-tipped tooth . . . and . . . and it's the most precious thing I own," she whispered, as she sagged against the rail, slumped into the frigid snow, and stared at the ancient tooth clutched in her right hand.

*"My empire is crumbling. Every year, more worlds refuse the Imperial Tithe. Others demand independence. I spend all my time and resources trying to force them back into compliance. The Kytun loom in the distance, ever closer and closer. And here I sit, freezing my ass off in the snow, staring at a worthless tooth. All the while my bodyguards watch as their Empress rants and talks to herself,"* she thought, as she sighed and stared up at the clear, deep blue sky above her.

"At least the snow has stopped. It always snows up here. It's never Spring. How I long for Sheppard . . . the warmth of the vineyards and gardens of my youth," she whispered, as she glanced around at the bleak, frozen stone of her mountain palace.

The Imperial Palace on Old Terra rested on the remains of what had once been the highest mountain on the planet. Over 2000 feet of the peak had been removed as part of the construction process. The crenellated walls, over 600 feet high and 200 feet thick, had been a throwback to an ancient medieval design from early Terran history. Towers and buildings soared above the walls. Some were almost the height of the original peak. She had once reveled in the details of her vast project. This was to be the last home of the Immortals. All that remained of them was now contained within its endless halls and galleries. She had loved this place once . . . centuries ago. Now it felt like a museum . . . or a prison.

Her breath frosted, then was swept away by the early morning breeze that swept up the mountainside as the sun began to rise. It was brutally cold, well below zero degrees Imperial. Her three bodyguards stood nearby, pledged to never leave her unprotected. At a minimum, one of them stayed within 50 feet of her, even as she slept. There had been 37 attempts on her life in the last 20 years, and the frequency was increasing.

*"I'm shivering in the cold like a child. Connell would look at me and snort. He'd say I've let myself become soft,"* she thought, as she placed the tooth back in her pocket, regained her feet, and brushed off the snow.

"Ahh, the cold helps," she said, as she raised her left arm and rotated a sore shoulder.

One of her bodyguards had struck her with a practice blade two hours earlier. The edge was dull, but the intense electrical shock had knocked her off her feet. That had never happened before. They had been as stunned as her. Their monthly duels had become a tradition. The three would attack and try to strike her. None of them had ever succeeded, until last night.

An armored transsteel panel leading back into her quarters slid open. Zeela Morain, her communications aide, stood in the opening, her eyes wide as she shivered and bowed to her empress.

"I know you despise the cold, so this must be important. What do you have for me?" Alexandra asked, as she walked past her aide and back into the welcome heat of her fortress.

After the bodyguards followed her in, and the transsteel door slid shut, Zeela bowed again, then said, "He's here, my Empress!"

Alexandra stared at the grinning young woman, sighed, then asked, "Zeela, who is here? Answer me, child, or has someone taken your brain as well as your tongue?"

"Connell MacLynn, my Empress! He entered the system near Pluto. His vessel is being held there."

"MacLynn! The transmissions we received. Was everything correct . . . the codes, the phrases? Is it really him?" Alexandra asked, as she felt her heart begin pounding in her chest.

"Everything was perfect, my Empress! Kuiper Belt Command indicated he was quite indignant at being held there."

"I just bet he was. Arrogant ass thinks he can disappear for 100 years and then come sailing back into the heart of my empire with no restraints. You'd think it was his empire!"

"They are waiting for your approval to release his vessel, my Empress. What should I tell them?"

"I'm hungry. It's time for breakfast, and I have a busy day. Tell them . . . I'll be in touch . . . in a few days," Alexandra said, and smiled as she walked away.

. . . .

The Morning Star

2 days later

"I don't believe this! Two frackin' days we've been sitting here waiting on her frakin' blessing," Connell MacLynn said, as the huge man paced back and forth across the bridge of the *Morning Star*.

"I thought you were close friends with the Empress. She keeps you waiting like a servant," JoNay Blaknar said, as she and Myra stood with Fultoon Longbeard, the pilot and mechanicus for the vessel.

"Yeah, Boss! All those stories about you being her mentor. I'm sensing some serious disrespect," Fultoon said, as he nudged JoNay and chuckled.

"Don't you two start with me. I'm not in the mood," MacLynn replied, as he continued to pace.

"It does seem strange that she would not allow our progress deeper into the Terran system. It will take us almost three days to reach Old Terra from here. It is almost as if she was sending her own message," Myra Blaknar said, in the deadpan style of a Serentii Navigator.

"You're right. That's exactly what this is. She's the Empress and I get to obey. Which means sitting here and doing nothing! Toon, warm up the realspace drives. We're leaving!"

"Boss, there are six destroyers within 100 miles of us. Long range scans show another 80 warships orbiting Pluto. Some of them are cruisers. There are even two heavy battle cruisers. You want to go to war with an Imperial fleet?" Fultoon asked.

"No, I'm not looking for a fight. She wants to play games. We're leaving! Myra, get to your reclusium. Make course for Danker's World in the Gliese 357 system. Toon, notify Myra when we're far enough out to initiate transition into darkspace. I'll be in my cabin," MacLynn ordered, as he turned and walked away.

"Boss, we've come all this way. She needs to know about the Cube. She needs to know about the Plan and all that's . . ."

"Toon! Now!" MacLynn yelled, as he walked down the corridor leading away from the bridge.

. . . .

Old Terra

The Empress was in her private quarters, sitting behind an ancient wooden desk, contemplating if this was the day to summon MacLynn. The desk was said to have come from a previous millennium, when Old Terra was known as Earth. It was heavily carved. An eagle with a shielded chest graced the front. One claw held arrows, the other a symbol of peace. She had considered having the eagle removed, and an Imperial Dragon added, but had discarded the idea. She loved the symbolism of power and peace.

The walls of her sanctuary were lined with bookcases containing ancient tomes from previous eras of human history. Shimmering stasis fields protected the fragile documents. Tables and cabinets were filled with precious and rare items of personal significance.

She glanced up when a knock was heard. Only one of her bodyguards, Tosh Jonriel, was in the chamber. He opened the door and stood aside as Zeela rushed into the room.

"My Empress, he's gone!" Zeela said, while gesturing with both hands.

"Zeela, who has gone? Gone where?" the Empress asked, missing the calm demeanor of the young woman's mother, Shana, who had been an aide to the Empress for over 50 years. Her daughter was far more emotional.

"My Empress, we just received word that MacLynn's vessel powered up and left orbit. Kuiper Belt Command said there was no warning. He didn't ask permission. He left, transitioned to darkspace, and disappeared," replied Zeela, as she bowed and backed away, expecting an eruption of the Empress's legendary temper.

"Darkspace . . . that arrogant bastard! I half expected him to try to force his way into the inner system. But leave? Leave me? I didn't give him permission to leave! Who the frack does he think he is? I'll impound his vessel. I'll have it scrapped. I'll . . ." Alexandra began, then slapped the surface of the oaken desk, calmed herself, and started laughing.

"Empress?" Zeela asked, shocked at her reaction.

"Oh, Zeela! Only Connell MacLynn would have the audacity to do this to me. Did he leave a message . . . anything?"

"Yes, Empress . . . one word. It didn't make any sense. I've never heard . . ."

"Zeela! What word?"

"Kytun . . . my Empress. Just that one word. What does it signify?"

The Empress stared, leapt from behind her desk, and began pacing across the room. Her hands began flailing as she grasped different ideas and concepts from the air.

*"It means . . . he's aware. It means everything. How much does he know? How can he know anything? I haven't told anyone about them, not even my closest advisors. If he knows, how many others know? What did he want to tell me?"* Alexandra thought, as she walked behind her private desk, opened a drawer, and removed the tooth.

"I made a mistake. I should have just welcomed him back. He's still the same prideful man from my youth. Now he's gone, and I need so badly to talk to him," she said, as she set the tooth on her desk and screamed.

Zeela bowed, backed away, and fled the room.

CHAPTER 2

Danker's World

The Shipbuilder

Twenty million years ago an insignificant planet in an uninhabited star system was destroyed by a collision with a massive rogue comet. The cataclysmic explosion shattered the planet's iron core, scattering the former planet's bulk throughout the system and beyond. One such remnant of solid iron travelled outward for millions of years. The wayward fragment was eventually caught by an unsuspecting planet and became a moon rather than a massive impact crater on the planet's surface. Over time, the asteroid settled into a stable, synchronous orbit around its new friend, awaiting the arrival of humanity, or in this case, Dwarvenkind.

The orbiting shipyard, 25,000 miles above Danker's World, was now over 500 years old. When Omat Schiffbauer arrived, 300 years earlier, he was able to buy the struggling shipyard out from under the previous owner thanks to an inheritance from his great grandfather. By then it had grown to cover almost 20 percent of the surface. The previous owner, a Dwarv named Haven Stormhand, was fonder of the bottom of a barrel of ale than he was of constructing quality spacecraft. One thing led to another, and with bankruptcy looming in his future, he was eager to sell to the strange Dwarv with the foreign name. The local guilds were also happy since they depended on the shipyard for employment and had become concerned with Axle's running of the business. They were less than pleased when Omat negotiated a 20 percent cut in their service contract, but acquiesced in the hope that when business picked up they could renegotiate the deal. Plus, he changed his foreign name from Schiffbauer to Shipbuilder, much more to their liking. Ten years later he was referred to as 'The Shipbuilder'. Everyone on the planet and the nearby systems knew who he was. To his close friends he was Omat.

Three hundred years had passed. The 'Big Iron' shipyard was now the largest in the five local systems. Omat had become a respected shipbuilder known throughout the quadrant due to the superior quality of his vessels and his reasonable prices. When repair contracts began coming in for Imperial warships damaged in the never-ending fighting throughout the Empire, this brought great prosperity to Danker's World. Support industries were developed, able to ship their products throughout the Empire. It was a stable and highly profitable situation for all involved. That stability was soon to end . . .

Most of the 5,000 personnel who worked on the orbiting shipyard were planetside on Danker's World celebrating the year’s greatest holiday, the Ascension of the Emperor. Tradition said this was the date on which the Emperor became truly immortal and would sleep until the End Times. The celebration would last for seven days.

Omat the Shipbuilder had reached an age where such revelry had no real meaning for him. He understood the wildness of youth, and still remembered his own hungers and cravings from earlier in his life. But now, those memories were a part of his past . . . a very remote past. He was 308 years old, though he prided himself with not looking a day over 200. Now, he lived for his ships.

*"How many starships have I built? How many beautiful designs have I created?"* he thought, as he sat in the semi-darkness, contemplated his life, and smiled.

It was the design and construction of swift star cruisers and corsairs, the repair of vast and ancient galaxy-wandering battleships, destroyers, and explorers . . . that was what he lived for. His shop was his home. He refused to think of the place as his office. Yet, that is what it was, with its wooden walls decorated with holoprints, sketches, models of starships and their systems, some going back to the birth of this orbiting shipyard. A small side room contained a bed and a cleansing area. It was all he needed. He rarely travelled planetside. People came to him.

He turned off the light and rose from behind his drawing board. Every design started with a thought. Each vessel, each component, the flow of people and energy, all of it began in his mind. From there, the idea appeared on a sheet of paper. His Dwarven apprentices shook their heads at his ancient ways. Holographic design was the modern way, but his assistants lacked one thing . . . his massive creativity. They might laugh behind his back at the flimsy scraps of paper he presented them, but they marveled at his genius.

"I'm tired. I used to be able to work 16-hour days. Now, I'm exhausted after ten," he said, as he yawned, rubbed his eyes, and picked up his pipe from a side table.

The pipe had long since gone out, but he placed it in the corner of his mouth anyway. It had become a fixture in his face, part of his persona. It had been a present on his 200th birthday, from an Imperial officer, now long dead. He turned, as someone tapped on the frame of his open door. His door was always open.

The stranger who entered his dimly lit shop was unlike any he had seen during all his years. The man was huge, well over seven feet tall and broad of shoulder. He was covered from head to foot in a shimmering cloak that made it hard to focus on any details of his form. No face was visible, nor even hands, and Omat wasn't even sure if this huge visitor was human or not.

"What can I do for you, friend?" Omat asked, as he sat back down in his suspensor chair and removed the pipe from his mouth.

He tapped the pipe against a trash receptacle and began cleaning the bowl with a pick retrieved from his vest. The man stepped further into the room.

"Not quite sure how you got past security. They’re supposed to still be working, despite the holiday. I’ll have to look into that after you leave," Omat said, as he opened a drawer and retrieved a pouch of coarse cut jomba weed. He opened the pouch, removed a heavy pinch, packed it into the large bowl of the pipe, and began tamping the jomba in place

"Are you Omat the Shipbuilder?" the man asked, and leaned over Omat’s desk, his dark shadow covering its broad surface and most of Omat's ancient form.

*"He's human, judging by the inflection and depth of his voice. But there's something about the way he asked the question that I don’t like,"* Omat thought, as he lit the pipe.

He blew a ring of smoke over the old wooden desk and scratched his balding head with his other hand while smiling up at the stranger.

"I might be. I might not. Who wants to know?" Omat asked.

Omat had been Master of the Danker's Shipyard for over 200 years, and had learned how to deal with such hard types. But this man made him extremely nervous, more nervous than he had been in many, many years. This man had the look of a killer.

"Old Dwarv . . . are you Omat . . . the Shipbuilder?" the man repeated, this time not as quietly and with a cold inflection that indicated that the question would not be repeated a third time.

Omat rocked quietly in the suspensor chair and pulled at his short-cropped beard with his left hand while staring at the stranger's face. Little of the face was visible through the shimmer produced by the cloak. He weighed his options, considered the autogun in the drawer in front of him, and concluded he only had one choice. He knew that if this man was an assassin, hired by a competitor or an old enemy, then he had seen his last starship launching and answered . . .

"Yes, I am Omat, master of this shipyard. Now . . . what can I do for you?" he asked, while slowly standing to his full height of almost five feet.

The man stepped around the desk while reaching inside his cloak with his right hand. He retrieved a small optical device commonly used by Imperial security forces to identify criminals with a three-dimensional optical identification pattern.

Next, he gripped the Dwarv’s head with his left hand, and held the device up to Omat's right eye and ordered, "Do not move!"

The man had moved so quickly that Omat had no time to react. Standing this close to him was like standing on the edge of a great cliff surrounded by darkness. He felt a sickening tightness in his groin. He was afraid to even breathe. The man’s huge hand grasped him firmly. Omat sensed he could have crushed his skull with little effort. Then the stranger released him, lowered the device, and placed it back within his cloak while taking a step back.

To Omat it seemed as if the room was suddenly filled with a soft light. The cloak, no longer dark, shimmered with a golden hue tinged on the edges with a cobalt blue. Omat fell back into his chair, his jaw clenched on the stem of his pipe.

*"He didn't kill me. That's a good thing. He must be some kind of Imperial agent. He verified my identity. Now, what does he want?"* Omat thought, as he began puffing nervously on his pipe.

The man reached into a pouch on his belt and removed a small cube, similar to old data cubes used to store information from Imperial computers. He had not seen one in years. This one was similar in appearance but lacked a connection port. The cube itself was two inches on a side and seemed to be a puzzle. He could see fine lines in the sides indicating that it came apart. Omat noticed such details. With a glance he could analyze any device, any person. This device and this man were puzzles. That intrigued him.

The man saw him looking at it and said, "The Cube is why I’m here paying you a visit. Observe! Do you see any difference from one side to the next?" he asked, as he rotated the cube in his enormous hands so that Omat could see all the sides.

Omat's eyes never left the cube as it continued to rotate deftly between the man’s thick fingers. He noticed the hands were covered with scars, some fine and short, others thick, and long and deep. He wondered how the hands could continue to function with such damage. The surgery required to repair such wounds would have been quite expensive and wasn't done in this system or in any system nearby. The cube itself was an ivory color similar to his old pipe which had been carved from the tooth of a large Grall. Omat reached for the cube, which seemed to fluoresce at his approach, but the man pulled it back and warned,

"Not yet. It doesn't know you, and it can be quite dangerous."

"Dangerous? It looks like a data cube," Omat replied, as he blew another ring of smoke across the room.

His fear was subsiding, and his curiosity was piqued.

*"A killer who doesn't kill. A data cube or something like it. Where is this leading?"* he asked himself.

He sensed that this . . . cube . . . would impact the rest of his life. This thought struck him as odd, and he dismissed it as a byproduct of little sleep, a dangerous stranger, and very odd circumstances.

"No, my fine Dwarv, it is far more than a mere data cube," the man answered in a deep voice as he slid the hood away from his face.

Omat was startled to see a face similar to the hands that held the cube. The man was old, not as old as he was, at least he didn't think so. But the fragility of old age was absent from this face. It bore great scars, including one that started at the forehead, sliced through the right eyebrow, across the bridge of the hawk-like nose, and ended beside the left corner of a mouth that rarely smiled, judging by the thin, straight lips. But the eyes were what held his gaze. They were emerald green with bright specks of gold that seemed to float above the surface of the eye.

*"Those eyes aren't artificial. He's not the type to wear such things. His eyes are real and definitely bizarre. I've never seen the like, and I've dealt with most of the sentient species in the galaxy. Now, he's touching my mind! I can feel it. If he was an assassin, he would have killed me by now. He doesn't look the type to play with a target."*

Omat noticed other strange things about the man's face and huge head. He had snow white hair, short cropped and flat on the top. Small golden hoops hung from each ear. From each hoop hung a great tooth, each the size of his pipe and probably of similar origin. Imbedded in the front of his forehead were three golden Imperial dragons, each an inch across and incredibly detailed, or he suspected they had been. Time had worn them almost smooth.

*"This man is a Galactic Marine. Those eagles are honorarium they give to their greatest warriors. But I've never heard of golden dragons before, only silver ones,"* Omat thought, as he wished his pipe was loaded with stim weed.

Silver dragons represented 100 years of service to the Empress, if Omat's memory served him correctly. This man was a great warrior. Rare was the man who lived to 100 in the service of the Empress's Galactic Marines, let alone 300, and these dragons were golden.

*"What does that mean . . . golden dragons? How old is this man? What does he want with me?"* Omat thought, as his fear began to mount once more.

Omat began to sweat and chewed his right thumbnail, a habit he had when perplexed by a stubborn, seemingly insurmountable problem. His eyes returned to the strange cube, which the man, his fingers as nimble as juggler, had continued to turn and tumble while Omat had stared at his craggy face.

"Are you ready to learn the secrets of the Cube, Omat, Master Shipbuilder?" the stranger asked, all threat gone from his voice.

Omat swallowed nervously, his throat suddenly very dry. He felt his senses alert and vibrating, his old heart pounding so hard in his chest that he thought the man must surely be able to hear it. He took a draw on his pipe, but it had gone out. After tapping the remains into a receptacle, he set the pipe aside.

"First, tell me your name. I don't deal with strangers."

"Fair enough. My name is Connell MacLynn. I'm a representative for someone who needs your services as a shipbuilder."

"I'm always up for new business. First, tell me about this cube," Omat replied, as he leaned back in his chair, gripping both leather arms with his sweaty hands.

MacLynn stared down at the Dwarv, then placed the Cube on the desk while glancing around the office. In a dark corner, covered with what must have been a centuries' worth of dust, he saw a large cylinder, three feet high and the same across, and walked toward it.

It had been machined from one piece of Falorrean steel. It had been one of the cooling coils on a pulse cannon from the forward battery of the Imperial battleship Omega Star. It was all that remained of the ship, destroyed during the Great Betrayal. Omat had found the piece in a scrap yard over 150 years ago and had bought it as a curiosity. It was only years later he discovered its origin. The Omega Star had been over 1000 years old when it was lost. The coil predated the Empire and was built during the early years of the Planetary Union.

The coil had become a fixture in his office. Objects such as the coil were so heavy in a 1g field, such as existed in this part of the spaceyard, that they were always moved by use of gravity suspensors. But the stranger had no need of such a device. He bent down, grasped the coil by its lifting handles, and with a mild grunt, lifted the dust-laden steel and proceeded to carry it back to the desk. He deposited it in front of Omat's desk with a resounding thud and a swirl of dust.

Brushing himself off, MacLynn sat on the coil, his knees level with the top of the desk, and placed his hands on either side of the Cube which Omat had not dared to touch. Then he locked Omat's eyes with his own piercing gaze.

Omat was stunned. The coil weighed over 1500 Imperial pounds. No man had ever budged it, let alone picked it up and carried it to the front of his desk to use as a stool.

"In a way, you are correct, shipbuilder. The Cube is a container of data, vast amounts of data, but that is just the start of its tale. The Cube is also about salvation, and struggle, and the future of this galaxy," MacLynn said.

Picking up the Cube, the man smiled that grim smile of his and began to tumble it in his fingers. It began to glow as if in response to his touch. Omat's curiosity returned, forgetting the display of great strength the man had so casually given.

The warrior's cloak had ceased to glow and had changed to a nondescript gray. Stretching his long arms, the man shrugged off the sleeves of the cloak revealing massive forearms, corded with muscle, and crisscrossed with scars. Attached to the outside of each forearm were metallic bands that Omat didn't recognize. He couldn't tell if they were decoration or some type of weapon.

MacLynn saw him stare at the bands Jenna Wasullen had given him, then said, "They are of no importance to you, old Dwarv. Let’s just say they were a gift from a friend. Focus on the Cube, for I have much to teach you and very little time."

Omat's eyes returned to the Cube. The man had ceased turning it, and held it at the level of Omat's eyes, and at an odd angle, with his elbows planted firmly on the old desk. Omat's eyes widened as the man talked to the Cube and the nearest corner facing him began to glow a bright ruby red. Omat was unable to move despite the sudden fear gnawing at his belly. He could only stare into the warrior's eyes, held by their golden intensity.

Omat didn't feel the beam from the Cube strike him between the eyes, but felt himself twitch and squirm as a mouse held in the crushing jaws of a great feline. The pressure on his mind was intense, and he resisted, but a quiet voice filled his consciousness and his defiance ceased. He felt a presence both benign and fearsome enter him, and he knew that it would never leave until the message was delivered or when he died. It surged throughout his body, searching every crevice, and healing, repairing, and strengthening his old form. Omat felt a vigor return to his body that he had not felt since his first century.

"NOW YOU ARE READY TO RECEIVE," the presence told him.

Omat felt the pressure on his mind increase again. This time he did not resist, but instead opened himself willingly. A smile came across his face as a feeling of grand ecstasy coursed throughout his body followed by the image of a great ship, the likes of which the galaxy had never seen. A ship so huge that the ancient battleships of the Imperium would seem like scout ships in comparison.

*"The shape is so unique. It’s cruciform in cross-section. It reminds me of a stretched-out version of a broadhead, a hunting arrow,"* Omat thought.

More data poured into his mind. This ship was fully 30 miles long, 7 miles wide, with darkspace and realspace drive engines half the size of an Imperial battleship. System designs far beyond anything he had ever built flowed into his mind with increasing speed. Weapons, shielding, life support, internal transportation, communication, engineering, medical, all the myriad components that make up any starship, but enhanced and sophisticated, designed by a mind more brilliant than any he had encountered.

Omat, the old master ship builder, began to weep as the serene beauty and power of the design began to overwhelm his senses.

This was not a mere vessel, but instead a temple devoted to the survival of the galaxy. It would be capable of housing over 100,000 people, transporting them anywhere, protecting them from anything. This was a city more akin to a shipworld than the vessels normally built by humans. Omat knew deep within his soul that he would build the first vessel, and many more . . . but he didn’t know why.

"I have to know. Please! What are these for? Why such a massive effort? This design is bordering on impossibility . . . even for me!" Omat asked to the presence inhabiting his mind.

Once again, he felt an inspection coming, deeper this time, soul deep . . .

"IN TIME I WILL TELL YOU, OMAT THE SHIPBUILDER. YOU ARE A RARE INDIVIDUAL . . . VERY RARE INDEED. I FIND NO DECEIT IN YOU, ONLY A LOVE OF CREATION. FOR NOW, YOU MUST BEGIN PREPARATIONS," the presence said.

"But it can't be done! The materials needed are beyond anything available here. Even I can't procure adamithrium in such amounts. I would have to search elsewhere . . . other systems. Even then . . . I would need my shipyard, more personnel. How long would it take to construct just one?"

"TELL ME, DWARV, WHY DO YOU EXIST? ARE YOU NOT BORED WITH THE REPETATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF STARSHIPS?"

"No! I love them all! Each one is a child of mine!"

"GOOD! YOU'LL NEED THAT LOVE AS TIME PASSES. I WANT 100 SHIPS COMPLETED IN THE NEXT 100 YEARS."

"Impossible! A ship like this has never been built. There will be complications, cost overruns."

Omat opened his eyes, and the voice was gone. The stranger was gone. Shaking himself, he looked around his darkened office, then stood and mumbled, "Senility! It's finally happened. Or . . . just a dream . . . an old Dwarv’s crazy dream. I've been working too hard lately. That must be it."

He stood and began walking around his desk while massaging his temples, trying to relieve the sudden onset of a splitting headache. With a sudden yell he began hopping around on one foot while grabbing his right knee. Losing his balance, he fell to the floor and saw the coil sitting in front of his desk, and knew it had been no dream.

He began massaging his aching knee, then said, "It was real! I see it all in my head. He wants a hundred ships! How is that possible?"

Omat stumbled to his feet and sat on the coil. He glanced around the darkened office, hoping to find the stranger lurking in the shadows, but he was alone.

"Wait! There is more to this than what you have told me. Who are you? Why do you want these ships built? Who will crew them?" he asked the darkness.

There was no answer, only silence, as a hundred questions tumbled through his mind . . .

. . . .

The Morning Star

"Boss, I don't get it. What was wrong with a friendly visit to his shipyard? I would have liked to have met Omat. He's one of the most famous Dwarven alive. Plus, I just know he has a good stockpile of ale on that asteroid," Fultoon said, as he guided the *Morning Star* away from the orbiting shipyard.

"Think, Toon! Use that head for more than head butting. The Kytun have already begun infiltrating the galaxy. We don't know the extent of that infiltration. If they're on Stonevalt, they could be anywhere in the Empire. If we went there openly, word would have gotten out. Plus, there has always been an undercurrent of resentment for the Empress. As the last Immortal, some consider her a barrier to progress. Families exist within the Imperial government who have held hereditary positions for generations. They see themselves as the true rulers of the empire, not her. They've been hunting me for decades. We can't appear in the open anymore."

"Fultoon, he's correct about the Empress. I can remember overhearing my mother talking with my father about the injustice of her rule. He was an Imperialist and believed in her right to rule. Mother didn't," JoNay Blaknar said, as she silently entered the bridge.

MacLynn glanced at Fultoon, a questioning look on his face.

"Nope. I didn't hear her approach either. I told you she was good."

"Where's Myra?" MacLynn asked. Having been attacked by JoNay twice, he was still cautious in his acceptance of her on his ship.

"Making mental preparations. She assumed you'd want to transition to darkspace as soon as possible."

"Her assumption was correct. As I've told you all before, I view this as a game of galactic chaka. We're all pieces on the board. Omat the Shipbuilder was an additional piece. Now, we're going to find another."

"So, you see this as a simple game? I was trained in mazes. I love a good puzzle," JoNay said, as she walked up beside MacLynn and stared at the command console laid out before him.

"AlNeegan to the core . . . along with your sense of invincibility. Have you learned nothing in the last few months?" MacLynn asked, as he spun and rose before her.

"I have merged with Myra and studied her memories of the Emperor . . . and what he showed her. Even before the death of my father at my mother's hand, I believed in you . . . in him. Something is happening to the galaxy . . . to all of us," JoNay said, as she stared at MacLynn's midsection, took a step back and gazed up into his swirling eyes.

"Where to, Boss?" Fultoon asked.

"Old Terra. Start cross-training JoNay. Start with the weapon systems. When she's proficient with them, the shield system, then the engines."

"What? I'm not a mechanicus!"

"Not yet. But on this ship, you are what I say you are. Everyone cross-trains," MacLynn said, lowered his head, and stared into JoNay's eyes.

"Cross-training . . . sure . . . why not," she said, forcing herself not to blink or break eye contact.

"Sure. She's smart enough, Boss. But . . . Old Terra? We tried that two weeks ago. The Empress wouldn't let us past the outer planets."

"We aren't asking her permission. We're heading straight to the inner planets . . . straight to Old Terra."

"Boss, that's not allowed. The Empress commands hundreds of ships. Nobody just sails into the Terran system."

"We'll exit darkspace between Mars and Old Terra. She's had a couple of weeks to regret her arrogance. We'll see how they react."

"React! That would be considered a breach of the peace. Her forces will hunt us down and kill us without asking her permission. Anyway, she's the Empress! She can be arrogant if she wants."

"Not with me she can't. You have your orders. When we transition near Mars, send this transmission to her fortress on Old Terra. Nothing else! Send 'Yes or No?', one time . . . and wait for a response," MacLynn said, as he walked away from JoNay and headed toward his quarters.

"But, Boss! What if she . . ."

"Contact me when we're near Mars. Until then I have some research to do."

"Is he always like this?" JoNay asked, as MacLynn exited the bridge.

"I told you before. When he makes up his mind, he gives orders and walks away."

"And you obey every time?"

"Look, I've questioned his decisions more than once during the last 40 years. But I've come to believe that he's almost . . . almost always right. He's seen so many things. Survived so many threats on his life. He has experience that can't be taught. He's lived it, and I have faith in him. If you're smart, you'll do the same. I can't believe you're still alive. Almost no one who tries to kill him survives. You tried twice and you're still breathing. That's a fracking miracle."

"I am AlNeegan! I am a warrior with . . ."

"You're a youngling with basic combat skills and a lot of courage. If he didn't see more than that, you'd either be dead, or you and your sister would have been dumped back on Stonevalt. He could have gotten another navigator there. You're here because he wants you both here. Once we transition to darkspace, I'll start training you in ship systems, but I think we'll start with the engines."

"I am not a mechanicus! I am . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, AlNeegan. Get ready to get dirty, and I hope you're not claustrophobic," Fultoon said, as he waved her away and turned back toward his console.

. . . .

Darkspace

Day six of eight

MacLynn was sitting at a data console in his quarters when Fultoon contacted him on a private channel.

"I'm busy. What is it?" MacLynn asked, as he continued reviewing personnel files of citizens on Old Terra.

"JoNay is sleeping. I wore her out today crawling through access tubes and tracing systems."

"Toon! Get to the point!"

"Boss, I just put on the helmet to check on our flight path. There's something odd going on out there."

"It's darkspace. When is it not 'odd'?"

"Well . . . I know I'm not an expert, but it's altered, and still changing. I don't know how to describe it."

"Toon, if there was a threat, Myra would have contacted us."

"Boss, I didn't say it was a threat. I'm telling you something is shifting the currents . . . on a large scale. Normally it looks like a jumbled mess with currents leading in different directions . . . all directions. You have to pick your way through the right flows to get where you want to go. Now, they're starting to line up, not completely, but more than I've ever seen it."

"Toon, not even the demons can control darkspace currents. At least, I've never heard any navigator imply they could. Which direction are they heading?" MacLynn asked, as an uneasy feeling came over him.

"The heading? It's . . . like I said, it's not total, just a gradual shift in one direction. It can't say . . ."

"Toon! What fracking direction are the currents shifting toward?"

"In realspace it would be toward the galactic north. Boss, I just had a thought. That's where . . ."

"Frack! The Kytun! That's where the Kytun are coming from."

"But, Boss! That doesn't make any sense. They are coming in those nest ships . . . moons. They don't have darkspace engines . . . do they?" Fultoon asked, and began tugging on his beard.

"Toon, there's a reason no humans have ever travelled to another galaxy, even using darkspace. The darkmatter and darkenergy that make up darkspace are concentrated around our galaxy. It exists apart from realspace but is part of a dual reality. It's all around us, but we can't see it or detect it. When you get to the edge of the galaxy, the currents turn back toward the center. There's no way across the gap, even using darkspace."

"Sooo . . . I still don't get it."

"Maybe there's something we don't know. We don't know how far past the edge of the galaxy darkspace extends. The Kytun are still 200 years away from the edge of the galaxy at their present rate of travel through realspace. At least, that's what the Emperor told me. What if they . . ." MacLynn began.

"Holy frack! What if the Kytun can somehow transition into darkspace and get here faster?"

"Exactly! They could travel across the galaxy unseen and emerge anywhere," MacLynn said, as a wave of hopelessness began to overwhelm him.

*"There's barely enough time to prepare for their invasion. These new ships . . . I have an idea how the Emperor wants to use them, but we'll need hundreds of them. It's almost impossible in just 200 years. If the Kytun can use darkspace and shorten that time to a few decades . . ."* he thought, and began to wonder if all the scenes of invasion and crushing defeat the Emperor had shown were inevitable.

"What do we do, Boss?"

"Continue on our present course. One step at a time. First, we find the next playing piece for the board. Then, we go see the Empress. How far is it to Old Terra?"

"Two more days in darkspace. A day to Old Terra from Mars, if we don't get attacked."

"Three days . . . " MacLynn mused.

"Boss, I just had a thought about the currents shifting. Demons ride the currents for the same reason we do. It makes their journeys faster. Maybe . . . maybe they sense the Kytun just like the Emperor could. They don't like anything from realspace intruding on their territory. The Kytun, with thousands of huge moons and trillions of creatures . . ."

" . . . would be the biggest threat they ever sensed. They might gather every demon in darkspace for a threat like that. Toon, keep a sharp eye while we're in darkspace. I know you don't like wearing that helmet, but it might start getting crowded in there. Make sure we don't wind up in a fight we don't want," MacLynn said, as a glimmer of hope began to rekindle in his heart.

"Okay, I'll put the helmet on. Frack, I hate this!" Fultoon said, as he slid the helmet out from under his console and placed it on his head.

. . . .

The Reclusium

To an outside observer, Myra Blaknar seemed locked in an immobile trance. Her eyes were glazed over, her breathing almost non-existent. But her mind was more than alive. Hooked into the vessel's darkspace drives, she swam through darkspace guiding the *Morning Star* along various currents, shoals, and tumultuous cascades of darkenergy and darkmatter.

*"Maintaining course heading is becoming difficult. I am being forced in one direction. I have to slip and skip across broad rivers of flowing energy like a stone. I have never seen this before. What has changed?"* Myra asked herself, as she pushed the *Morning Star* onto a small side current.

*"Better! Now we are back on course. But I estimate two hours until I am forced to abandon the currents completely. This stream is going to merge with a more powerful current. We will be swept in the wrong direction. If I lose the currents, our progress will slow. Yet, I see nothing to our advantage. Everything is flowing toward . . . no, that is not possible. Darkspace is chaos . . . endless chaos. It never flows in just one direction."*

Myra sat above the *Morning Star* inside a bubble on the upper hull. She was surrounded by the multicolored flows of darkspace. Her mind was focused on their goal, the system of Old Terra, in realspace. Of all the sentient species, only Serentii Astrologi, called navigators by most races, were able to guide a vessel through darkspace while focusing on a destination in realspace. Myra knew where she was in both realms of existence. The fragile current she was guiding the vessel through was becoming unstable. It was being wrenched in another direction, to the galactic north. All the streams were being turned in that direction. As far as she could sense, darkspace was becoming organized . . . which was counter to everything she had ever been taught or experienced.

*"Not possible, yet it is happening,"* she thought, as her mind sensed a presence behind her . . . behind them.

Massive new flows were forming. The chaotic surge of hundreds of separate currents was organizing, merging, bending in one direction behind them. Even worse, the massive rivers of dark energy weren't empty. Herds of demons were also combining and flowing toward the galactic north. She watched in awe as billions, then trillions of creatures plunged into the flow.

*"Why? Are they after us? Have I failed again? No, we have turned aside. We are nothing. They are ignoring us. What has happened? Where are they going? MacLynn! I have to tell him."* she thought, her mind returning to the vessel for the first time in days.

Then she sensed the presence of another mind with her in darkspace.

*"Fultoon . . . how? I sense him in here with me. A Dwarv*?" she asked herself, as her focus shifted toward this new mystery.

*"His mind is here. He's very afraid. He's trying to be quiet, to hide from me, but his thoughts are so raw, powerful. Is he psychic? Who am I seeing? A woman . . . a friend of his, of MacLynn's. A desert planet . . . Adytum! She made this thing . . . this device he wears on his head. No! By the Serentii soul! He can see darkspace!"* Myra thought, as she began the process of slowly withdrawing from her trance and pulling the *Morning Star* back into realspace.

. . . .

The Morning Star

Realspace

"Don't yell at me! How was I supposed to know she wasn't focused on business? She hadn't seen me before," Fultoon said, as he kept circling his console to keep away from MacLynn as he stalked him around the bridge.

"It was not his fault. I was pulling out of the trance. We have bigger problems than that heretical device he was using," Myra said, as she pointed at the helmet sitting in Fultoon's chair.

"I don't understand. What is the helmet, and where are we? Why did we exit darkspace?" JoNay asked, as she walked onto the bridge.

"We're in realspace . . . somewhere . . . and not near Old Terra, thanks to this incompetent Dwarv!" MacLynn yelled, as his stalking continued.

"Boss, calm down. It wasn't my fault! Besides, she's right. Something bad is going on . . . in darkspace . . . not in here," Fultoon said, as he kept moving and stayed out of MacLynn's grasp.

"MacLynn! Stop!" Myra said, as she stepped in front of the huge galactic marine. She was six-foot-four, yet he towered more than a foot above her and was four times her mass.

"Toon, we'll settle this later. Put that helmet in storage and tell me where the frack we are!" MacLynn bellowed, as he restrained himself from throwing Myra to the side.

Fultoon hurried away, stored the darkspace navigation helmet, and returned to his console.

"Boss, we're in realspace, two days travel from the outer edge of the Old Terran system. It'll take us a week from here to get to Old Terra, if we aren't intercepted," Fultoon said, while glancing over his shoulder.

"So, who is this woman? I caught a glimpse of her in Fultoon's mind. Is she the inventor of . . . that thing?" Myra asked, while pointing at the locked cabinet on the side of the bridge where Fultoon had stored the darkspace helmet.

"It's . . . a long story," MacLynn said, while rubbing a hand across the stubble on his heavily scarred face.

"Fultoon said we have two days until we reach the edge of the Old Terran system. We have time. Who is this woman?" Myra asked, as JoNay slid up beside her, glanced up at MacLynn, and smiled.

"Toooon!"

"Busy, Boss! Initiating realspace drives, maximum velocity, course set for Old Terra. I need to do system checks. You tell the story," Fultoon said, ignoring the guttural sounds coming from MacLynn's throat.

"Adytum. I believe that is where she lives," Myra said, as she stepped behind Fultoon and faced MacLynn.

"Hey, I'm up for a good story. I'll just sit over here," JoNay said, as she slipped past MacLynn, sat in his chair, and placed her feet up on his console.

He growled again, stared at the back of Fultoon's head, then began pacing as he told the Blaknar sisters the story of Adytum and Jenna Wasullen . . .

. . . .

One hour later

"Myra, our people are ruined! The whole planetary economy is based on the income derived by our Astrologi. Everything else is secondary," JoNay said, as she continued pacing across the bridge, staring at Fultoon and then at MacLynn. Her hands kept straying to the daggers on her thighs.

In the past two weeks, she had stopped wearing the full-length black robe of a flavus Serentii female, preferring the skintight armored bodysuit of the AlNeegan caste of which she was a member. Long daggers were attached to each thigh. Throat slashing blades were mounted on each wrist. Pouches built into her armored suit contained other devices and weapons.

"JoNay, I have allowed you to wear your weapons again because you have earned my trust. In spite of you trying to kill me, not once . . . but twice. Violate that trust once more, and I'll kill you. No more chances," MacLynn said, having finished his tale of Adytum, Jenna Wasullen, and everything that happened there.

JoNay shook her hands and placed them behind her back. She stopped pacing and glanced at Myra.

*"Sister! This device is a threat to our people. What do we do?"* JoNay thought, mentally linking with her sister.

"From what they say, the device is limited. They can't see beyond the immediate vicinity. They have to rely on the ship for a basic heading. The strain of using the device is great. Fultoon almost died while using it," Myra replied, deciding that secrecy at this point was dangerous.

*"Myra!"*

"Talk openly, JoNay. We all have to trust each other, or the Plan is doomed. There are more important things to discuss than the financial security of the Serentii. Something has changed in darkspace. I do not think it will be safe to travel there for quite some time. I saw enormous masses of demons all flowing in one direction. The history of generations of Astrologi and their travels through darkspace are a standard part of our training. There is no record of an event like this. The currents have never merged, began flowing toward one point . . . never! I cannot imagine what . . ."

"We know . . . or at least we have a theory," Fultoon said, as he glanced at MacLynn and received a nod.

"The Kytun are approaching from the galactic north. They're supposed to be at least another 200 years out, or so says the Emperor. What if . . . what if they can use darkspace like we do . . . to speed things up . . . shorten their travel time?"

"Their ships, the moons . . . they don't have engines. I thought they just drifted." JoNay said.

MacLynn stared at the young Serentii warrior, remembering their fight against Lord Seeker Agron Salash on the *Eye of the Empress*. She had fought bravely and assisted him off the vessel after he was gravely wounded by a demon weapon.

*"I have to trust them both. It's the only way. They have to know everything. No more secrets,"* he thought.

"Something is pushing the Kytun in our direction at a significant speed. They must have some type of propulsion system, but I've never seen it. Their ships are giant nests, half rock and half organic. It's all glued together somehow. At the center of the nest is a leader, a queen or mother, an enormous creature that breeds them all. It's psychic. All the mothers are. They can communicate, control their actions, act collectively. Perhaps they have developed some way of transitioning their nests into darkspace. The Emperor told me the Kytun are affecting his ability to 'see'. He said, he would become blind as the Kytun entered the galaxy. They project some kind of psychic barrier. The demons of darkspace can sense something small like us when we enter into their realm. The Kytun are coming in huge nest ships, tens of thousands of them . . ." MacLynn said and paused.

"MacLynn, that's what I was seeing. Not the Kytun, but the reaction of the demons. The Kytun must be entering their space. Demonkind react violently to the presence of anything from realspace. That is why we enter darkspace with shielding up and move quickly and quietly, trying to stay away from any concentrations of demons. But the currents? How can the currents be changing? They are always erratic. The demons, they are the same as us, just riding the currents from place to place. For them it is part of their normal migration, to absorb energy from the few stars, then attack and devour others of their own kind. This is different. The currents are changing to support the mass movement of trillions of demons . . . toward the Kytun!" Myra said.

"We've always thought about the darkspace currents like rivers on one of our planets, a method to speed up travel. What if they're more than that? What if they are able to sense a threat to the whole, to darkspace itself?" Fultoon asked.

"The Old One told me the Kytun have been devouring galaxies for millions of years. They strip planets of everything. They devour all organic material, water, air. All they leave behind is barren rock. Everything they scour is used to make more nests, more creatures. He didn't talk about darkspace, but what if they do the same in darkspace. They devour darkmatter and darkenergy. Maybe that's their propulsion system. Imagine darkspace with no currents, no demons. Only a few stars and barren, rocky planets . . ."

"Boss, maybe the demons are our allies," Fultoon said.

"Allies? The 'enemy of my enemy is my friend' is an old saying. The demons would attack any fleet of ships from realspace as quickly as they would the Kytun. But . . . this may give us the time we need to prepare to defend ourselves. The Kytun need darkspace to travel across our galaxy. They won't destroy the currents if they need them. The demons will swarm toward them from everywhere. Myra has seen the beginning of this. There will be a war unlike anything we've ever seen. Trillions of demons against trillions of Kytun," MacLynn said, his mind staggered by the concept.

"Boss! Remember that demon lord we fought. That thing had more power than anything I've ever seen. Even our nukes couldn't penetrate its shielding. If not for the Cube, we would have been destroyed."

"I remember that we killed it. At least I think we did. That thing had the power to shatter a planet. If there are enough of them, they might be able to stop the Kytun on their own."

"I have heard stories of such things. Great demons that could crush an entire ship, even a fleet of ships. I never met anyone who had seen such a thing. Even our father, who had guided hundreds of starships through darkspace, had never seen one. But, he had heard the same stories since he was a young Astrologus. Our mother . . . she . . ." Myra began, then fell silent and turned away.

"JoNay told us what happened to your father, Myra. She also told us of her sensing something wrong when the two of you left your homeworld . . . an odd smell," Fultoon said.

"It was an emotional time for us both. I thought she was imagining things. But now . . . if I had listened to her . . ."

"Myra, never do that! The past can't be rewritten. Learn to trust your instincts. Learn to trust the instincts of your closest friends. Even if you had said something, who would have listened? The acidic smell of insects . . . a young woman and her delusions. You would have been ignored. Now we know certain signs and indications of infection. These things, your experiences, will be presented to the Empress. She has the power to spread this information throughout the empire. The Kytun are more than a ravaging mass of killers. If they were that simpleminded, they would have been defeated long ago. The Old Ones have been fighting them for millions of years . . . and have never stopped them," MacLynn said, and studied the three faces around him.

"Boss, we've all seen the Kytun and what they can do. The question is, can we stop them?"

"An equally important question, will the Kytun try to assault both realities at the same time?" JoNay asked.

"A two-front war! The history of the galaxy is littered with empires and nations that tried to accomplish that. The vast majority failed and were destroyed in the attempt. My guess, my hope, is they will attack darkspace first, then realspace after their transit routes are secure. If they remove the demons and keep the currents, they will be able to appear anywhere in our galaxy, in realspace, at their leisure. That's what I would do," MacLynn replied.

"So, Boss, what's our next move? Do we head straight for Old Terra? Do we send the message to the Empress, and then we see what happens? The demons will buy us some time. I wonder if they have a chance of stopping the Kytun?"

"As I said, from what I've been told, the Kytun have never been stopped. But we have to try, my friends. We stop them or we become another galaxy that spins quietly in the darkness . . ."

CHAPTER 3

Darkspace

The Galactic North

They were the tip of the Kytun spear, three young mothers given the honor of being the first to penetrate the new feeding ground. Each of them had been born during the long journey. Almost a million years had passed since the last great consumption. Resources for new construction and new birthing were gone. Their existing children all slept. Fresh material was needed for the creation of new mothers, new nests, and trillions of new children.

MondraK was the first mother to transition her nest into darkspace. She was young, only a few millennia old. She had never participated in a great feeding. Memories shared from older mothers told of endless planets filled with massive amounts of organic material and consumption that went on for thousands of years. Tens of thousands of new nests, with new mothers, had been created to replace the inevitable losses as sentient species resisted their last galactic onslaught. That was long ago. The Andromeda galaxy was empty. The very oldest mothers told of thousands of galaxies left barren in their wake. This new one would be no different . . .

She felt her sisters emerge on either side. All of their nests were small, only 20 miles in diameter. Each young mother lay in the center. Their bodies were shriveled by lack of nutrient, yet each weighed over 1000 Imperial tons. Their multiple brain cases made up almost half that mass. They were half brain, half reproductive organs. Nothing else mattered. Their bodies were ovoid, segmented, gray masses of immobile flesh. Each end of their body was attached to their nest. One end was connected to a massive channel that would fill with organic matter when the great feeding began. The other end was connected to hundreds of tubes where a million eggs would be extruded every day once nutrient was available. Mature mothers grew massive, and their nests grew with them, layer by layer. The greatest mothers were the size of a mountain. Their nests were hundreds of miles in diameter.

All that would come later . . . if they survived. MondraK knew she and her two sisters were considered expendable. They were unlikely to survive long enough to grow stronger. She had no fear of death. The concept of fear was unknown to Kytun. In death, they would be consumed by those who followed, then reborn by another mother. That was the way of existence for Kytun. Life . . . consumption . . . death . . . rebirth.

MondraK felt her sisters touch her. ToroK and PaquaK were both young like her. All had been born of the same Great Mother, GravitMutaK, one of the eldest of all great mothers. Her nest was over 1000 miles in diameter. She was far away, yet MondraK could sense her presence, observing everything as her three daughters penetrated the barrier and awakened their own offspring for the coming battle. The three sisters, and all their children, bore the marking of their great mother. All were covered with pulsating green veins.

. . . .

Anul-Vakanay

Greater Demon of the North

Time had no meaning to a demon. Life began and ended. They were born of excess energy. When demons consumed more energy than their structure could bear, they screamed in rage and tore themselves apart. Those parts rapidly became another demon, a copy of the original. Those who could absorb more energy without splitting apart grew larger, ever more powerful. Anul-Vakanay was one of the most formidable. He ruled over one quarter of all darkspace. As a Greater Demon he had few peers. Only a handful existed that could resist the demon hordes he could summon. Unlike most of his kin, he was clever and had patience. Stars were the secret to control of darkspace. Stars were power, and he controlled fully 60 percent of the few hundred that existed in all of darkspace.

Anul-Vakanay had sensed the intrusion before it came. It was something new, something massive, something he had never seen before. He was more curious than concerned. He was a Greater Demon. His forces were uncountable. They moved at his command. These new intruders would be great sport and a new supply of food for his ravenous flock.

. . . .

The Kytun

MondraK awoke her children as they crossed the barrier between realspace and darkspace. Her first birthing cycle had been selective, focusing on one particular species of Kytun. The genetic coding had been provided by her mother. Octed were designed to protect the outer shell of the nest from invaders. Like most Kytun, they had eight primary limbs. Four short, massive, clawed legs made them immovable once they locked into place. Their thick outer shell, covered with long barbs, was almost impenetrable. Each of the four arms ended in eight long, barbed tentacles. Anything it grasped was pulled in, torn apart, and consumed. They emerged from their nest in the millions and soon swarmed over the home of MondraK.

. . . .

The Demons

Anul-Vakanay surged to the north of his realm surrounded by a billion-strong wave of lesser demons. He sensed the intruders. Three spheres, each controlled by a separate mind. He cast his hatred at the first sphere in the form of a psychic bolt that should have shattered the orb into small fragments. His power was dissipated, leaving the target intact.

He targeted the other two intruders, with identical results. He drew closer until he could see them with his own eyes.

"Small, insignificant rocks, barely worth a second glance. What creatures live within you? How were they able to withstand my power?" he asked himself, as he hurled his demons forward with a single thought.

. . . .

The Kytun

A billion demons swarmed the three nests. A million Octed tore the demons apart with massed barriers of tentacles, but the demons were relentless. ToroK was the first to fall. Her Octed weakened in one quadrant. She screamed in rage as the demons ripped open the shell of her nest and raced inside. Millions of them died as she focused her psychic power internally, but the demon numbers seemed endless. The Greater Mind shuddered as she was torn apart and consumed.

PaquaK was next. Her fate the same as her sister. MondraK mourned the fate of her two siblings, yet reveled as she felt their spirits return to the Greater Mind. She stood intact, defiant, as the last of her reserves swarmed across the outer surface of her nest. Soon, she would be reunited with her sisters. She accepted her fate, as the demon hoards focused their attention on her.

. . . .

The Demons

Anul-Vakanay shifted his attention to the last intruder. This diversion had been entertaining. He would crack this last shell and personally consume the being within.

A cloud of death surrounded the three nests. Half his billion-strong hoard lay shredded. Such losses were trivial. Uncounted billions more lay deeper within his realm. These new creatures were ferocious and difficult to kill, but their numbers were limited. He touched the mind inside the last nest.

*"Interesting. The last of its kind, but no fear. Hatred, defiance, satisfaction? I will torment this creature for ages. I will teach it fear,"* Anul-Vakanay thought, as he began pounding the sphere with psychic bolts.

It was untouched. Its creatures still swarmed the jagged surface . . . waiting.

He paused as he sensed something else enter his realm. He sent his demons forward as he lifted his mind from the battle.

"Another mind, stronger . . . others . . . many others!"

The barrier between darkspace and realspace shuddered as more Kytun nests crossed over. He sensed three, then a dozen, then hundreds . . . thousands.

Anul-Vakanay pulled his forces back and retreated deeper into darkspace. His memory went back a million years. Such a thing had never happened. No one from the outside had ever invaded in such numbers. Greater demons rarely communicated. Their hatred of each other was beyond intense.

*"They won't believe me. They'll think it a ruse, some trick to pull their forces into a trap, but I don't have a choice. I will send them everything I have seen. This threatens us all,"* he thought, as he touched each hate-filled mind and opened his thoughts.