FORTUS SHAR

Prologue

Past and Present

Darkspace was immeasurably vast, and old beyond human understanding. It had existed for trillions of millennia, long before an accidental spark created the tiny universe known to humans as realspace. This new universe filled with billions of star-lit galaxies was nothing more than an odd point of light in the infinite darkness of true reality.

Mash NeRa NaGo was ancient long before the creation of realspace. NaGo had always been and would always be. When NaGo sensed a flicker in the darkness as realspace became a new reality, NaGo became curious. It amused NaGo to see something new. Nothing had ever been new. All that was had always been. That was the way of things.

NaGo had tried to consume this new place, so filled with delight and energy. But, NaGo had found this new place protected. It existed inside, but separate from darkspace. NaGo's vast intellect touched this new experience, and sensed something familiar.

"Ahh, the Old Ones! A hundred billion years since they retreated into their crevice of existence. Now, I find they still persist, ever plotting, ever refusing to admit defeat. They have created a new place and seek to keep it from me, protected from me. We shall see," NaGo said, and with a creative thought, merged inorganic and organic matter. Within this new place, NaGo planted a seed, and gave it life.

"My creation . . . I give you will and purpose. Consume this abomination created by the Old Ones. Consume every speck of life, every bit of sentient existence. Then, when your mission is complete, you will consume yourself, and things will be as they have always been," NaGo said, cast forth the first creature, and called it Kytun.

And so, it began. The first Kytun was placed on the edge of realspace. It possessed the ability to pass from darkspace into realspace. It hungered for the warmth and endless nourishment it sensed in the delicate spiral islands floating in the darkness. It grew stronger, and larger, then felt life stir within it, and birthed more of its kind . . . many more . . . billions more. The first Kytun became known as Dautra NaGo, Kytun Great Mother. She birthed new Great Mothers, each in the image of the first. Each created her own nest. Each gave birth to billions of Kytun and more mothers. Ages passed. Stars grew ancient and died. The Kytun became an unstoppable force as each galaxy they entered was stripped of life and grew silent.

Mash NeRa NaGo was content. The Old Ones could not stop the creation. The Kytun moved on, found a new feeding place filled with sentient life. NaGo sensed a thought, a bright speck of intellect, and was curious. This one was as bright as a star, knew of the approaching Kytun, and thought to learn of NaGo. A brief second of contact was allowed before the speck was cast aside.

"This one was different, powerful in its own way. It sensed the existence of NaGo. Curious . . . this one was betrayed by his own spawn. The Old Ones know of him. They will make another attempt at resistance. They are persistent and amusing. Such brief little lives. 'Old Ones' . . . a mere billion years, and they wither away into nothing. There are so few of them left. NaGo will miss them."

And so, NaGo turned away, dismissing the tiny speck who referred to himself as the Emperor. The Old Ones had tried this ploy before and failed. They always failed . . .

CHAPTER 1

Connell MacLynn

He gasped, a scant breath, just enough to jar his mind into wakefulness. Then he swallowed and coughed. His mouth was as dry as the sands of Adytum.

*"We plunged . . . inward . . . toward the red hole. I felt stretched . . . torn apart . . . I thought we were dead,"* he thought, as he shuddered, and felt life reentering his lungs, as if for the first time in centuries.

His eyes opened, but his vision was blurred. He wiped the sweat from his face, barely recognizing the touch of his own calloused hands. Another touch, a slap, then another . . . then he screamed . . . a howl of defiance, rage, and life, echoing across time and space.

He slapped his chest, releasing his chair's restraints, and stood on shaking legs. The screams and bellows continued as Connell MacLynn fought through death and retrieved his life. He stepped away, stumbled, overwhelmed with dizziness, fell to his hands and knees, and hit himself again. The pain reminded him he was alive.

He tried to focus, but all he saw was fabricated metal, the deck plate of his ship . . . the *Morning Star.* He screamed again, his defiance echoing throughout his ship . . . as the *Morning Star* transitioned into realspace . . .

CHAPTER 2

Verdantum

4th Planet of Theta 6

Butterfly Cluster

Galactic South

Fortus Shar sat on the side of the hill with a warm fire crackling at his back. In the distance, the local sun had slid below the mountainous horizon only moments before. Distant stars began to twinkle above the conifers, forming unfamiliar constellations. His breath frosted as a slight breeze came in from the north.

"The scent of pine . . . what an incredibly beautiful smell, so filled with life," he whispered, sensing the endless forest of conifers surrounding him.

"Fortus, you know they're waiting on the other side of the hill. The valley is packed. There must be 5,000, maybe more," Dana Varge said, as she sat beside Fortus and admired the view.

"I thought you hated the open sky. This is about as open as it gets," he said, as he offered her the remainder of his meal.

"Boradon! Not to your liking?" she asked, as she accepted a plate with two skewers of plump and well-seasoned meat. The aroma made her mouth water.

"I ate the tubers and the shrooms. Once, in my past, I lived amongst cannibals. That cured me of any desire for meat," he said, as he continued to stare at the emerging stars above him.

"At least you weren't on their menu," she said, as she slid the first two pieces of succulent, seared flesh into her mouth and sighed.

"I was a little too stringy for their taste. My companions weren't as fortunate. My ability as a psyker has saved my life on more than one occasion. That was long before you and Stinger rescued me. Then . . . I estimated I only had a few days left to live in the household of Primo Bonsalvanio. My abilities had waned. He had grown tired of my presence."

"That man was a piece of schlat! From what I've seen over the last few months, your 'powers of persuasion' work just fine. My guess, you had grown tired of living," she said, as she finished the first skewer, threw it aside, and started on the second.

"Perhaps you're correct. Perhaps I had grown tired of living . . . and not for the first time. I lacked purpose. Just surviving no longer mattered to me."

"My! Aren't you the consummate philosopher. 'Life without purpose has no meaning!' Have you ever considered that life is the purpose? Survival is the meaning?" Dana asked, as she threw the second empty skewer aside and pulled the stopper from a flask of wine strung across one shoulder.

"The Imperial experiment becomes the intellectual. Perhaps they bred you for more than your fighting ability," Fortus said, instantly regretting the harshness of his words.

She said nothing as she continued to study the constellations emerging from the darkening sky above. The flask of wine at her lips began to drain.

"Dana . . . I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . ."

"Is that all you think I am, a biomechanical Imperial experiment?" she asked, her thirst sated for the moment.

"Again, my apologies. That was unkind. I've endured so much cruelty in my life that I try not to inflict it on others. When amongst the people here I'm careful of every word, every tonal inflection. There is so much at stake. We have to have their cooperation. It's tiring. You and Stinger are the only ones I don't have to be careful with. I hope you know by now . . . I consider you both my friends, and I've had very few."

"As I remember, I shattered your jaw soon after we met," Dana said, as she passed him the wine.

"And that was after I saved your life," Fortus said, as he sampled the wine, and handed the skin back to her.

"It was Stinger's fault. He always puts me in an ill mood," she said, as she belched, stoppered the wine, and lay back on the hillside.

The sound of the crowd drifted over the hill, reminding them of their purpose in the remote area.

"What are you going to say to them?" she asked, as she heard footsteps approaching from above and rose to her elbows.

"Oh, he'll tell them the usual. Our survival depends on all of you contributing to the war! This is how your children survive the coming onslaught of the Kytun!" Stinger said, as he appeared on Fortus' right and slumped onto the hill beside Dana, and clapped her on the back.

"In other words, the usual bovine schlat he always tells these primitive hill people," Stinger said, as he unslung his own wineskin, removed the stopper, and took a long swig.

"Primitive people! Says the farmer!" Dana said, and laughed as she shoved him, and found her wine once more.

Stinger nodded in respect, then snapped his fingers as a long dagger appeared in the hand closest to her.

Dana laughed, and grabbed his wine before he could object or react.

"Bitch! I should . . ."

"Should what?" she asked, as a trio of six-inch adamithrium claws slid from her closed fist.

"My friends . . . it's not 'bovine schlat'. We have to recruit them into the Plan. You both know that," Fortus said, as he turned and stared at Stinger, then Dana.

"What I know is that . . . in principle, we've recruited over 25,000 of their children and haven't established a process for training them. How long do you think their parents will abide by their agreements if we don't produce any proof of what we've claimed?" Stinger asked.

"MacLynn will come. He promised. The Empress will provide everything we need. The ships, the equipment, the facilities . . . everything!" Fortus said, as he rose to his feet, staring at Dana and Stinger, as if daring them to object.

He turned and began walking up the hill toward the people waiting for him in the valley on the other side . . .

CHAPTER 3

Old Terra

Deep below the Imperial Palace

The Great Betrayer

"Come, walk with me, Jakar. You said you had news," the shadowy figure said, as he turned and walked further into the darkness, his voice echoing in the vast cavern.

The air was cold, even for a place that hadn't seen sunlight for millions of years. Massive beasts had walked the surface of Old Terra when this valley was formed by a raging river. Time had buried the valley, then carved it anew as water flowed underground and endless millennia passed.

"Master, there are issues . . . problems. We have sensed the presence of MacLynn, the Pretorian. He . . . isn't dead!" Thom Jakar said, as he turned and followed the Great Betrayer into the shadows.

"The bastard is more difficult to kill than my father. I wonder if I'm going to have to handle this personally?"

"Master, please, no! The danger! That butcher has evaded us for centuries. We have thousands of killers at our disposal!" Jakar said, as he clutched at the black robe of his master, who towered above him in the darkness.

"Jakar . . . I'm well aware of MacLynn's capabilities. And . . . if you ever touch me again, I will send your soul to my allies in darkspace. They would find you quite delicious," he replied, then continued to walk, knowing Jakar had released his grip on his robe.

"But . . . the Pretorian, my Master. What do we do about him?" Jakar asked, as they continued walking through the deepest passages beneath the Imperial fortress on Old Terra.

"For now, nothing. He is lost in the depths of space and a problem for the future. You will return to your duties in the palace. The Empress is of more concern. She has lost most of her precious contact with the galaxy. She feels helpless. That will make her desperate. The Consectorum manages the affairs of the Empire. You are Summus Princeps of the Consectorum. Do your duty. Talk to her. Advise her. Inform me of all her actions and decisions. And . . . there are two other issues I want you to address."

"Anything, my Master!"

"First, there is a planet . . . Adytum, in the Laskan System. MacLynn has friends there. I want them dead, but it needs to be done delicately. I want the planet and everything on it left intact. I may have need of it. Second, Verdantum, a small planet orbiting Theta 6. There is a prophet, Fortus Shar. He needs to die."

"Yes, Master," Jakar said, bowed, and asked no more questions.

. . . .

The Empress

*"Kytun inside realspace . . . inside my galaxy. How is that possible? Barely a year ago, Connell sat here beside me and swore it would be decades, at the least, before they began to penetrate the galaxy in force. Now, I find out a battle occurred with a nest ship somewhere far in the south, near some planet named Adytum. What am I to make of this? I'm nearly blind. Their presence blocks my visions. The wine of Sheppard is almost gone. Do I risk another glance, or should I save it? What should I do?"* Empress Alexandra Dubonnet asked herself, as she sat staring at the fireplace in her private quarters, perched high in the mountains on Old Terra.

There was a knock, in a certain code, then the creak of a door being opened.

"Empress, there is a visitor requesting audience," said Zeela Morain, as she entered the abode of her mistress and knelt.

Alexandra felt her pulse increase as she hoped for the arrival of Connell MacLynn.

"And who might this visitor be?" Alexandra asked, knowing the tone of her voice held a mild reproach at the lack of information.

"Pardon me, my Empress. It is Thom Jakar, Summus Princeps of the Consectorum."

"I'm aware of his title. What does he want?" she asked, disappointed.

"Pardon me, my Empress. He didn't confide the exact purpose of his visit," Zeela said, her bow deepening.

Alexandra reached for a glass of chilled wine, and drank deeply while thinking, *"The head of the Consectorum. He never comes without wanting something of me. Summus Princeps Jakar asking for my aid? His resources almost exceed mine. What can I give him that he doesn't already have? Long ago, Connell warned me about days like this. They start off so quietly, then explode in your face. Am I being paranoid, or is this one of those days?"* she asked herself.

"Zeela, please allow the Summus Princeps to enter. Ensure all sensors, recorders, and defensive systems are active."

"Of course, Empress!" Zeela replied, bowed, and backed out of the room.

*"I trust him like a chipped blade made of glass. He's flawed and self-serving, like all his bureaucratic kindred. I wonder what he wants this time?"* she thought, while refilling her glass.

Thom Jakar entered behind her, on her left. She ignored his presence, and continued to stare at the blazing fireplace before her. He paused on the edge of her peripheral vision, awaiting her permission to proceed any further.

"Come and sit with me, Jakar. I have always found the flames of a wood fire to be peaceful . . . cleansing . . . reassuring."

"I hesitate to disturb your tranquility, my Empress. But time is short. There is a rebellion afoot in the southern quadrant. It would seem that some are once again resisting Imperial authority. I need your permission to employ certain . . . assets, to quell this unseemly situation. In my humble opinion . . . this needs to be handled discretely, least we encourage more rebellion," he said, as he eased into the space beside her.

"A very logical conclusion, Summus Princeps. But, I have to wonder, why are our citizens rebelling in the south? And where in the south? We have given that quadrant peace from alien incursions for decades."

"A place of little significance, my Empress. A planet known as Adytum."

*"MacLynn was right. A quiet day turns chaotic. First, a report of a Kytun incursion near Adytum. Then the appearance of this schlat, reporting a rebellion near . . . Adytum. What am I to make of this . . . coincidence? Where lies the truth? I can see MacLynn's scarred face now, saying, 'Alexandra, there are no coincidences!' So, what is Jakar up to?"* she asked herself.

"And why are the people of Adytum rebelling against the Empire?" she asked, while studying the intonation of his words for clues as to his intent.

"Peace breeds complacency, my Empress. They take peace for granted and forget to whom they owe their tranquility. At such times, the Consectorum exists to remind them, to ensure their loyalty to your greatness . . . and the Empire," Jakar said, his head bowed, but his eyes never leaving her face, weighing every gesture.

Alexandra ignored him and continued to stare at the fire, her fingers thrumming on the table beside her.

Jakar stared at her fingers . . . wondering about her thoughts, and the meaning of such obvious tension.

*"She's suspicious, but she knows nothing. I sense fear. If I press the request, she'll succumb to my wishes."*

*"Adytum . . . Adytum . . . MacLynn told me of this place. A Galactic Marine lives there! She builds things. What was her name? Jenna . . . something? Why are the Kytun there? What does this schlat want with Adytum? What is happening? I have no facts, no details. They have isolated me, and the Kytun have blinded me. Both seek my destruction. Is there more to this than I know? What are my options? I could kill him where he sits. I probably should. But they would just replace him with another of the same heinous breed. I am trapped inside my own fortress. I need direct information. I need eyes I can trust,"* she thought, as she refilled her glass and drained it again, knowing he studied every motion she made.

"Empress, I beg your forgiveness, but I need an answer. Such cancerous insurrections spread if they're not burned out at the onset."

Alexandra turned and gave him her most imperious glare, informing him that his concerns were trivial to her.

"I find this conversation increasingly tedious. Come back in 30 days. I will consider your request at that time," she said, stalling for time, and turned back toward the fire, his presence no longer required.

"Empress, forgive my candor, but such matters can grow beyond our control if we do not act with . . ."

She moved quickly and snatched him from his chair, his feet dangling as she stared into his eyes and said, "Question my decision again, and I will remove your head myself and keep it as a souvenir," she said, and threw him toward the door.

Jakar rolled to his knees and glared at her for less than a second. Much information was exchanged in that brief exchange.

*"Fear, but not of me. He's failed in his mission, and he's more afraid of who sent him than he is of me. Curious! Who am I really fighting?"* she thought.

"I beg your forgiveness, Empress. Please forgive your humble servant," he said, as he remained on his knees and backed toward the slowly opening exit.

Tosh Jonriel, one of her personal Galactic Marine bodyguards, stood in the doorway staring down at the bureaucrat backing away from the Empress. He glanced at her, requesting instructions. A quick twitch of two of her fingers, and he stepped aside, allowing Jakar to slink from the room, his forehead dragging on the stone floor.

"Empress?" Tosh asked.

"Please escort our esteemed guest from my quarters. Our meeting has concluded," she said. Then signed for him to return to her immediately afterward.

He nodded, then closed the door a bit too quickly, slamming into the esteemed visitor as he exited the room.

"Forgive me, Summus Princeps. I trust you are not injured," Tosh said, as he helped Jakar to his feet.

Jakar's eyes were fuming, but he said nothing as he jerked his arm free, turned, rubbed the top of his head, adjusted his robes, left the meeting room of the Empress, and stormed down the hallway.

"The little weasel seemed irritated. I hope you didn't hurt him," said Sara Grange, another of the Empress' bodyguards, as she closed the door behind Jakar.

"It would give me great pleasure to slit his throat and watch his last gasp. I don't know why she tolerates the presence of such creatures," Tosh replied.

"Correct! You don't! And it's none of your frakin' business. He is a piece of schlat, but his family has served the Empire for 20 generations. That means something. How long have you served the Empire, eight years? And didn't she request your return after you disposed of her guest?" asked Zahir Moltief, oldest and most senior of her bodyguards, as he strolled in from a monitoring room where he had been observing and recording everything.

"Frack!" Tosh said, as he glared at Zahir, and rushed for the door leading back into her quarters.

"You're too hard on the boy," Sara said, as she stood beside Zahir.

"And you act like his mother!" Zahir replied, then jerked his head aside as an armored fist slid past his chin.

"You're getting slow," he said, and smiled.

"It was only a warning," she said, returned his smile and walked away.

. . . .

"Empress!" Tosh said, as he entered the room, knelt, and thumped his right fist against his chest armor in salute.

The Empress was pacing before the fire like a trapped animal. She turned, stared at Tosh, and pointed her finger at him.

"You are going on a trip as my personal representative."

"Empress, I'm not a diplomat or member of the Consectorum. I'm a Galactic Marine. My duty is at your side, protecting you!" he replied, shocked at the concept of leaving her.

"Your duty is to obey me. On your feet. We have much to discuss."

. . . .

Two hours later

"I am her senior protector. Why didn't she tell me of this? Where are you going?" Zahir asked, as Tosh stood in his quarters and began packing his weapons, equipment, and personal belongings into two large metal cases.

"I don't know, and I can't say. I'm sworn to secrecy. You know how she is. When her mind is made up, that's it. I'm obeying her orders. I'll be in orbit in an hour, and in darkspace in less than a day. And . . . I shouldn't have told you that much."

"Where are you going? At least tell me that."

Tosh looked at him and shook his head.

"Fah! I've been guarding her since before you were born! I would give my life for . . . no . . . you're right. If she wants me to know, she'll tell me. Tosh, watch your back out there. Darkspace is becoming more unstable, and getting decent information out of the far north of the galaxy, near impossible," Zahir said, as he clapped Tosh on the shoulder.

"I'm not heading north. I'm . . . frack!"

"Who do you think gave her the information about Adytum. Good luck. Be careful. Talk to no one about your mission."

"I won't, brother. I'll bring you back a Kytun head as a souvenir."

"You just try to keep your own head attached. I don't want to have to train another replacement," Zahir said, as they clasped hands.

. . . .

Thom Jakar

"You're sure about this? The Three Protectors are never far away from her. I've lived in this palace for over 60 years, and I've never heard of one of them leaving the planet. They're only replaced when one dies or becomes too old to serve," Thom Jakar said, as he rose from his desk and approached Bay Jakar, a cousin, Lord of South Am and one of his resident Consectorum agents within the palace.

"I'm positive! There was a teleport signal detected at 0304 hours from within the Empress' complex. The signal was scrambled to avoid detection, but we were able to triangulate the departure point. The arrival point was easier to ascertain . . . Bay 11, on Lower 42."

"Lower 42 is only used for incoming food shipments. Was there a vessel scheduled to depart close to that time?" Thom asked, as he stood before his cousin and stared into his eyes.

"There were two planetary departures within a 20-minute period. One was headed for the southern end of Frica. The other was scheduled for the central plains of North Am . . ."

"I detect a 'but' in your analysis."

"The second vessel left its approved course. It rendezvoused with a ship in high orbit above the southern pole."

Thom stared at his cousin, then turned and glanced out a portal that granted him a view of the peaks that descended row upon row to the north.

"Interesting. No ship within half a light year of Old Terra is authorized to deviate from a previously approved travel path. They would be intercepted and destroyed. What happened when they changed course?"

"Nothing! No warning, no caution, and certainly no intercept," Bay said, as he handed the Summus Princeps a data slate will all the information.

He glanced at the data, then tossed the slate onto a nearby table.

"Only she could authorize this. Has the receiving ship departed?"

"Ten minutes after docking. Rapid ascent toward transition distance. They are definitely headed for darkspace."

"Bay, find the ship that departed Lower 42. Question the pilot and the crew. Find everything you can about the outgoing vessel they travelled to. Who owns it? Who pays for its maintenance? If they're going to darkspace, they have an Astrologus. Where was the ship headed? Contact our friends amongst the Serentii, and find out what they know. Make sure they're aware that the request for information comes from me."

"Yes, cousin!" Bay replied, bowed, and prepared to leave.

"Agent Jakar, one more piece of advice. Over 20 generations of our bloodline have served in the Imperial palace. Our great grandsires fought together during the palace rebellion over 200 years ago. We are family. But if you ever address me as 'cousin' again, I will have you inserted into a bio grinder. With care . . . I could keep you alive and screaming until it reaches your hips," Thom Jakar said, and began caressing one of the many strings of black pearls that hung around his neck. Every pearl represented an individual that had come under his personal care. The black pearls of Thom Jakar were infamous within the Old Terran system.

"My apologies, Summus Princeps!" Bay said, deepened his bow, and backed out of the room.

When the door slowly closed, Thom smiled, imagining his cousin screaming in agony.

"Don't fail me, cousin. Don't ever fail me," he whispered, as his fingertips slid from pearl to pearl, each one a vivid and pleasurable memory.