PROLOGUE

On the Edge of Everywhere . . .

and Nowhere

*"Greetings, Old One. I will miss the passing of your species. There are so few of you left. The last few billion years have been exciting because of the presence of your kind,"* Mash NeRa NaGo thought, as it approached the edge of realspace.

NaGo had no form, shape, or substance. Yet, it had every form, shape, and substance that had ever existed. It simply was as it had always been . . . eternal.

*"Greetings, NaGo. I felt it appropriate that we should meet before you are defeated,"* the Eldest of the Old Ones replied, as he remained behind the barrier. The power of eternity was before him. Caution was paramount.

NaGo's intellect rippled with amusement, relishing the audacity of the old foe.

*"You reference my defeat. An interesting concept, Old One. Defeat . . . I have never felt its touch. Nor, will I ever. Such an abstract thing is . . . inconceivable to me. As always, you overestimate the strength of your position. I have preserved your life force out of amusement, nothing more. You have provided stimulation to my boring reality. Having no worthy foe had become tedious. But . . . I have grown weary of your meddling. My First Kytun rages at your interference. I feel her pain as her children die. Your time and my patience have passed. These young creations of yours within realspace have been fascinating, but now they have become troublesome to me,"* NaGo thought, and bent its mind to destroy the soul who dared to resist the will of one who had existed before time was a concept.

*"A blind threat, NaGo. You cannot pass through the barrier. It still stands for a reason. Another power bars the way. You are not alone in infinity. Existence has balance. Your arrogance will lead to your demise,"* the Eldest of the Old replied, and slipped away, deeper into realspace . . .

NaGo felt the substance of his being shudder as if amused or afraid. He found both sensations stimulating.

*"Another? If another power existed, I would know. Balance? An odious concept unworthy of my consideration. And yet, my demise, implying my lack of existence. What a fascinating thought. As if such a thing could happen to me. And, another power, a balance to existence. More nonsense! Impossible concepts, nothing more. Yet, this barrier does exist, and I cannot pass through it. How curious! How wonderful this game has been! Yes, Old One, I will miss you when you and all your kind are gone,"* NaGo thought, as its essence slipped away from the realspace barrier, and considered its options.

CHAPTER 1

The Morning Star

In orbit above Krisendom

Two days after the Death of the Great Betrayer

"Boss, how do you feel?" Fultoon asked, as MacLynn groaned and settled into his command chair just above and behind the sturdy Dwarv's position on the bridge of the *Morning Star*.

"Like I just had my ass kicked. I must be getting old," MacLynn said, then chuckled at his own joke.

Twenty centuries had passed since his birth on Old Terra, and at this time, every century felt like a massive weight on his shoulders.

"How long to reach transition after we break orbit?" MacLynn asked, as he activated his seat restraints and began scanning the console before him.

"Twenty-eight minutes. I'm bringing the realspace drives online now. Myra is in the reclusium. She isn't happy to be leaving, but she has Arcus in her mind. She's locked in!" Fultoon said, his eyes scanning various system parameters.

"She has unfinished family business. She settled things with her mother. But JoNay, that's another matter," MacLynn said, his mind still filled with memories of the battle in the monastery with the Great Betrayer and his demon allies.

"Boss, is he really dead?" Fultoon asked, as he eased the *Morning Star* out of orbit and began the gradual acceleration to transition velocity.

"How did you know I was . . ."

"We've been together over 40 years. I may not be a mind-reading Serentii, but I can usually tell what you're thinking."

"Bethan Dubonnet is dead. He has to be! There was nothing left but ash and a few charred bones. Immortals are hard to kill, but . . . yes, he's dead. Gracian will do as I asked. The monastery will be leveled and sealed."

"Frack, I hope you're right. That bastard caused a lot of pain and destruction. The Emperor . . . Stonevalt . . . the attacks on the Empress," Fultoon said, as the ship shuddered while passing 0.1 light speed.

"Frack! Minor adjustment, Boss. There . . . she's smooth as silk."

MacLynn said nothing. His mind had drifted elsewhere, to their next objective.

*"She's only a child . . . this . . . Alycean Marr. So far away. Why am I going after her? The Kytun are starting their invasion of the galaxy. Arcus is the first place they will strike. How long to get there? A year? Maybe two? I don't know. This makes no sense. The planet is doomed. She's doomed. Yet, I feel compelled to save her. Why? She's a child. What use is she to me . . . to the Plan? So many tasks are in motion now. I feel like I'm abandoning the others. Is this trip a mistake?"*

"Time to transition?" MacLynn asked, knowing he had requested the same information scant minutes before.

"Twenty-five minutes. I could use a mug of Southington ale, just to steady my nerves," Fultoon replied, sensing this trip would be a difficult one.

"You always want a mug of ale. Focus . . . my friend. Get us to darkspace. We have to reach this girl," MacLynn said, as Fultoon pivoted and stared, their eyes locked.

"Aye! The ale always calls me. But, for now, I'll focus on business. It's a long trip, Boss. With the currents of darkspace as they are, this will take a year, maybe two . . . maybe three if our luck is bad. No way Myra makes it in one jump."

. . . .

Myra

22 minutes later

*"The journey has started. Transition nears, but JoNay is reaching out for me. I can feel her. She wants to link. She knows I have been with mother. She is angry and confused. What do I tell her? Tell her I have forgiven our mother for murdering our father? That mother was a victim? But part of mother was not the victim. I sensed that when we linked. She used to be arrogant and self-centered. Part of her agreed with the Great Betrayer. She wanted Serentii to rule the Empire. That left her mind open to his words, his control. Then she was trapped. Would she have killed father without being influenced? I do not think she would have. She loved him despite their differences. I forgave her, but I still have my doubts. She was hiding something from me. If we link, JoNay will sense that. She and Father were so close. She is so volatile, always has been. Mother is haunted by what she did. But, JoNay . . . if she and mother ever meet . . ."*

"Myra! Two minutes! Then I'm transferring control of the ship to you. The darkspace drives are yours after we transition!" Fultoon said over the comm, as the ship approached 0.666 the speed of light. The point at which the barrier between realspace and darkspace broke down.

*"I love you, JoNay!"* Myra thought, sent that heartfelt message, and broke the partial link with her sister just as the *Morning Star* began transitioning into darkspace.

"I have control of the ship, Fultoon," she said, as realspace disappeared and was replaced by the chaotic beauty of darkspace.

. . . .

JoNay

She sat in the reclusium on *Big Iron* as it orbited above a fixed point on Adytum. She had raised the couch of the Astrologus into the bubble that extended outside the ship. All around her lay the delicate beauty of realspace, but her mind was focused on her sister, so many light years away.

*"She never let the link solidify. Then she said she loved me and severed the connection. She was . . . what? Sad? No! She was afraid and sad. Of what?"* JoNay asked herself, as she replayed the memory of her sister's partial link with her.

*"Frack . . . she was afraid of me. Why? I would never hurt her,"* she thought, then glimpsed a faint memory of another face. A face that made the hair on the back of her neck rise. A face that made her scream. A scream that echoed across the reclusium . . . across the galaxy.

CHAPTER 2

The Emperor's Plan and Other Things

3 years later

The Morning Star

"Boss! Quit yelling at me! Myra doesn't have a choice. We have to leave darkspace. The currents are schlat! Nothing leads us north! It's all a tangled mess," Fultoon said, as he removed the darkspace navigation helmet, lay it on his console, and began massaging his temples.

"This is what . . . 38 . . . 39 jumps? We're getting nowhere!" MacLynn yelled, as he released his restraints, rose from his chair, and began pacing across the bridge of the *Morning Star*.

"Thirty-six! Boss, by my calculations we're half-way to Arcus, and we're running out of provisions again. I need a break. Myra definitely needs one. In the last three years we've spent maybe six weeks in realspace, less than a month off this ship. Most important, we need a shipyard. I can't do maintenance on the darkspace drives while they're running, and I need parts."

"Excuses! Frackin' excuses! We have to reach her, Toon! Every fiber in my body tells me she's in danger. We lose her, and we may lose everything!"

"And if the ship falls apart, we're stuck in the middle of nowhere. Then, this Alycean Marr is still on her own, and we're fracked!" Fultoon shouted.

"Schlat! Three years wandering through darkspace. What's happening to the Plan? I should be on Old Terra or Adytum! Every time we drop out of darkspace the news gets worse, or . . . there's no news at all. The closer we get to Arcus, the less information we get. The north has grown dark, as if it didn't exist any longer."

"Boss, the Plan is in motion. Myra contacted JoNay every time we dropped back into realspace. Omat is building the ship. Fortus is still recruiting. Gracian is training her recruits, and the Empress is building up her forces. You started all this. It's what the Emperor wanted you to do. You keep saying this girl is important. I believe you. I don't understand why she's important. But if you say so, that's good enough for me. We find this child. Of course, it's going to take a while . . . and the ship needs maintenance . . ."

"You and your frakin' maintenance. Put that frakin' helmet back on, and tell Myra to find a system to your liking," MacLynn said, his mind still fuming, wondering what was happening elsewhere.

. . . .

Big Iron

In orbit above Adytum

"To be honest, I thought you were crazed the first time I saw your plan for this ship," Ruthana said, as she stood beside Omat and gazed at the massive hull that filled over a third of the cavernous construction bay on *Big Iron*.

"Not the first time I've heard that," Omat said, as he tapped the ashes from his pipe and reloaded the succulent weed that had arrived on a recent shipment.

"How long until she's complete?" she asked.

"Two years, at least. There have been complications. I knew there would be. With the first ship there are always things you didn't anticipate," he said.

"*Or the Emperor never showed you,"* he thought, as he lit his pipe, and stared at the wonderous vessel taking form before him.

. . . .

Krisendom

"Mother, how many more can we take? All we do is train these children, bring them to maturity, and place them in these capsules. We've built three new monasteries. What else can we do? The more time we dedicate to training and converting them, the more our own combat skills are eroding," said Senior Sister Caley Sarason, as they watched the latest batch of new recruits materialize on the plain before them.

"Be grateful, Sister. Without the assistance of Jenna Wasullen, none of this would have been possible. How long do we take to train a sister from initiate to novice?" Mother Superior Gracian Anthrolopus asked.

"If she survives, and has determination and talent, 10 years."

"Ten years, and she is only a novice. And how long until full sisterhood?"

"Another ten years, on average."

"Also correct. Twenty years. We have now accomplished the same thing in one year."

"Mother! You're comparing these . . . children to us?"

"After one year they are fully grown and trained warriors ready to defend the galaxy. That is what I'm saying. Their minds have fought endless battles. Their muscles are stimulated. The best have been chosen for leadership positions."

"But, Mother, it's all a simulation. None of it's real. Wasullen created this environment. No blood is shed."

"True, they have no visible scars. But to them, every day is a challenge. They are exposed to a wide variety of combat situations. They can fail."

"But, none of them die!"

"Not true. They can die if they make incorrect decisions."

"Mother . . ."

"Yes, I know. Then they are brought back to life and run the scenario again. I talked to Wasullen about that. They feel physical pain when they are wounded or killed in a scenario, but then they wake up and are brought back to the beginning. I fear they will begin thinking of themselves as immortal."

"Death of a sister is a great loss. Eleven were lost fighting . . . that thing in the old monastery."

"Victory comes at a price. These warriors we are creating will come to realize that. As for the process, it was the only way to create massive numbers of trained warriors in a brief time. How they perform when it's real, when they see their comrades torn apart by the Kytun, only time will tell."

"Yes, Mother," Sister Sarason said, understanding the need and the risk.

"Sister Sarason, this is the 3rd shipment of trainees Fortus has sent us. Two have been processed and transferred back to *Maximus Nine*. Eighty-seven percent have survived the conversion and training. Praise the Emperor and his daughter for our success. We have created 50,000 warriors, enough to fill the first of Omat's new ships. I understand the first vessel will be named *Broadhead.* As for our own martial skills*,* time will preserve them for our use,*"* Graciansaid, as she acknowledged a signal sent from *Maximus Nine* orbiting far above them.

*"They depart with 25,000 new warriors in stasis. In six months, another shipment of new trainees will arrive. Sister Sarason is correct. How will we maintain this pace?"* she asked herself, as she signaled for sisters assigned to indoctrination to proceed toward the latest batch of shocked arrivals.

*"My sisters will not be gentle. If they were, it would be a disservice to these children and the parents who have sacrificed them to the survival of the galaxy,"* Gracian thought, as the harsh indoctrination process began.

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Maximus Nine

In orbit above Krisendom

"Captain Meyz, please take us out of orbit. Our goal is Alatrix 4, in the Gratian system. Transfer the coordinates to the reclusium," Fortus Shar said, already dreading the stress of recruiting in a new planetary system.

"As you wish. Mistress Blaknar is in position in the reclusium. Transferring coordinates now. Lieutenant Je'sha, leave orbit. Proceed to transition. Notify me when the Astrologus is ready to assume control," Captain Meyz said, as she settled back into her command chair and secured the restraints.

"Not bad. Another delivery to Krisendom. We pick up another batch of new warriors, and no new attacks. Our luck is holding. This jump should take less than eight days," Lieutenant Je'sha said, as she completed the data transfer to the reclusium. Their goal was less than 20 light years away.

"Delivered and refilled. This is nothing but a transport ship making routine deliveries of meat," Stinger said, and turned away, the disgust in his voice more than obvious.

"And what the frack did you think we were doing? You've seen what's coming. You got a better idea?" Dana Varge asked, as she grabbed him by the shoulder.

"These children don't know what they've agreed to. And these so-called warriors they'll become have no idea what they'll be fighting," he said, as he slapped her hand away.

"They'll learn. The sisters know. They'll train them."

"Easy words for someone who's never seen a Kytun, let alone fought one. Fearless! That's how you see yourself. Clueless, more like. Bare your claws, Dana! Theirs are bigger! They're quicker! They're stronger! They fear nothing . . . absolutely nothing!" Stinger said, as he walked from the bridge while shaking his head.

"Stinger!" Dana shouted.

"Leave him alone. His past still haunts him and refuses to release his soul. He identifies with these children. He's seen the nightmare they'll experience one day," Fortus said.

"Release his soul! Soul is an old term. I never took you for the religious type," Dana said, as she turned her attention to Fortus.

"Religious? No. I perceive religion as an invention of the unknowing, or perhaps, those seeking answers to the unknowable. That doesn't mean there isn't a source of our creation. None of this is an accident. It all has a purpose. At least, that's what I believe."

"A purpose? What purpose? You're telling me that all the suffering, injustice, and death I've seen in this galaxy have some purpose? Pray, tell me the purpose of a planet's annihilation. Tell me why billions have to die because one person decides they are no longer useful! Tell me why we follow this plan!" Dana said, then turned away, despising her own weakness.

"Valid questions. Valid doubts. MacLynn once told me we were all pieces on a chaka board. Just pieces in a never-ending game. I thought it was a metaphor. He never struck me as a deep thinker . . . a philosopher. But, how do you live for almost 2000 years and not become introspective?" Fortus asked, smiled at her, and walked away.

"What the frack is that supposed to mean?" she asked, as she followed him and left the bridge.

Fortus was never alone. Either Dana or Stinger were always nearby, sometimes both. They knew he was the key to the Plan, or so they thought . . .

The bridge crew of the *Maximus Nine* watched as Fortus and his bodyguards departed, leaving them to their duties.

"I agree with Stinger. I can't even look at these children anymore. If I do, then I can't sleep. I keep seeing their young faces. Most of them are just scared. A few seem determined. I know Fortus has been in their heads and shown them things, explained why they have to leave their families, but . . ." Lieutenant Bakre began, then sighed and turned his focus back to the massive ship as it slowly accelerated toward transition.

"Lieutenant, a couple of years ago I had a long conversation with Fortus about them. I asked him how they were going to convert these children into warriors in just a few years. He told me about a Galactic Marine named Jenna Wasullen. She's supposed to be a genius. She developed an accelerated process for stimulating human growth and development. This process is why Galactic Marines are so much larger than most humans. They're genetically modified," Captain Meyz said, as she stood beside her First Officer, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I've heard rumors of that, but these are children. I don't have a family, but . . . when I see their young faces . . ."

"I know. It seems immoral, almost cruel."

"Yes."

"They weren't kidnapped. Their parents weren't forced to give them up."

"But Fortus persuaded them."

"But he didn't force them. He did the same with us, and gave us a choice. We all know what's coming. We've seen what the Kytun will do to a planet filled with life. They'll strip it bare and consume every living thing."

"Some of these children are only ten. None of them are older than 13!"

"They have to be young for the growth acceleration process to work. If they have reached puberty, the process is difficult, the fatality rate much higher. Galactic Marines use a different process. They want them young, but older . . . 15 or 16. Still developing, but mature enough for the type of testing they prefer. Three years ago, Tosh Jonriel told me their death rate is over 50 percent, and that's just the conversion. The training takes years, and kills many more."

"I'm with Marsh. I feel like we're hauling bovine, and I'm guiding this ship to a slaughterhouse," said Lieutenant Je'sha, the pilot of the *Maximus Nine*.

"Neither one of you has to stay aboard. I can find a new first officer and a pilot. The choice is yours," said Capt. Meyz.

"We know too much. MacLynn would space us both," said Lieutenant Je'sha, and glanced at Lieutenant Bakre.

"MacLynn's not here. This is my ship. I'm Captain. I won't force anyone to stay aboard. You're senior officers. Keep your doubts to yourselves. What I won't allow is an insurrection. Try that, and I'll space you myself. As for now, maintain acceleration and course for transition."

"Captain, we're loyal to the mission. It's just these children. It just . . ."

"I know, Lieutenant Bakre. I used to have children of my own. Two. A boy and a girl. Both died of a virus while I was away. Lost my husband, too. That was years go . . ."

"Captain, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . ."

"Focus on the mission, Lieutenant Bakre! Time to transition, Lieutenant Je'sha?"

"Aye, Captain! The mission!"

"Sixty-nine minutes, Captain!"

They conversed no more as *Maximus Nine* lumbered away from Krisendom.

. . . .

Mashana Blaknar

She sat erect on the Astrologus' chair, still connecting herself to the life support system that would maintain her life while she guided *Maximus Nine* through darkspace for weeks or even months.

*"No forgiveness in that one. Her hatred is palpable, even across 1000 light years. She will not listen to me. Every time I try to link, she breaks contact. Myra says I should leave her alone. She is probably correct. I treated JoNay like a stray canid during winter who wandered by looking for comfort. My own child, and I treated her like a piece of trash. Then, I killed her father. No! I murdered him. Tafur, husband . . . I cannot undo what I have done. I can tell myself I was forced to kill you by . . . him. But part of me wanted to be free of you. I was a fool. Now I have lost everything. Myra has forgiven me, but we will never be close. JoNay . . . my flavus child . . . she will kill me if we ever meet. Tafur, you always had time for her. She loved tending your orchids. Plants . . . dirt! What self-respecting Astrologus buries their hands in dirt? That is what I always thought. I thought it demeaned you. All I was doing was demeaning myself. What an arrogant bitch I was. Not even Myra knows what happened after you died. Tafur . . . you disappeared. I told the local Seeker you left and never returned. I had your ashes mixed with your beloved plants,"* Mashana thought, and winced at the pain in her head.

The headaches had returned as of late. They had disappeared after the death of the Great Betrayer on Krisendom.

"Mistress Blaknar, are you prepared to accept control of the ship? We'll reach transition velocity in 18 minutes," said Capt. Meyz over their comm link.

"I will be prepared, Captain," she replied, as her chair reclined and began rising toward the transsteel dome.

*"The headache will disappear once I am under the control of the life support system. It is a nuisance brought about by worry, nothing more,"* she thought, as she reached the highest point in the reclusium and gazed out upon realspace.

*"So bland in comparison. Soon, I'll be immersed in the cascading beauty of darkspace. I will become this massive ship wallowing through chaotic currents of color and dodging streams of darkspace demons. I will be alive. I will be home! The one place I can be at peace,"* she thought, as her conscious mind began to fade into the background.