CHAPTER 1

Seren Secundus

(Homeworld of the Serentii)

"Mashana, they are too young. Why did you arrange this without consulting me?" Tafur Blaknar asked, as he and his wife stood on a balcony overlooking the rolling hills behind their home. Both wore protective shields over their sensitive eyes.

The early morning sun was on their right. Tall conifers cast shadows across the deep blue grass that rippled like the surface of an ocean.

"Can you smell it? Rain is coming. And the northern horizon is dark. We are going to have a storm today," Mashana replied, as she slipped her hand from his grasp and walked away.

"Answer me! They are only 18 years old. Why did you arrange a mission so far away?" Tafur asked, as he followed his wife back into the house.

"Because of you. You are too protective! They are not children anymore. When I was their age, I had already guided a dozen vessels through darkspace . . . so had you," she replied, as she turned and faced her husband.

"But a private ship needing a replacement Astrologus for one who died mysteriously in darkspace? Yes! I did my own inquiry. The shielding failed! Almost nothing is known about the owner of this vessel."

"We do not get to pick and choose our assignments. You know that. I submitted Myra's name. She was assigned by the Office of the Principatus. We are fortunate they allowed JoNay to accompany her. They both need to learn independence. If you had your way, they would never leave the planet. You would keep them in your arboretum tending your orchids. Myra is true Serentii, a purebred like us. She is a born navigator! Her scores at the academy were the highest they have seen in decades. Her future lies in the stars . . . in darkspace, serving our people. JoNay . . . well . . . she will struggle as she always has. Perhaps she can serve Myra in some capacity."

"Serve? JoNay is her twin sister, not her servant! She has performed well in her classes. She . . ."

"Classes? She is now AlNeegan, a secretive caste of . . ."

"JoNay is our daughter, no different than Myra. We love them both equally!"

Mashana held her tongue and turned away as she raised the hood of her pure white robe.

"The rain will come early. I have business in the city. Say goodbye to them both for me."

"They leave in less than an hour. You cannot stay and say goodbye? We do not know how long they will be gone. It could be years."

"Myra is . . . they . . . are Serentii. They will understand. I have to go," Mashana said, as she pulled the hood of her pure white robe over her head and walked away.

. . . .

"They were arguing again," Myra said, as she walked into JoNay's room.

"They always argue. They're both happier when they're apart. Mother did this for a reason. After we are gone, she will break the bond for good," JoNay replied, as she finished packing a large case with the last of her clothing.

"I do not believe that."

"Believe what you want. She's never happy when she's here. Which is not very often. What's your first memory of her? Mine is when we were ten. She came back from a long mission. We were all eating one evening and she just walked into the room. She kissed you on both cheeks and glared at me like I was a stray beast who had crept into the house."

"JoNay, that is not true. She loves you!"

"No, she loves you and tolerates my presence. I'm surprised I wasn't discarded at birth."

"JoNay, there is nothing wrong with you. Serentii do not 'discard' their children. It is not our way. Every child is a gift!"

"Yes, that's what they teach us. We're all Serentii, all citizens of the Greater Good. Stand beside me, sister! What do you see in the mirror? Are we equals?" JoNay asked, as she pulled her taller sister beside her.

"JoNay, you are my twin. I love you. We are not identical, but we are both . . ."

"Not identical? Really? Look in the mirror. Let's see . . . you're six-foot-four. I'm five-foot-nine. You are a classic, hairless, purebred Serentii with flawless alabaster skin and glistening black eyes. You speak like a purebred. Your diction is always crisp and perfect. You never lose your temper. I'm . . . well, I'm classic flavus! I have a volatile temper that has earned me numerous mental and physical beatings by my instructors. My skin is a disgusting shade of yellow. I have little green spots all over my body. My eyes look like an offworlder. They're white with a big green circle in the center with an iris that looks like a three-bladed propulsor from an ancient sky craft. Look at my lips. Why can't they at least be yellow like the rest of me? No, they have to flush a hideous shade of pink! I'll be glad to leave this planet. Maybe I can find some place where people won't stare at me!" JoNay shouted, as she returned to her packing.

"JoNay . . ."

"Have you finished packing yet? You're always late. But then again, people will wait for you. You're a purebred. If I'm late I get left behind!"

"The conveyance arrives in 30 minutes. I will meet you downstairs. Father will want to say goodbye. This is going to be hard on him. He will miss you," Myra said, as she left her sister's room.

*"Why do I always do that? Seven years of training as AlNeegan and I still lose my temper as soon as I enter this house. At least there I'm among equals. We're all flavus . . . flawed. The only thing that matters are our skills,"* JoNay thought, as she opened the smaller of her two cases, the one containing her weapons and her skintight suit of armor.

*"When I'm in my armor with daggers in my hands, then I feel normal,"* she thought, as she caressed the smooth surface of her nanotube armor.

She turned as there was a knock on the door.

"Father . . . how . . . how are the orchids today? Isn't there a showing at the Complex soon?" JoNay asked, as her father stepped into the room.

He was tall and thin like all purebred male Serentii. At six-foot-ten he towered over her. His white face was angular and rail thin. His black eyes glistened in the morning sun streaming through the window behind her. He wore a loose-fitting gray robe, the one he wore for gardening.

"You've been outside again without covering your head. Your skin is pink. You'll burn," JoNay said, as she hugged her father and rested her head against his chest.

"My little flavus. Always trying to take care of me," he said, as he kissed the top of her head.

He was the only one who could call her flavus without her temper exploding. To him it was a term of endearment.

"Somebody has to. You'll wind up with radiation burns if you aren't careful. What will your peers say . . . a purebred with a blistered head? How embarrassing!" she replied, as she looked up into his eyes.

"I am going to miss you. Our orchards will be sad when you are gone."

"I'll make a point of saying goodbye before I leave. Just stick to the watering schedule I gave you. They'll be fine."

"I believe I was growing orchards before you were born, young lady," he said, as he cupped her chin and kissed her on the nose.

"Lady? How insulting! I'm AlNeegan, a Serentii warrior fighting for the Greater Good!"

"Yes, and you better take care of your sister. That is your assignment from me. She is used to being catered to. Not everyone in this galaxy will appreciate her. From my experience, you will be more accepted than she will. To many of the citizens of the empire you will look more normal than her."

"I know, Father. We've heard stories about all the ugly people out there."

"I have never used that term."

"No, but mother has. According to her, the galaxy is filled with hairy people that rarely bathe. They're violent, loud, and fill their bodies with intoxicating chemicals."

"I did not know your mother shared her experiences with you."

"She doesn't, but I've 'overheard' her talking to Myra on occasion."

"I am sorry that she . . ."

"Don't! You have nothing to apologize for. I reached an understanding with her years ago. She doesn't like me. She doesn't want to be around me. She wishes I were dead."

"JoNay! No! That is not true. She . . . she loves you in her own way. She just . . ."

"Why do you always make excuses for her? I'm an embarrassment. She produced a flawed child. If I had died at birth, you two would still be happy together. You'd have your one perfect child, and everything would . . ."

Her mind reeled as her father mentally slapped her. All Serentii were telepathic at least to some extent. Purebreds were powerful psykers. A rare few were capable of communicating across great distances. It was this mental power which allowed them to see in darkspace. An ability that only the purebred Serentii possessed.

*"Do not ever say that again! You insult yourself. You are an accomplished young woman with a great future. You have learned skills beyond anything your sister could ever dream of. As you grow more experienced, those skills will grow. The AlNeegan are a proud part of our history. Never forget that. They are the protectors of the Greater Good!"* Tafur thought, his words projecting into her mind.

*"Then why do our own people stare at me as if I were some alien? Why are people like me called 'flavus'?"* she replied, as her thoughts flowed back to him.

*"Because we have forgotten. But the time will come for you to protect your sister. The time will come when the AlNeegan take their rightful place amongst the Serentii people. People have forgotten our history with the Empire. Some stories are no longer told of our real homeworld. Seren Secundus is . . ."*

*"I know, Father. Seren Primus was destroyed in a natural disaster and the Emperor moved us here."*

*"That is what you were taught. One day you will find the truth."*

*"What? What truth? You've never . . ."*

"Father! JoNay! The conveyance is here. We have to leave," Myra said, as she appeared in the doorway.

"The orchids! I've got to say goodbye," JoNay said, as she released her father and rushed to get her bags.

"I will say goodbye for you. Now hurry. You have an orbital shuttle to catch. Starships have a tight schedule. They don't wait for anyone."

The sisters rushed ahead, both excited now that the time for departure had arrived. Tafur carried one of Myra's bags for her. JoNay needed no such help. Her years at the AlNeegan training academy had left her lean and strong.

Tafur stayed at the front door as their bags were loaded into a compartment on the skimmer. Myra turned and nodded. He felt a gentle mental caress. JoNay rushed back to her father, wrapped her arms around him and looked up into his eyes.

"Tears, my daughter?" he asked, as he gently brushed one aside with a fingertip.

"I know, purebred don't cry. You don't know what you're missing," she said, as she kissed his hand.

"Be careful, JoNay. The galaxy is harsh," he replied, as he leaned down and touched her forehead with his.

"Father, I am AlNeegan! I am fearless and brave!" she whispered, as tears ran down her cheeks.

"Always so emotional . . . my sweet flavus. Now go, before I find out what tears feel like."

. . . .

"Will he be a problem?" Sarak Galfar asked, as he sat in a skimmer, hidden in a treeline 300 yards from the front of the Blaknar residence.

"My husband is a fool. He suspects nothing. With my daughters gone, all my time will be spent assisting our master. We have a great deal to accomplish," Mashana said, as they watched her daughters leave in the spaceport conveyance.

. . . .

Spaceport 6

The two sisters sat side-by-side as the shuttle taxied from the hangar. All 20 seats were filled. JoNay couldn't help but notice she was the only flavus aboard.

*"I guess people like me don't travel in space very often,"* JoNay thought, as her mind merged with Myra's.

*"It is quite expensive. Most of these people are on business or they are Astrologi travelling to assignments,"* Myra replied. It was customary for Serentii to conduct conversations telepathically when in the presence of Serentii outside the immediate family. To converse aloud amongst others was considered crass and ill-mannered.

*"I wonder what it's like . . . to be around other races? Can you imagine how loud it would be if everyone in here began talking at the same time?"* JoNay asked.

*"Mother once told me aliens are quite loud, and many of them emit offensive odors. It is one aspect of travel I am not looking forward to."*

*"I was taught that other races have distinct smells. We were trained to differentiate between 12 different sentient species all within the same room . . . while blindfolded,"* JoNay said, as she shut her eyes and breathed deeply.

*"I cannot imagine a use for being able to . . ."*

*"Myra . . . I smell something . . . odd."*

*"What you smell are 20 Serentii cooped up in a small transport. I imagine even we have a . . . scent,"* Myra replied, offended at the concept.

*"No, it's something else. It's . . . unlike anything I've ever smelled, and we were exposed to the scent of every known sentient species in the empire,"* JoNay said, as she swiveled her head, trying to detect the source of the strange aroma.

*"Sister, sit still. You are becoming offensive. Serentii do not squirm."*

*"Myra, it reminds me of something in Father's arboretum. Something I can't quite place,"* JoNay thought, as her mind relaxed and she began using techniques learned during her training.

She imagined walking beside her father as he fiddled with the soil of different plants. Checking the moisture content was a daily task she had been given when young. The data was recorded on a data slate for his review. Later, she was trained to inspect the plants for insects, especially for aphids. She would lift each leaf and look for the presence of the small insects. Once, she found a leaf covered with them on the underside.

*"I ran my thumb across them, crushing them and looked at my thumb. Then I smelled it . . ."* JoNay thought, as her eyes snapped open.

*"Why am I having a threat response? I'm sitting in a shuttle filled with Serentii and I'm wishing I had my daggers."*

*"Sister, calm yourself. I sense your tension, and it is making me nervous. Explain what you are feeling,"* Myra said, as she mentally stroked her sister's mind, attempting to soothe her agitated state.

*"I'm sensing a threat. It smells like . . . this doesn't make any sense. It's acidic and smells like . . . insects."*

*"Insects? Sister, relax. I will calm your mind,"* Myra said, as she cleansed her sister's thoughts and guided her into a relaxed state that would last for the duration of the flight into orbit.

CHAPTER 2

Adytum

Connell MacLynn stood on the edge of the desert with the sun rising at his back. His shadow ran ahead of him as he stared at the fortress thrust upward from the center of the impact crater. A sand bridge, stretching from the crater's rim to the portal leading into the fortress, glistened in the morning light. It had taken him a month to trek back from deep within the desert. Each night, he had meditated on his conversation with the Old One.

*"How do I explain to Fultoon and Jenna that we're all just animals created to fight in a war that has been going on for millions of years?"* he asked himself, as he descended the last dune and reached the roadway surrounding the crater.

His feet shifted from sand to the road's crystalline surface. He remembered Fultoon's comments on the impossibility of a hardened pathway made out of nothing but desert sand.

"None the less, old friend, it's a road, and it seems to have led us down another path," he said, as he approached the entrance to the bridge.

He paused, remembering the first time they crossed the bridge with Jenna Wasullen.

"The force field! There was a control panel over here," he said, as he walked over to the right side of the bridge.

"Frack! She told us the code but didn't show us how to open the access panel to the keypad," MacLynn said, as he stared at the blank surface of the column and tried to remember the scene.

"She tapped the surface, the panel opened, she entered the code, then shut it. Now where is the fracking panel?" he asked, as he began tapping the crystalline surface of the column.

Two minutes later, his patience nearing an end, the panel slid back revealing the keypad.

"Patience! What have you told yourself? Control your temper. You have to teach, and you have to lead. You can't just chop your way through every person or problem you encounter. Now what was the fracking code?" MacLynn asked, as he took a deep breath to calm his volatile nature.

"A double sequence . . . then the reverse . . . then 33! That's it 33 at the end. All their measurements are based on 11. Yes, first 11-22 . . . then 22-11 and 33!" he said, as he entered the numbers into the keypad.

"Jenna better not have changed the fracking code!" he said, as he turned, stepped past the column, and onto the surface of the bridge.

"She never told me the history of this bridge. It's unsupported, 1.1 miles long and made out of sand. But it's more than just a simple causeway. It swallowed Fultoon's hand and then attacked us both when we wouldn't kneel at the portal entering the fortress. The bridge was damaged during the battle, but now it looks pristine. That black gem above the portal! Did the black gem repair the bridge?" he asked, as he stared into the distance.

He was able to see the portal, but not the gem mounted into the adamithrium wall above the entrance. He continued to walk, careful not to touch the side walls of the bridge.

"We should be friends by now. I have talked to your creator. I will not kneel, but you should understand that. Let me pass!" he said, as he approached the end of the bridge, glanced up and saw the glistening black gem almost the size of his head.

The portal loomed above his head. He ignored the gem and chose to focus on the tunnel leading into the fortress.

"May his will be done!" he said, as he stepped forward and passed into the tunnel.

"Fultooon!" MacLynn bellowed, as he exited the tunnel and entered the circular great room containing the War Wheel.

Receiving no answer, he glanced at the weapon and nodded approvingly at the changes that had been made. The wheel was now sheathed in a camouflage pattern of reddish browns and tans suited for a desert world. The weapon pods on either side now sprouted matched sets of quad-mounted laser cannon.

"Well, at least they haven’t been sitting around for the last three months," MacLynn said to himself, as he circled the war machine.

As he returned to the front of the machine, he heard the none too delicate sound of large feet slapping on metal coming up the stairwell behind him. Turning, he smiled as the sweaty face of Fultoon Longbeard burst from the stairwell opening.

"I see that I caught you sleeping again," MacLynn said, ignoring the torn work apron and grime that covered the Dwarv from fingernails to elbows.

"Sleeping? I’ll have you know we just finished packing up the last prototype and . . ." Fultoon began, until he burst out laughing having noticed the wide grin on MacLynn’s nut-brown face.

"We were wondering if you were going to show up on schedule," the Dwarv added, as he approached his friend.

MacLynn seemed leaner, but even more muscled, if that were possible. His hair was completely white, the last faint traces of red having been bleached out by the sun.

"On schedule? Toon, I’ve only been gone for three months," MacLynn said, as they clasped hands.

A voice rose from the stairwell and said, "I don’t know what you’ve been doing, MacLynn, but you’ve been gone a year to the day. As a matter of fact, you’ve returned almost to the minute!" Jenna added, as she stepped into the room.

"That’s impossible! My chrono shows only three months have passed since I left," MacLynn said, incredulous that nine months of his life seemed to have disappeared.

"None the less, what I say is true. Where have you been?" Jenna asked.

"Where did he take me and why so far?" MacLynn responded, half to himself.

"Where did who take you?" Fultoon asked, as he stepped closer to his friend.

"The alien, of course!" MacLynn said, dismissing both questions with a wave of his hand.

"Oh, frack! Another alien . . ." Fultoon replied.

"What alien?" Jenna asked.

"Is everything ready to go? The *Morning Star* repaired? Equipment aboard?" MacLynn asked, ignoring their comments.

"Yes, all has been ready for the last three months, as requested. Now . . . what alien?" Jenna asked again.

"Good, it’s time things were set into motion," MacLynn said, as he brushed past Jenna and teleported 20 feet to the stairwell entrance.

Jenna grinned at his newfound powers. Fultoon only stared.

"Jenna, you have to stay here and continue your work. Toon, you’re with me. And that fracking ship better be spotless!" MacLynn yelled over his shoulder as he bounded down the stairwell.

"No, MacLynn! I won’t stay! I’ve been alone too long. With what I know now, I can’t stay here. I need to set up manufacturing facilities, find and train laborers, start stockpiling my weapons," Jenna said, as she teleported directly into the stairwell, reaching for his fleeting shadow as he entered the room below.

Spinning to face her, MacLynn grasped Jenna by the shoulders and said, "Jenna, here is where you will build those factories. The workers will be transported here. This planet is yours . . . your resource, both for materials and ideas."

"Please . . . don't leave me here!" she said, as she looked into his eyes.

"You said yourself, most of the planet has yet to be explored. This planet is the greatest treasure trove of advanced science in the galaxy. It’s not an accident that you and we have found it at this particular time. It was left here! We were all guided here, intentionally," MacLynn said, as he gently shook her shoulders in an attempt to make her understand.

"Alone . . . always alone. You have no idea how much it has meant to me to have companions again," she said, pulling herself free of MacLynn’s grip.

"Jenna, within five years you'll command a thousand skilled workers. In ten years, ten times that many, and that’s just the beginning! In time, this planet shall rival Mars herself. Once this starts, you'll never be alone again. The day will come when you'll pray for some solitude," MacLynn predicted, knowing the effect such a statement would have on her.

"It's your final mission! One worthy of the last of the Blood Stars, and . . . it's the Emperor’s will!" MacLynn added, having felt the woman’s despair and loneliness.

Jenna’s frame slumped, as she recognized the truth and wisdom of MacLynn’s words.

"So, tell us about this alien," Jenna said, resigned to her fate.

"The alien? Well, I’ve never seen its like," MacLynn said.

The heavy thump of Dwarven feet echoed down the stairs proceeded by none too subtle curses, "Fracking trick, this teleporting! I still can’t do it. Why me?"

"Fultoon still can’t teleport, not an inch. I’ve even caught him snorting sand in an effort to increase his uptake of adamithrium. All it does is make him sneeze," Jenna said with a laugh, as the gasping Dwarv stumbled into the room.

"Now, tell us about the fracking alien!" Jenna yelled while thumping MacLynn in the arm.

"He, if it was a he, was unlike any species I’ve ever seen. Three feet high, no hair, light gray skin, very thin with a large head and huge black eyes," MacLynn began, and told them everything of the alien and his trek through the desert.

Jenna and Fultoon were silent as MacLynn finished the story. Fultoon stared at his hands while picking grease from underneath his nails. Jenna just stared at him in disbelief.

"I’ll never be anyone’s fracking pet," Jenna said, and began to turn and walk away.

"Jenna! Please!" MacLynn said, as he gently grabbed her shoulder and turned her around.

"That’s the first time you’ve addressed me and said . . . please," she said, as she stared into MacLynn’s emerald green eyes.

"I'm not used to asking. I get my way, or someone gets hit. That's always been my . . . method. We fight our own battles for our own reasons. We make alliances and gather information to support those battles. Standard GM strategy . . . my friend . . . if I can call you that. I have very few friends."

"You eat enough for three marines, you snore louder than a dozen Dwarven, and you aren't pleasant when you're drunk. But yes, we are friends," she said, as she extended her hand.

He grasped her forearm, in the old way. The two warriors stared at each other. MacLynn knew that few could lock eyes with him without looking away, but Jenna stared unblinking, as if peering into his soul, and it was MacLynn who pulled away first.

"I don’t know what role the alien has to play other than to let us know we aren’t alone. The giant ship was first shown to me by the Cube. It was unlike anything I’ve ever seen. I have no idea who built it; maybe the aliens, maybe a species we haven’t met yet. But the Old One showed me more detail about the vessel. There will be more than one . . . many more!" MacLynn said.

"I don't understand. We can't build a ship. Well, maybe a small one," Jenna said, as she glanced at Fultoon.

"The Inner Circle! There will be more of us. Others . . . with different skills. They're all part of the Plan. We have to find them. That's our task."

Jenna turned away, remembering her interactions with the Cube . . . the Emperor . . . and the dreadful fate that awaited the galaxy . . . that awaited all of them.

"Everything has been downloaded onto the *Morning Star*. All my designs and concepts . . . expansion . . . material and personnel requirements . . . everything! I even built a plain version of that gorgeous helmet I designed for you. Plus, we loaded enough of my flechette ammunition to keep you supplied for a few wars," Jenna said, as the departure she had been dreading rapidly approached.

"Toon, I trust the *Morning Star* is space worthy?" MacLynn asked, carefully placing his best scowl and look of disdain on his scarred face.

"Boss, may my beard fall out if things aren’t sat when we board, but . . . we still have a problem," Fultoon replied, offended that his preparations should be doubted.

"Problem? I've been gone a year, and you haven't fixed everything! What the hell have . . ."

"Boss, we don't have a navigator!" Fultoon said, and winked at Jenna.

"I thought about that. We'll have to stick to short jumps, less than six hours. We'll just pop out of darkspace, find out where we are, and jump back in."

"You'll be going in circles. It will take you forever to get anywhere!" Jenna said, and smiled while walking over to a worktable.

"What choice do we have? We have to enter darkspace or our bones will turn to dust before we get back to Old Terra!"

"Well . . . you might want to try this. It's another side project Fultoon and I have been working on while you were out strolling through the desert," Jenna said, as she removed a container from under the worktable.

She and Fultoon exchanged a smile. The Dwarv began rocking back and forth as he was wont to do when he was happy.

"Toon, the last time I saw you with that look, you had been in the Southington ale. What are you two up to?" MacLynn asked.

Jenna opened the box and removed a helmet. It was matt black and unadorned. A large cable trailed from the back. A faceplate, the same color as the helmet, was attached to the front.

"It looks like an Enforcer's helm, and it looks too small for my head," MacLynn said, as Jenna handed him the helmet.

"Correct! It was designed to fit me," Fultoon said, as he strolled over and Slid the device from MacLynn's hands.

"What does it do?"

Fultoon just smiled at MacLynn, winked at Jenna, and placed it over his head.

"Enough with the fracking games! What does it do?" MacLynn bellowed.

"His temper hasn't improved any while he was gone," Jenna said, as she playfully punched Fultoon in the shoulder.

"Toooon!"

Fultoon removed the helmet, smiled, and then said, "Boss . . . this is her best invention yet. Of course, she wouldn't have completed it without my help. I was . . ."

"Fultoon Longbeard! So help me . . ."

"It sees in darkspace! At least, we think it will . . . it should!" said Jenna, as she stepped between MacLynn and Fultoon.

MacLynn stared at them both and then at the unassuming device held in Fultoon's hands.

"Darkspace? For over 1000 years we have ventured into a parallel universe blindly, except for the navigators . . . the Serentii. You claim to have developed an instrument that will remove our need for them?" MacLynn asked.

"No! At least, not completely . . . for now . . . more like an emergency device," Jenna added, as she retrieved the helmet and presented it to MacLynn.

"You're serious? This can see in darkspace?" he asked, as he studied the interior of the helmet.

"Your present helmet, the one you wear with your armor, it links to sensors that . . . interpret various wavelengths of the energy spectrum. It shows you things you can't see with your naked eyes."

"Yes, but darkspace isn't like that. The energy spectrums are undetectable!"

"Exactly . . . you have to be able to detect dark matter and dark energy, with all the energy spectrums they emit!" Jenna said, as she stared up into his eyes.

"And you have done that?"

Jenna nodded, saying nothing.

"Boss, this will connect to all our sensors, but it will see more. It will see darkspace. Though, we'll still need a navigator as soon as possible. Like she said, this is for emergencies. Once we get back to the *Morning Star,* you can place a request with the Serentii. Their nearest temple is located on Vorwaden."

"And how would you know that . . ."

"Old records I kept from the Blood Stars. The Serentii don't move their temples once established. Most of them are hundreds of years old," Jenna said.

"Any other surprises? It seems I've lost control of this venture while I was gone."

"Well, I've developed a taste for Grall beer," Fultoon said, unable to look MacLynn in the eyes.

All three comrades burst out laughing at the posturing and absurdity of the scene.

"My friends, this is what the Emperor wants. Despite all his power and everything he knows, he's still limited. It's people like us who will save this galaxy. I don't think even he would have come up with this helmet of yours. Neither one of you would have accomplished this by yourselves. But together . . . " MacLynn said, as he set the helmet down and wrapped a huge arm around each of his friends.

" . . . together, we have a fighting chance."

. . . .

The departure was uneventful. As promised, Fultoon had literally rebuilt the Grall fighter in less than a month. He had added a rudimentary navigation system, stabilizers, and increased engine efficiency by several hundred percent. A grudging admiration between Jenna and Fultoon had blossomed into a genuine friendship that would last for centuries.

 "Where to, Boss?" Fultoon asked, as he settled in behind his console on the *Morning Star*.

MacLynn paused, as his calloused fingertips seemed to caress the edges of his own console, lost in thought.

"Head out to the transition point. Plot a course for Vorwaden. That will be our first stop. We'll try the new darkspace helmet first and see if it works. If it doesn't, you know the pattern. Keep the jumps short. Locate our position after each jump and then jump back in until we get there. It’s awkward, but it should work," MacLynn finally answered.

"Already plotted. And, Boss, that was the old way. This helmet will allow us to navigate our own course through darkspace. It will work!"

"Toon, think! The Serentii can link with the target location. They stay locked in whatever happens! From what you said, this helmet can't do that. We still have to have a heading."

"Boss, we're in the galactic south in the Perseus Arm. The Vorwaden system is in the Orion Spur. Can't be more than 5,000 light years. Close enough by galactic standards. I planned it just like a normal realspace flight. Relax, I'm in control. It's all planned out."

CHAPTER 3

Darkspace

"We're far enough out, Boss. Our velocity for crossing over is perfect, 0.666 light and steady. Adytum is 1.5 million miles behind us. I guess this is as good a time as any," Fultoon said, while examining Jenna's helmet for the tenth time that hour.

"Toon, you're about to see things that only Serentii have seen before, and they don't talk about it. They're trained from childhood to tolerate the mental stress of exposure to darkspace. Are you sure you want to go through with this? We can still do it the old way," MacLynn said, as he sat behind his command console on the *Morning Star*.

"This seemed like a good idea when Jenna and I talked about it, and my feet were on solid ground. Frack! I sound like a youngling on his first trip off planet. Let's get on with it! I have the coordinates for Vorwaden. They're programmed into the navsys. All I have to do is try to maintain the course."

"Coordinates are verified. Toon, you know you could have gone up to the navigator's station."

"Perched inside a bubble with my head sticking outside the hull . . . into darkspace . . . by myself? I don't think so! I like it right here behind my console, cozy, in my own chair. You know, a mug of ale might calm my nerves."

MacLynn laughed, then said, "Toon, put on the helmet. Show me you can do this."

"Frack!" Fultoon replied, as he lowered the helmet over his head and was immersed in total darkness.

"Helmet online. System checks are sat. Darkspace shields up. I'm activating the darkspace drives in 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1!" Fultoon said, as his hands initiated the insertion from memory.

The queasy feeling in Fultoon's stomach was always the same when they transitioned from realspace to darkspace. He hadn't eaten in eight hours and was hungry, but he didn't want to puke inside Jenna's helmet.

"Toon, we're in! What do you see?" MacLynn said, as he decreased their velocity to 0.5 light.

"Helmet's operable. Coordinates for the Vorwaden System are at the bottom center of my vision. I steer the ship with my head. That was her idea. I wanted something more physical, like a steering handle, but she said this would be more responsive."

"Right! Now, what do you see?"

"Just wait! My eyes are adjusting. It's . . . it's like being in a river. Except the river is all around us. It's beautiful! The colors are so vibrant. I . . . crap . . . the current is heading down, taking us off course!"

"So, look up! Stay on course!"

The *Morning Star* began to vibrate as Fultoon guided the vessel across the flow of the current.

"It's changing. Now, it's like . . . like a bunch of rivers all mixed together. The currents are all heading in different directions . . . at different angles. It's so jumbled up! How am I supposed to navigate through this mess?"

"Focus on the heading! Jump from stream to stream and weave your way through," MacLynn suggested, as he tried to imagine what Fultoon was experiencing.

"*The currents are so strong! When you burst through one, you're caught up in another. This is exhausting, and I've only been doing this for a few minutes. How do the Serentii do this for weeks?"* Fultoon thought, as sweat began to pour down his face.

"Boss, I need a break. I don't know if I can take this!"

*"Frack! Why didn't she make another helmet? We could have taken turns!"* MacLynn thought, as his fingertip hovered above the Transition Initiator that would send the vessel back to realspace.

"Wait! I can do this!" Fultoon said, as he leapt the *Morning Star* from one stream to another heading closer to their desired direction.

"*Come on, Fultoon . . . just relax. You sailed on Lake Dargoon when you were a lad. Feel the ship's motion. Feel the flow of the currents.*"

"Boss, I'm getting the hang of this! This current is steady and heading in the right direction. You just have to look ahead and anticipate your next move."

MacLynn withdrew his finger, leaned back in his chair, and wiped the sweat from his face.

"I never had a doubt! I knew you could do it, Toon. You're sailing in darkspace! This will be a tale your ancestors will tell for generations."

"We have to live through this first. It's getting smoother. I think when we transitioned into darkspace it created turbulence, like throwing a rock into a pond. That's why it was so jumbled up. We're in one current now . . . smooth sailing."

"I don't see anything on short-range or long-range sensors. The screen's empty," said MacLynn.

"Trust me, Boss . . . it's not empty out here. When I was a youngling, a friend named Lodor gave me some mushrooms. I thought I was supposed to give them to my mother to cook. He just laughed and told me to eat them raw. He said I would like what they did to me. I went home that night and ate one after everyone else was asleep. It was like this . . . all bright lights and swirly things. I was unconscious for two days. When I woke up, my Ma and Da were standing over me. Ma hugged me and then began yelling, but Da didn't say nothin'. He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me outside in the snow. He handed me an ax and pointed at the woodpile. I spent the next eight hours splitting wood dressed only in my skivvies. The next time I saw Lodor, I punched him in the face."

"And I thought I had heard all your stories. How long do you think you can do this?"

"It's opening up some. There are spaces between the currents. The further we go, the larger the spaces. It's not empty. It's not like realspace. You don't see black emptiness anywhere. I don't see any stars or planets. It's all color . . . everywhere."

"Like being inside a nebula?"

"Yeah, kind of, but our nebulas are bland and static in comparison. There are so many colors, and everything moves. But the streams . . . they plow through everything."

"Slip out of the current and see what happens."

Fultoon slid the *Morning Star* to starboard and broke out of the stream they were riding in. The ship was jostled, then became calm as if it were standing still.

"Toon, we're still going 0.5 light."

"She's still moving. Outside the currents, the density must be less. But we're leaving a trail . . . like a ship sailing through water. Now, this is strange. I can see everywhere without turning my head. I can see behind us. Yeah, we leave a long tail, and it seems stable. I can see where we left the current."

"That's not good. If we're leaving a trail when we're outside the stream, then we can be followed. Okay, Toon, here's the plan. We sail in the currents for as long as you can take it. Then we exit. You rest and eat. Then we jump back in. I think the currents are the secret to darkspace travel. Once inside, we accelerate to 100 or maybe 1000 times the speed of light. That's how darkspace travel must work."

"But, Boss, the ship indicators don't show that. It doesn't look like we're going any faster. Wouldn't that tear the ship apart?"

"I've heard different theories about how darkspace functions, but it's all speculation. The Serentii must know, but they don't talk. I once asked a navigator how it worked. He stared at me for a few seconds, then said, 'If I told you anything, I would be executed. My family would be killed. Every relative of mine would die.' Like I said, they don't talk. Anyway, sensors are still clear. Take the helmet off. Go get some food and make us some kavey. I'll keep watch."

Fultoon slid the helmet off and then groaned.

"Vertigo! Boss, everything is still moving. I can't focus," Fultoon said, as the helmet slid to the deck, and he leaned against his console.

"Close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths . . . Master Navigator! You may have just put the Serentii out of business. Come to think of it, they may send an assassin after you," MacLynn said, and chuckled.

"They can keep the job. This is brutal. Just give me my Family Ax, and I'll take on a hundred demon Rattin instead. That would be easier. This is worse than the first time I drank Grall beer!"

"Hey, some food and a few hours sleep, and you'll feel like a new Dwarv," MacLynn said, as Fultoon cursed, rose to his feet, and staggered away from his console.

. . . .

The journey went on for 8 days. Each shift became longer as Fultoon became accustomed to the strains of navigating in darkspace. Then they jumped back to realspace as they neared their objective.

"Toon, as far as navsys can tell, we're near the Vorwaden system. You made it almost the whole way in eight days. I'm impressed. Another few hours in darkspace and . . ." MacLynn began, then heard a thud as Fultoon passed out and fell to the deck.

. . . .

Fultoon awoke to see MacLynn staring down at him as he stood by his bedside. MacLynn smiled, then said, "Frackin' Dwarv, you almost killed yourself. You went into shock and your heart stopped. I thought I'd lost you. How do you feel?"

"The room's not spinning, and I'm not dead . . . so, pretty good. My mouth is as dry as the desert on Adytum. How long was I out?"

"Eleven hours. I put us on a course for Vorwaden. I contacted them. Our navigator is in transit. They should arrive about the same time we reach the planet."

"How far away are we?"

"A little under a day, realspace travel time. You got us really close."

"Boss, I'm fine! I just need a little . . ."

"Toon, you frakin' died on me . . . for the second time. I had to get your heart and breathing started again."

"My heart and breathing! That means you had to . . ."

"Yeah, I didn't want to use the Cube unless I ran out of options. After this, I might have to invest in an Autodoc."

Suddenly, Fultoon's lips felt even drier and his thirst nearly unquenchable.

"Boss, I think it's finally that time. I'm taking the keg of Southington Ale out of stasis."

"What? I thought you were . . ."

" . . . saving it for a special occasion. I'm alive, and I just navigated us through darkspace for eight days. Plus . . . I'm glad we're getting another navigator. I really don't want to do that again. It, umm . . . I don't know how to put it. I've seen and done some things in my life that I'd just as soon forget. But this . . . this was the worst. After a while you feel like . . . like you're not alone. Like, something is crawling on your skin. It's . . . hard to describe."

"You'll get over it, Toon. Once we get toward the bottom of the keg, it'll all just be a bad memory," MacLynn said, as he pulled Fultoon erect and patted him on the back.

"Yeah, just a bad memory . . ."