CHAPTER 1

Big Iron

In orbit above Danker's World

Omat the Shipbuilder stood by a window in his office on *Big Iron.* His orbiting shipyard, an asteroid now converted into a spacecraft, was nearing the scheduled time for departure. He knew the flight crew were busy preparing to launch his vessel on its virgin trip, and he was determined to stay out of the way. He rubbed fatigue from his eyes, then pulled his Grall tooth pipe from a vest pocket. He stared at this gift that had been part of his life for over 100 years, and began to clean the residue from the bowl with a pick.

"Omat, the *Morning Star* undocked ten minutes ago. They're headed for the transition point at maximum velocity. Our new captain informed me we're preparing to break orbit from Danker's World. What's our course?" asked Jomuk Grimstone, his project manager for the last 50 years.

Omat felt *Big Iron* begin to shudder as the asteroid fought against the disruption of a million years of stable orbit.

"Don't ask me. Ask our captain. He has control of *Big Iron* and knows our destination. I'm just another passenger," Omat replied, as he pulled a pinch of Dombra weed from a pouch and tamped it into the bowl of his pipe.

*"I hope I packed enough weed. I don't think we'll be coming back to Danker's World anytime soon,"* he thought, as he added another pinch, and glanced outside at the planet that been his home for over 300 years.

"Omat, are you sure about this? Our captain, I mean. He's a human. The grumbling has already started," Jomuk whispered, as he began packing his own pipe, and joined Omat at the window.

"Let the crew talk. They always talk. When they quit complaining, then I'll get worried. My decision is made. He was an Imperial officer. He's commanded a ship before. Like many, he was drawn here. He knows what the stakes are," Omat said, as he lit his pipe and offered the flame to Jomuk.

"Aye, but I've heard the circumstances of his leaving his last assignment weren't the best. Even worse, he's still a pup," Jomuk said, as he glanced at Omat and inhaled the fire into his pipe.

"We all have a past, my friend. Some are a little messier than others. He may be young by our standards, but humans mature faster than Dwarven. We consider a Dwarv reaching 50 as just approaching maturity. A human's life is halfway done by then . . . if they're lucky. Our captain is in his late 30s. He's experienced . . . blooded. The crew will get used to him."

"That's easy for you to say. I have to deal with the complaints," Jomuk said, as he exhaled his first puff and glanced sideways at Omat.

"And that is why you're the second richest Dwarv on this vessel," Omat said, as he blew a smoke ring against the window that encircled the *Morning Star* as it disappeared in the distance, bound for Old Terra.

*"I wonder when I'll see Connell MacLynn again. Everything I've done to my shipyard is because of him. I would have been happy just building common spacecraft for the rest of my life. Danker's World was a good home. Now off we go to parts unknown, to build a ship that's never been built. There better be as much adamithrium there as he claimed or the crew will space me,"* Omat thought, as the *Morning Star* shrank in the distance until it became another point of light out amongst the stars.

. . . .

Long before Omat had *Big Iron* bored out and turned into a space vessel, he had expanded the old orbiting shipyard to cover half the surface of the asteroid. One of the areas he had not developed was a long ridge known as Skull Mountain. One side of the ridge had a distinct resemblance to a skull. It was atop a prominent hillock over two miles high and ten long, on the asteroid's ‘rough side’. When he decided to convert the asteroid into a space craft, one of the first things he had to consider was where to build a control room, a bridge for his new ship. He toyed with ideas for various areas, but always came back to Skull Mountain. After much consideration, he decided to bore into it from beneath, and construct the control room at the peak, using the natural elevation and shielding it would provide.

The highest point on Skull Mountain was known as Sly's Wart, named after a long dead guildmaster from the founding of Danker's World. Legend had it that Sly Stonecracker had a huge wart on the side of his forehead that looked just like the knob on Skull Mountain. Hollowed out, and fitted with salvaged components from a dozen wrecked Imperial warships, Sly’s Wart became *Big Iron's* control room. It's official designation was the Control Center. The crew named it the Wart.

. . . .

"Jomuk, I think I'll wander up to the Wart. Care to come along?" Omat asked, as he finished his pipe and tapped the ashes into a container by his desk.

"I'll pass. I'm headed for the Ale Room. I'm more concerned with our Dwarven brethren. I need to get a feel for their mood," Jomuk said, as he touched the mouthpiece of his pipe to his forehead in respect and left the room.

Omat tucked his empty pipe into a vest pocket, left his office, and wandered in the general direction of the Wart. He stopped and marveled at the wonders of the vessel he had constructed . . . or rather, converted. Over the last three centuries he had cut into the surface of the asteroid to create shelters and storage cubicles as his shipyard expanded. Most of that cutting and boring was shallow, only 50 feet below the crust.

The huge asteroid was now honeycombed with passages, workshops, hangars for smaller space craft, living quarters that were luxurious by old standards, endless storerooms, agrifarms, armories, and huge galleries, many of which contained strange equipment of which only Omat knew the purpose. When he had the tunnels and cavities insulated and heated against the bitter cold of space, he did not simply create a habitable environment. He designed the interiors with magnificent stonework and heated oaken floors that looked like the ancient planking of oceangoing vessels from the legends of ancient Dwarven and human history. Rich stone carvings depicted famous heroes and leaders from the various sentient races of the empire.

After many stairs, corridors, and intersections, he came to a familiar location, and sat on an old piece of furniture. The oaken bench had been outside his office for over a century. Almost all who came to visit Omat the Shipbuilder had to sit there and wait for his permission to enter.

"That was one short year ago. One single year!! So much has happened since then. I'm afraid I really was a conceited bastard. People had to wait before coming into my esteemed presence," Omat thought, then shook his head, and laughed at his own arrogance.

It had been one year since MacLynn had arrived and shown him the Cube. One year since he had seen the Emperor, the Kytun, and the plans for a marvelous new ship that still made his heart race. His eyes had been opened that night, and his sense of self-importance had diminished with that awakening.

He massaged the side of his head and remembered the next morning, the day after MacLynn's first visit. He had personally removed the door to his office, wanting all to enter freely. Then he plopped down onto the old bench, feeling tired, confused, and somewhat lost. His life had changed overnight.

"I remember that strange feeling. I began to wonder if the whole thing had been a dream. Then I sat here, on this same bench, questioning my own sanity. Then I touched this," Omat said, as he glanced down at a plank on the bench.

Crudely carved into the wood was the image of a cube. He had stared at the carving until his eyes burned. Only a handful of visitors had noticed the symbol over the past year. None had asked what the cube meant. A few wondered who had the nerve to carve such a thing into the 'Waiting Bench' outside the office of Omat the Shipbuilder. He had the bench relocated two weeks ago, to a location near the base of the spiral stairs leading up to the Wart. His mind was still drifting in the past, one hand idly caressing the carving, when another figure approached and coughed.

"Omat, greetings! I've been walking about. She's a beautiful vessel, far different from what I expected," JoNay Blaknar said, dressed in the new white robes of an Astrologus, a gift from her sister, Myra.

"Welcome, Navigator! Excuse me . . . Astrologus . . . or rather, Mistress Blaknar," Omat said, as he stood and bowed in her direction.

"Omat, I am your navigator, but I would also like to be your friend. Please, call me JoNay," she said, as she lowered her hood and gently touched her forehead to his.

"A Serentii who wants to be friends with a Dwarv. Such a thing is almost unheard of," Omat said, as he sat and gestured for her to join him.

"Unheard of? So is a Flavus becoming an Astrologus. We live in interesting times," JoNay said, as she sat beside him.

"MacLynn told me that phrase is considered a curse on Old Terra. 'May you live in interesting times!' I think he's right. One day I will look back with fondness on the mundane routine of my shipyard and its endless rotations around Danker's World."

"Perhaps. But then you would never have created this masterpiece," JoNay said, while gesturing at the intricate carvings and stonework which lined the passageway.

"*Big Iron* is elegant, in her own way. I decided early on to focus on aesthetics. I wanted this ship to be more than a place to work. It's probable most of us will live out our lives on this vessel. I see this as a generational ship. Many will be born here, grow old, and die, always calling this ship their home. I wanted it to be functional, of course. But it had to be beautiful. I wanted the crew to be able to walk down a hall and slide their hands along a wooden handrail. Not steel or some cold, artificial construct that looked like wood, but real wood, harvested from a real tree. Wood that would darken and shine with age after being contacted by 10,000 hands," Omat said, as he glanced at the highly figured wooden railing that led up a spiral staircase down the corridor on his left.

"You have succeeded. She is exquisite," JoNay said, as she began to rise from the bench.

"Please . . . JoNay, stay and talk to me. I needed a rest before climbing the stairs. More than once I've asked myself if all this decoration was a waste of time and money? I'm sure MacLynn would say yes. Perhaps he would understand, but I doubt it," Omat said, as he removed his pipe from a vest pocket.

JoNay hesitated, then said, "Just for a few minutes. The captain has summoned me. I haven't met him yet. When I got to my cabin, I found a note atop a pile of books and data slates. The note said, 'Astrologus, learn these.' It was signed with an 'N'. I assumed it was from Captain North. All I've done is read, eat, and sleep since I came aboard. I haven't even been to see the reclusium."

"Hmm, I could give you my opinion of Captain North and his background, but I prefer to let people form their own opinions."

"If you didn't trust him, you wouldn't have selected him as Captain."

"Astute, and true enough. I did have him in mind for the position before MacLynn suggested Fultoon. MacLynn, he's a difficult man to say no to," Omat said, as he felt *Big Iron* shudder once again.

"More than a little difficult. He's used to getting his way, and doesn't like his decisions being challenged," JoNay said, remembering all the times she had confronted MacLynn.

"I sense some dislike. Am I mistaken?" Omat asked, as he placed the stem of his pipe in the corner of his mouth.

*"Why do I want to tell this Dwarv my life story. I barely know him. He trusts MacLynn completely or he wouldn't have accepted me as his navigator. All my instincts and training tell me to be wary,"* JoNay thought, as she tried to mentally link with her sister.

*"I can't find her. She's already gone. MacLynn was in a hurry. They've transitioned to darkspace. I'm alone. For the first time in my life . . . I'm really alone,"* she thought, then realized Omat was staring at her.

"Sorry. I was thinking about someone."

"Quite all right. I tend to drift away myself. Well, my old joints have had a rest. I don't want to keep you away from the captain. Please, follow me. I'll introduce you," Omat said, as he rose and began walking toward the spiral stairs.

He walked down the hall, turned into a small archway, and began climbing the 36 steps of a spiral staircase that was the back way to the Wart. Reaching the top, Omat placed his palm on a security sensor beside an oaken door. As it slid open, he paused and allowed his eyes to adjust to the dimly lit interior.

The Wart was a perfect circle, 90 feet across. The entrance was in the rear, on the lowest level. The forward half of this level was lined with workstations controlling the operation of all ship systems, such as darkspace and realspace drives, shielding, life support, transportation, weapons, external and internal sensors, security, teleportation, and many others. Every system was capable of automatic operation, but could be overridden for manual operation with the proper access code. Personnel were stationed at each console to constantly oversee the proper functioning of the ship.

The second level was smaller, also circular and six feet above the first. This level contained three command and control stations for the Flight Command Crew. They directed all activities of the Control Center staff. Each station controlled one of the three primary systems: propulsion/energy, shielding/sensors, and transport/life support. These positions were located on the forward half of the circular platform.

The third level, the captain's position, sat in the rear half of the second platform, elevated a further three feet above the others. From here the captain oversaw all Control Center activities and had override capabilities over all commands. Located at the rear of his station was a set of spiral stairs leading to a hatch. Behind that was the reclusium, the operating station for the Astrologus. It was a small, circular room 15 feet in diameter. A padded chair sat in the center. When operating in darkspace, it was raised 30 feet above the operating floor into a transparent, hemispherical dome, six feet across, from which the Astrologus was exposed to darkspace.

Behind the Control Center were two stairwells on opposite sides. One opened into the hallway Omat had been sitting in, and the other into a meeting room below the Wart. Behind the stairs were a pair of turbo lifts, one for personnel and the other for personnel or large equipment. Both had access to the ship-wide turbo lift transportation system.

JoNay saw none of this. All she saw as they exited the stairwell and entered the Control Center was the amazing view.

When the Wart on Skull Mountain had been hollowed out, Omat had most of the exterior iron surface removed also. A curved, multi-layered quartz glass panel was installed over the opening. The forward view covered a 90-degree arc, creating a curved window 50 feet high and 90 feet across.

"Omat . . . the view is . . ." JoNay began, at a loss for words at what she was seeing.

" . . . impressive, exquisite, stunning . . . yes, it is," Omat said, anticipating her reaction.

"We're still debating what to name it. I wanted to call it 'God's Eye' or Eye of the Gods'. Some find that a little pretentious. Any suggestions?"

"No, but, it does seem . . . vulnerable," she said, not wanting to hurt the old Dwarv's feelings.

"Oh, I forgot one other description. Impregnable! The window is protected by a minimum of one force shield at all times. Once we're underway, two more shields are activated. If the need arises, a total of ten are available. If they all fail, or at the captain's discretion, a three-inch adamantium barrier can be slid into position."

"And in darkspace?"

"Redundant darkspace shielding. Same number of shields. We plan on running with maximum shielding and the barrier shut. Most find the gray blankness of darkspace disturbing to look at," Omat said, as the image of another control room passed through his mind.

Omat had been shown this design before the conversion of his asteroid had even started. He knew the Command Center on the Empire-class ships he would build would look exactly the same, only much larger. The Cube had shown him both.

The Cube had presented the design of a sterile Imperial vessel, identical in many ways to standard vessels constructed in Imperial shipyards across the galaxy. He had allowed himself the luxury of converting his asteroid into a Dwarven vessel, with all its beauty and subtlety, despite its external ugliness, because he believed the ships they would build in the future would be supremely functional killing machines, but little more, or so he thought. For while the Cube had taught him much, it had actually shown him only what he needed to know . . .

"Omat, we're leaving orbit on schedule. We'll be at the transition point in six days," commented the tall man as he came down the stairs from his elevated platform.

"Six days? Seems a rather long time to reach transition," JoNay said, as she stepped beside Omat, extended her hand, and stared into the captain's eyes.

*"Gray eyes. Odd. The iris seems overly large. Yellow hair. He's human, but not from Old Terra. Over six feet tall and heavily muscled. Built for combat. More like a miniature version of MacLynn than a ship's officer,"* JoNay thought, shook his hand, and slipped within his mind.

"Mistress Blaknar. Not what I anticipated, but a pleasure to finally meet you. I am Captain Orion North. I suppose our departure will be somewhat leisurely by Serentii standards. *Big Iron* is unique. I'm not quite sure how she'll handle. We have performed endless simulations. But . . . they are only simulations. She may be more unpredictable than anticipated," Captain North said, while thinking, *"I heard she was different, but she's short for a Serentii, and what an odd face. I've never seen an Astrologus with yellow skin and green spots. She's pretty, in an alien sort of way. And what's with the eyes? A triple pupil. Looks like the blade on a rotary propeller."*

JoNay continued to smile as she gripped his hand, and felt the other hand slip beneath her robe and slide across the grip of one of her daggers.

*"Alien! He called me an alien. He found my eyes humorous. He's an ass. He reminds me of MacLynn!"* she thought, while continuing to smile and shake his hand.

Omat could tell something was going on, but he wasn't sure what. He nudged Captain North as he reached for his pipe.

"Umm . . . my apologies, Mistress Blaknar. I can see that I may have offended you. That was not my intent. I tend to be a little . . . blunt. It's a fault of mine."

*"MacLynn would never apologize. And . . . what am I sensing in his mind? Why is he so open? I read him like a child, and I'm not nearly as skilled as Myra,"* JoNay thought, as her hand relaxed, and her mind focused on his memories . . .

The images and memories JoNay saw were complex and disturbing. Captain Orian North was an oddity. He was only 37, and had been crewing on, or commanding starships, for over 20 years. As a young boy he had been abandoned on the streets of his home world of Fa'sal and left to survive on his own. He grew up a thief, and had become a local celebrity by the time he was 13. It seemed his charm and captivating looks were able to extricate him from any snare.

When he was 15 his life changed forever. He stole a small system cruiser that belonged to the planetary governor's daughter. He had been tempted to steal her also, but only wanted to resell the craft at a profit. It had taken the local Imperial forces a month to catch him, much to their embarrassment. He managed to hide while bouncing from one planet in the system to another, until he had been betrayed by another thief to whom he had tried to sell the ship. The reward for his capture was worth more than the value of the vessel.

The planetary governor, persuaded by his daughter, sent North to a local infantry regiment to serve out his life in proper service to the empire. At the age of 17 he fought in a system war to repel a Rattin incursion. His actions had so impressed his superiors that he was sent to the system's Imperial Space Academy for training as a pilot and officer. Much to his surprise, he thrived on the order and discipline.

Four years later, after finishing fifth in his class of 200 cadets, he was posted on the *Morton*, a small destroyer assigned to the local system. The vessel was decrepit, outdated, and understaffed. The captain he served under was an incompetent political appointee, but young Ensign North fell in love with the ship and the crew. Unlike most officers, he was able to communicate with the men below him. He was able to get them to work harder and to produce more quality work than any of the other junior grade officers on the vessel. As a result, he was promoted ahead of his contemporaries. Two years later he was transferred to the *Blade*, a modern destroyer capable of darkspace travel. After six months he was promoted again and became the First Officer of the Blade at the age of 24.

Soon after, during the Grall incursion of the Falmouth system, the *Blade* became involved in a general free-for-all and was severely damaged. Her captain was killed. First Officer North assumed command just as a Grall boarding party attacked the ship. He surrendered the ship, and the few remaining crew, rather than have them butchered. This nearly cost him his life . . . and had ruined a promising career.

The remaining crew of the *Blade* would have died either way, by fighting or by execution, since the Grall were not in the habit of taking hostages. Only the sudden appearance of a Galactic Marine assault team saved the remaining crew and the ship. First Officer North was court-martialed for cowardice and sentenced to 30 years on the Imperial prison world of Kartoum. When Kartoum fell two years later during another Grall invasion, prisoner North found himself a leader in the underground. Three years later, a hero of the resistance, he was pardoned, and at the age of 28 began to wander the galaxy on any craft he could find.

Two years later a merchant ship under his command had come to *Big Iron* for repairs on the darkspace drive. By then the shipyard had been shut down for modifications. The merchant ship ended up stranded in the system. The crew and its captain were left unemployed. There he learned of Omat the Shipbuilder, and heard rumors of his plan to convert the asteroid into a darkspace capable space vessel. Intrigued, and somehow drawn to the strange Dwarv's project, he arranged a meeting and begged for a job during the retrofit. After working as an electronic specialist for two months, he was promoted to supervise the electronic techs. Four months later, he became the technology manager. It was then that Omat became interested in him.

"Mistress Blaknar, I've had Serentii probe my memories before. It leaves an odd taste in your mouth. Did you enjoy yourself?" North asked, as he released her hand.

*"He knew what I was doing. Yet, he opened himself up completely. Why would he do that?"* JoNay asked herself, then replied, "There's an old Serentii saying: 'Open minds lead to a clean spirit.' It's rare to find such . . . honesty."

"I'm a straight-forward man, Mistress Blaknar. I appreciate honesty and demand it from my crew. I hope we can establish such a bond of trust. Please, familiarize yourself with the ship and your reclusium. It will be a few days before I have need of your abilities," North said, and stepped away.

"Well, what do you think?" Omat asked.

"I think he is very confident and sure of his abilities," JoNay replied.

"I have heard that said of others," Omat said, smiled, and gestured toward the entrance to the reclusium.

CHAPTER 2

The Morning Star

They had just transitioned to darkspace, and Myra could not believe what she was seeing.

"No! We are doomed!" Myra said, as she sat within the Astrologus bubble perched atop the *Morning Star*.

"Myra, what the frack happened? Where are we? We're getting some strange sensor readings here," MacLynn said over the comm link.

"We are in darkspace, but in a very bad place," Myra replied, as she activated the three remaining darkspace shields.

"That part I got. Normally I can't see schlat in darkspace and now I'm seeing what looks like a huge red eye on our port side. What is it?" MacLynn asked.

"Boss, we've got a problem, a big one. We're being pulled toward that thing," Fultoon said.

"The Serentii call it a Gurges Ater, a red hole. In realspace they exist as black holes. In darkspace they are bright red, or so I was taught. The laws of gravitational mechanics of dark matter and dark energy are different here, hence the red color. Few Serentii have ever seen one, and none from this close. We are on the inner edge of the accretion disk. Just outside the outer edge of what you would call the event horizon, what we call the Finitor Eventum . . . the Final Event," Myra said, as she stared in wonder at the deadliest creation in either universe.

"Well, pull us out of here!" MacLynn ordered.

"Boss, she has the darkspace drives maxed out. We're at 115 percent, and we're still stuck beside that thing," Fultoon said.

"Then . . . drop out of darkspace!" MacLynn ordered.

"If I do that, we will be torn apart. The only thing that will translate back to realspace will be debris," Myra said, and sagged back into her chair, as she continued to stare at the astronomical death trap.

The ship began to vibrate as the darkspace drives struggled against the enormous gravitational field the *Morning Star* was stuck in.

"Boss, the darkspace drives will start to come apart in less than two minutes. We need to cycle them down," Fultoon said.

"Toon, switch ship control back to the bridge. Then cycle them back, but try to maintain our position," MacLynn replied.

"Myra, unhook and come down here. We all need to talk this through," MacLynn said, took a deep breath, and leaned back in his suspensor chair.

. . . .

Five minutes later

"The engines are at 100 percent. We can maintain that indefinitely. Boss . . . I don't know how we're getting out of this one," Fultoon said, as he jumped out of his suspensor chair and began to pace back and forth on the bridge.

"Fultoon is correct. Bad luck has determined our fate. There was no way I could have known that a Gurges Ater would be here. Now that we are here, there is no escape. No ship is powerful enough to escape this gravitational pull. We are too close," Myra said, as she came in through the entry way.

"I didn't think that Serentii believed in luck," MacLynn said, as he slid Doom Bringer from its scabbard and studied the intricate etchings on its surface. He always found comfort in studying the blade during times of decision.

"Normally, we do not. But the old legends speak of 'Fatalis' as something you cannot avoid. Our modern beliefs abhor the very idea of a loss of control that is determined by fate, or as you would say, bad luck," Myra said.

"I believe in making my own luck. All right, Toon, we need options! It'll have to be something different."

"Why did it have to be this big? There are small black holes, only a few solar masses. If we believe our instrumentation, this red hole is at least 200 million solar masses. We're fracked, Boss," Fultoon said.

"Think, Toon, or I'll space that keg you love, and you'll die thirsty."

"Well, we could take every nuke on board and try to use the explosion to push us out past the event horizon," Fultoon said, as he jumped into his suspensor chair and began running a series of calculations.

MacLynn stared out the forward viewing windows at the blood red sphere. Matter swirled and twisted as it was dragged inward for inevitable consumption.

"Not enough. Even with max shielding, the combined nuke blasts would destroy us. If we move the detonation further away, there wouldn't be enough force to get us past the horizon," Fultoon mumbled, as he double checked the results.

"What if the blast was . . ." MacLynn began.

". . . in front of us, and we rode the wave outward. I tried that too. We'd get pulled back in. I even checked a stern blast and every angle in between. The results were the same. We either don't survive the blast, or we get pulled back in," Fultoon said, as he crossed his arms across his broad chest and leaned back in his suspensor chair.

"How about a series of blasts rather than one big one?" MacLynn asked.

"Maybe," Fultoon said, as he returned to his console and began running the calculations.

"No, I tried every blast combination possible, and from every angle. The results are the same, blown up or stuck," Fultoon said, as he sagged back into his chair.

"What about the realspace drives? Can you use darkspace and realspace simultaneously?" MacLynn asked.

"Different polarities. The drives are mirror images of each other. If you run both in close proximity, you have a massive explosion. It was tried a millennia ago. I remember reading about a planet having a sizable chunk blown out of it by the blast," Fultoon said.

"Myra, any suggestions?" MacLynn asked.

"The thing that is out there has no explanation. The scientists of Old Terra were the first to theorize its existence. Some think they are the beginning and the end of the universe. The universe started with one massive black hole that exploded and lead to the creation of everything there is. Perhaps, in the end, all the black holes that exist will come back together and start the process all over again. Many millennia have passed, and we still don't understand these things," Myra said.

"We know that darkspace has relatively few stars. I wonder if they have all been consumed by things like this. Their power is beyond anything we have ever created or dreamed of creating. We cannot control it. We cannot harness its power, and we cannot survive it. The Gurges Ater will pull us in, consume us, and tear us into our constituent atoms. Then, it will tear those atoms apart and consume them," Myra said, as she pulled her hood over her head, dropped to her knees, and began praying.

"Come on, Myra, we're not dead yet. The three of us have all been in tight spots before," MacLynn said, as he sat down beside Myra in front of Fultoon's console. He leaned back, his sword in his lap. His broad shoulders stretched from one side of the console to the other. Myra knelt on his left, her back rigid, in the Serentii way. Fultoon came and sat on his right, his gnarled mechanicus hands fiddling with the gold chains that hung from the ends of his forked and braided beard. The vibration in the ship became stronger as they sat together, quietly thinking.

"Too bad the Cube's gone. It would be nice to see a bright, cobalt blue light about now," Fultoon said.

"My Emperor, we need your help. If your will is for us to continue the mission you have assigned us, give us a sign," MacLynn prayed.

"Prayer? He is not a god. You said his power would diminish as the Kytun approached. They have diminished, and his power has left us alone," Myra said, as the vibrations grew more violent.

"My Emperor, if your will is for us to die, then I accept your will. I have always accepted your will. Let us know . . ." MacLynn began, then paused as the blade began to glow a brilliant cobalt blue.

"He hears you!" Myra said.

"Help us, Lord. Tell us how to escape this trap. This great, red eye will soon destroy us," MacLynn said.

"GO INWARD," was all they heard, and the glow brightened on the side of the sword facing the red hole.

"Inward, my Lord? I don't understand," MacLynn said.

In response the sword brightened once again, but only on the side facing the red hole.

"By the Serentii soul, I know what he wants us to do," Myra whispered.

"So do I. Oh, frack me! So do I. But that's just crazy. We can't do that. You said we'd be torn into bits, and then our bits would be torn into smaller bits," Fultoon said, as he stood up and began backing away from the sword.

"What are you two talking about?" MacLynn asked.

"He is telling us to dive into the Gurges Ater . . . the red hole," Myra said, as she paused and slowly shook her head in disbelief.

"My Emperor, please explain. You have appeared before us all in the past. We need to know for sure that this is your will," MacLynn said, almost pleading.

The sword slowly rose from his hands and began to gently spin. The brightness became uniform, then intensified until the entire bridge was filled with a cobalt glow.

"Don't do this. Please don't make me do this. This is worse than darkspace. I admit it. I'm afraid," Fultoon said, as he continued to back away.

They could only stare as a golden figure appeared before Fultoon, his back against the forward viewing screen. In the background stood the great red eye, looming over his right shoulder, as if listening to the discussion.

"HAVE YOU LOST FAITH IN ME, FULTOON LONGBEARD OF THE CLAN LONGBEARD?" the Emperor asked.

Fultoon fell to his knees and bowed his head, but said nothing.

"AH, YOUR FEAR OVERWHELMS YOUR FAITH. IS THAT IT?" the Emperor asked.

"Only a fool wouldn't be afraid to sail into such a place. There's no chance of survival. Even you aren't that strong," Fultoon said, as he raised his head and immediately regretted his words.

"YOUR LACK OF FAITH DISAPPOINTS ME. YOU HAVE FOUGHT FAITHFULLY BESIDE CONNELL FOR DECADES. I HAVE BROUGHT YOU BACK FROM DEATH ITSELF. YET, STILL YOU DOUBT," the Emperor said.

Fultoon bowed his head in shame, fought through his fear, then said, "Connell has told me of his moments of weakness, but in the end he has always had faith in you. I've heard him say, 'May your will be done.' Then he places himself in your hands and obeys. I beg your forgiveness."

Fultoon stood and properly arranged the gold chains that connected his forked beard to his belt. Then he raised his head and stared into the golden eyes that peered down at him. He saw no anger or hatred at his weakness. He saw only patience and compassion.

"I've followed Connell for many years. I intend to be with him until I die. Until then, I will have faith in him . . . and in you. Even though the thought of diving into a gurgling alter, or whatever Myra calls it, fills me with dread down to the marrow of my bones," Fultoon said, and stood proudly before this image of the Emperor.

The glowing image turned and stared at MacLynn and Myra as both regained their feet.

"GO INWARD," was all the Emperor said, as his image slowly faded away.

The sword dropped to the floor with a clang, leaving the three companions staring at each other.

"Secure everything on the ship. This will be a rough ride," MacLynn said, as he retrieved the sword. The three said nothing else as they went about their tasks.

. . . .

One hour later

MacLynn sat behind his console examining the glistening blade of Doom Bringer. He treasured this gift from the Emperor far above any other possession. He still couldn't believe the Emperor had manifested using the sword. Fultoon was busy checking the darkspace drives, shields, and other items.

"It is incredibly beautiful. It looks as if it was just created," Myra said, as she stood at MacLynn's right shoulder.

"Well, at least the blade does. It's made from adamithrium plus some other unknown alloy. It belonged to the Emperor. He gave it to me as he lay dying on the *Lady's Blade* on the day of the Great Betrayal. We placed him in stasis ten minutes later. He told me it was over 40,000 years old. He never said how he knew," MacLynn said.

"That makes it older than the empire, older than the Serentii," Myra said, awed by the presence of such an ancient item.

"It dates from before the first expansion from Old Terra. I’ve searched hundreds of records trying to discover its origin and found very little. The metal is very difficult to work and has a very high melting point. Once cooled, it's almost indestructible. Only the most powerful laser can cut it, and then very slowly. This blade is intricately detailed, but dates from an era millennia prior to the invention of lasers on Old Terra. Even worse, there are no adamithrium deposits on Old Terra. My guess, it came from somewhere else in the galaxy and was left on the planet. Why? By whom? That just adds to the mystery," MacLynn said, as he turned the blade over in his hands.

“How did the Emperor discover it?”

"He found the blade in his youth, long before I met him. It was discovered during an archeo dig in ancient Gyptus. The blade was the only thing remaining. The cross piece, grip and pommel had all rotted or rusted away. He had new components fabricated. That’s why the cross piece is a different metal than the blade.

"And the gem? That is the largest emerald I have ever seen," Myra said.

"It was found on Trappist 1 during early mining days, and sent back to Old Terra as a gift to the Emperor. The Imperial seat of government wasn’t moved to Sheppard until 200 years later. The reason he mounted the emerald on his sword wasn't the size of the gem. It was something he discovered about the gem, its unusual characteristics," MacLynn said, as he spun the blade downward and began caressing the emerald encased between the heads of two extinct flying raptors.

"How much longer, Toon? I want to get this over with," MacLynn said, over the comm link.

"Five minutes! I'm securing the keg of Southington," Fultoon replied.

"More like tapping it," MacLynn said, and laughed as he closed the comm link.

"As usual I've been doing all the work while you two are swapping stories," Fultoon said, as he strolled onto the bridge carrying a large mug of ale.

MacLynn shook his head in mock dismay.

"So, fire me! Or, better yet, drop me off on the nearest planet!" Fultoon said, as he settled into his suspensor chair while smiling at MacLynn.

"Finish that and stow the mug. Myra, go to your station and get ready. I'll pilot this time. For a change, I can see in darkspace," MacLynn said, as he sheathed his sword and strapped it to the back of his suspensor chair.

"I will be at my station in the bubble. I wish to see everything. There will be sights that no sentient being has ever seen," Myra said, as she bowed to them both and left.

"Let me know when you're on station, and make sure you stay on the commlink," MacLynn said, as she left the bridge.

"Boss, I toured the whole ship, even our quarters. Everything is stored and secure," Fultoon said, as he drained the mug and dropped it into a storage container below his console.

"If you had told me this morning that we would end the day by intentionally sailing into a red hole, I'd have shackled you in your quarters," MacLynn said.

"Like the Emperor told me, 'Have a little faith, Fultoon. It's only a red hole, Fultoon'," Fultoon said, and smiled at the memory.

"I don't quite remember the conversation going that way, but this is about our faith in him," MacLynn said.

"I am in position and secured," Myra said, over the commlink.

"Good, let's see where this takes us," MacLynn said, as he eased back on the darkspace drives and turned the nose of the *Morning Star* toward the red hole.

"Hey Boss, just in case his plans don't include us, it's been a good ride," Fultoon said, as he kissed the twin blades of his ax and placed it in a harness mounted on the side of his suspensor chair, the heavy blades resting on the floor.

. . . .

When the nose of the *Morning Star* turned toward the Gurges Ater, it went from fighting the massive gravitational pull to accelerating toward it.

"Max thrust, no point in delaying this," MacLynn said, as he began a gradual acceleration from 40 percent to 100 percent thrust.

"Toon, keep the shields up as long as you can. If you see or feel anything going wrong, tell me," MacLynn said, as the blood-red disk filled the forward viewing screen.

At first they felt nothing. The severe turbulence of resisting the pull of the red hole had disappeared as soon as they had turned toward it.

"Boss, this is really weird. Instead of feeling like we're accelerating, I feel like I'm floating, like we're standing still," Fultoon said, as the bridge was filled with crimson light.

"Myra, what are you seeing, feeling?" MacLynn asked.

"Where you see only red, I am seeing a brilliant crimson disk surrounded by a swirling mass of color and energy. I also see a gigantic beam of dark energy spiraling away from the Gurges Ater, perpendicular to the disk. We are approaching a boundary of sorts. Once we reach that, I expect us to die. We will pass the Finitor Eventum, the event horizon. The pull we have felt thus far is miniscule in comparison. Once we cross this area we will begin our dive to the singularity. I look forward to this more than you can imagine. Serentii have discussed and debated what it would be like to enter such a place for centuries. I, and I alone, will be the first one to know. If we survive, you will have seen little, only what I tell you after. But I will have seen . . . everything," Myra said, and was silent for the remainder of the journey.

"I see what you mean, Toon. It does feel like we're floating. Not exactly floating, but not pulled in any one direction. That makes no sense. We're at 0.8 light and accelerating," MacLynn said, as he felt himself pulled in every direction at once.

"Boss, it's like we're inside gravity and it's pulling us everywhere," Fultoon said.

"The event horizon. It's almost like a null point. We're pushed and pulled at the same time," MacLynn said, as his eyes flashed over the indicators on his console.

"Boss, look at the radiation levels. The shields are starting to go," Fultoon said.

MacLynn glanced at the shield indicators on his console and saw the fifth shield rapidly drop from 80 percent to ten and then fail. The fourth shield went even more quickly.

"There is nothing more we can do but have faith, my friends," MacLynn said over the comm link, as he reached forward and deactivated all the remaining darkspace shields.

A cobalt glow of incredible brightness filled the bridge, then the entire ship, then expanded around the vessel, until the *Morning Star* was encased in a new protective shield.

From a distance, the tiny ship seemed immersed in a white-hot haze. But the speck was surrounded by a brilliant shell of cobalt blue as it plunged deeper and deeper toward the singularity. Its progress seemed imperceptible. Then, as the *Morning Star* approached the singularity . . . it disappeared . . .

CHAPTER 3

Stonevalt

The Tomb of the Emperor

A dark figure materialized before the impenetrable barrier at the top of the pyramid. He stood quietly, staring inside the tomb, as if considering his next move.

"You've already lost. Why don't you just give up and die? He won't be coming to save you this time. I've seen to that," the man said, as he removed a glove, studied his nails for a few seconds, then reached out with his hand. The barrier dropped at his touch.

"I really do sympathize. All these centuries just lying there. Nothing to do but wander the galaxy, living through others. What a pathetic existence for the most powerful man to ever exist . . . until me. I was trapped on a backwater planet, but at least I had things to occupy my time. Aliens are so fascinating. They can die in so many ways," he said, as he approached the stasis field surrounding the Emperor.

"Oh, my! What do I sense? One last attempt to save your pet canine and his pack of vermin. Impressive! With the Kytun emerging, that must have taken almost everything you have left," the man said, as he studied the panel controlling the stasis field that kept the virus from destroying the Emperor's body.

"Ah, yes. This will do it. Once I press this, the field will drop. I would like to stay and chat with you. After all, it’s been so very long. You might even wake up. I do hope so. The suffering would be intense, at least for a few minutes. But . . . my virus doesn't discriminate. I couldn't figure out how to kill you, and mother, and all the rest of the family, without killing me. So, I have to go. I have a reunion to attend with my beloved sister. Goodbye, my father!" he said, pressed the symbol, turned, and walked away.