

Cataclysm

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**Ward**

**Wagher**

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I

Horace Lefler felt great satisfaction as he signed the decree before him. The people of this planet had put up with things like this for far too long. The original settlers had worked hard to establish a nice place to live in harmony with the environment. Xanadan was an idyllic world. It was blessed with a pleasant climate across its temperate zone since Faros, the star of the Faros system, was a close analog of Sol. And, Xanadan was a world protected by strict rules on what people could do.

Farming was strictly regulated to avoid soil erosion and prevent pollution of the land by chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Animal husbandry was forbidden – which was not a problem since the inhabitants were vegan by belief and conviction. Even with the limitations on farming, the planet easily fed its modest population.

The population of Xanadan had reached its optimum and was limited from growing further. The happy citizens voluntarily limited themselves to two children each. The youngsters were carefully nurtured in crèches located in the villages. Each individual was well-adjusted and supportive of the whole.

And yet, as First Citizen Lefler remembered, the rest of the universe persisted in trying to infest, infect, and poison their beautiful society. This had happened repeatedly over the four-hundred-year history of the colony. Each time the infection had been ruthlessly stamped out, and peace returned. Yet over the past twenty-five years, the Merchants and Manufacturers League and its navy had persistently meddled in their affairs and had demanded tolerance for those who wished to destroy their world.

Well... no more. Lefler had been elected on a platform of eliminating the infection once and for all. The first step had been to prevent the landing of any people coming from other star systems. The starports would only now serve those working their assigned duties in the orbital habitats and the asteroid mines. Plans were being made to shut down the daughter colony on Yanadan, the next planet further out in the Faros system. Twice the infection had come through that colony. It simply was not worth the trouble.

Later Lefler and his allies succeeded in driving the Woogie infection from the planet. The Xenos were self-righteous and polite to a fault. Their personal chemistry left foul odors about, and messed up the environment. If anything, they were more destructive than humans could be.

The first citizen was now at the apex of his career. Everything he had worked for over the past decades was coming to fruition. After placing his signature on the edict, he capped the old-fashioned fountain pen and laid it down. He picked up the declaration and handed it to Cynthianna, Second Citizen and sometime lover.

“Remember, my Dear, this is a secret finding. We cannot have anyone finding out and trying to flee. Please deliver this to Marshall Foalke, and ask him to report to me on his implementation plans.”

“Of course, First Citizen. At once.”

He smiled at Cynthianna's trim form as she walked from his office. She was an ideal servant of the Xanadan Ideal. They had originally met during one of his rare visits to Earth. At the time, Lefler was between assignments, and she was a thoroughgoing convert to the Green philosophy, which formed the foundations of the Xanadan colony. He seriously considered suggesting another time of assignation with her. She had been a pleasant companion the last time.

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Lefler stepped from behind his desk and walked over to the double doors. He pulled them open and stepped out onto the balcony of the Government House. The capital village of Brampton held only about five hundred people, but that was fine. The town lay nestled in a valley between two modest, green mountains. The view from his balcony was soothing – Lake Ontario was a stunning shade of blue and mirror smooth.

Fifteen minutes later, Marshall Gerhard Foalke knocked on the door to his office and walked in.

“Gerhard!” Lefler cried as he stepped from behind his desk. “A great day!”

Foalke nodded and stepped over to shake hands with Lefler. “I can't believe we have finally achieved what we set out to do.”

“What are your plans, then, Gerhard?”

“There is no need to wait. We will begin at midnight. By daylight tomorrow, we should be rid of those trouble-makers.”

“And peace will return to our world.”

“And peace will return.”

## II

Brach Morton sat in front of his comp-term and studied the numbers. He leaned back and sipped on his coffee as he reviewed the data from his personal observatory. Planet-based astronomy was uncommon – it was much more practical to simply take a starship to the celestial object in question and study it in relative proximity. But Morton had not the opportunity to travel widely. He had, in fact, stayed on Xanadan all his life. And it was mostly a pleasant life. He could mostly ignore or avoid his obstreperous fellow citizens by tending his few acres during the day and studying the heavens at night.

He knew the people in Brampton cared little for him and looked askance at his religion – or any religion for that matter, but they pretty much left him alone. Oh, the agricultural proctors visited occasionally, but he was careful to make sure he followed all the rules and listened carefully to their advice. And, for the most part, the farm police – as he called them – were helpful and knew what they were talking about, even if they were officious.

The people of the village also knew about his hobby – studying the stars. Apparently, they felt it was harmless since they never bothered him about it. Which was fine because he had made the discovery of his lifetime.

His instruments and comp-term had allowed him to detect and follow a visitor's progress to the Faros system. Not a starship, but an interstellar traveler of another sort. Rogue planets were widely theorized about and rarely seen. Morton often thought of them as the wandering stars mentioned in the book of Jude in the Bible. But he had his very own rogue planet to observe. Unable to resist the urge, he had sent a query to the planetary observatory, which resided aboard Orbital Habitat Alpha. The curt reply confirmed his discovery, then instructed him to leave them alone.

He was happy to maintain solitude and kept a careful diary of his wanderings about the night sky. For the past several weeks, he had filled multiple files on his comp-term, describing the progress of *his* planet. Tonight he thought he had gathered enough data to plot a course for the wandering body.

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His comp-term crunched away on the data he had laboriously gathered over the past months. Several columns of numbers sprang onto the screen, and he scanned them with a frown. He copied the summary to another screen and plotted the points on a chart of the star system. He felt his pulse begin to race as he looked at the path of the rogue world as it curved through the system.

He quickly moved backward in the data and rechecked the observations. No errors were found, for he was a careful man. The thrill in the pit of his stomach condensed into a churning ball of fear as he replotted the graph. It simply could not be!

His focused attention to the honest numbers on his screen kept him from hearing anything through the open window if there was anything to hear in the spring night. He jumped and turned as the door to his cottage was torn off its hinges with a crash. He stared as the local constable stepped in, along with five other villagers.

“Marshall Foalke, what is going on?”

“We are meting out justice to the Harmonites tonight, Mr. Morton.” The men moved toward him.

“Wait! Wait! I have to tell someone – it's very bad!”

“Oh, you've told this village enough, I think.” He motioned the men forward.

Half an hour later, the villagers carefully reset the door on its hinges. A trio of the younger women thoroughly cleaned the cottage, preparing it for its new occupant. One of them looked incuriously at the comp-term display before switching the device off. Horace Lefler's decree had been accomplished in Brampton Village, as it had across all of Xanadan.

### III

The Merchants and Manufacturers League Navy Cruiser *Gdansk* swam through space at the maximum velocity of its Faster than Light drive. This was a new ship, the pride of the Navy, and she was fast. Captain Ethan Glock wondered if she was fast enough. The League and Naval Intelligence had watched the situation on Xanadan over several years. The election of Horace Lefler had caused great concern. Put frankly, Lefler was a xenophobe and a militant one at that. Six months previously, Lefler had driven the resident Woogies off of Xanadan, even killing several.

For decades, the Greens, who dominated the planetary politics of Xanadan, had grown increasingly radical and viciously intolerant. Around the League councils, regret had been voiced about allowing things to get out of hand. Now it appeared Lefler was going after the religious minorities. This time, the normally fractious League had reached a consensus that they needed to intervene. Each planetary government within the League was required to sign the Universal Rights Covenant. This obligated the League to protect minorities. In practice, enforcement was imperfect.

The League was a quasi-governmental body and was more effective in facilitating commerce than enforcing policy on the dozens of independent planets in the sphere of man. The problem was that mankind spread out through the stars faster than could be tracked. In practice, some less popular minorities sometimes suffered before the League bestirred itself. And the Harmonite Church was among the least popular. The Harmonites called themselves Christian. Other Christian denominations called them a cult. They had embraced grotesque doctrinal aberrations and adopted a series of strange practices. The

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most obvious and controversial custom they adopted was polygamy. Their enthusiastic marriage of multiple wives and their in-your-face evangelism made the temptation to suppress them irresistible in many worlds.

The League might have waited longer to bestir itself; however, the Xanadan persecution of the Woogies had generated immediate revulsion among the merchant classes on Earth. It could not be said that most humans *liked* the Woogies, but the pink fireplugs did considerable business with the League, and there was some fear they would take their marbles and go home if sufficiently provoked. The potential loss of business to the League was not to be tolerated.

The Xanadans had driven the Woogies off planet, and when some of them had not moved quickly enough, they were murdered. It appeared that the Harmonites were next. Naval Intelligence had picked up information that Horace Lefler was not going to bother with trying to drive the Harmonites away from Xanadan. It would be much simpler to murder them, and appropriate their property. And so, Captain Ethan Glock had a mission.

Glock was not sanguine about fulfilling his instructions. Oh, *Gdansk* would have no problem controlling the high orbitals of Xanadan. Stopping a pogrom on planet was another problem altogether. Normally a League Navy Captain could count on his or her authority to make directives stick. The Navy had recourse to several effective methods of arm-twisting to control recalcitrant planetary governments. The threat of blockade was effective, especially if it included cutting off access to planetary net updates and banking transactions.

In this case, however, Glock was not convinced that Horace Lefler would give a flying fig since his goal was to isolate Xanadan from the mainstream of the Sphere of Man anyway. Yet, the League Navy had sent its premier starship, under its most experienced captain to rein in a recalcitrant planet, and he planned to do his best. It made for an interesting conundrum.

Glock was absorbed in reviewing the most recent culling from the Xanadan planetary net when his door chimed. He pushed a button on his desk to open the door. As it slid open, Commander Kyle Donner, *Gdansk's* executive officer, walked in.

“What status, Exec?”

“Systems nominal, Skipper. We're a little less than twenty-four hours from Faros.”

“How's the crew?”

Donner stepped over and sat down across from the captain. “Honestly, Skipper? They are nervous. Everybody knows about Lefler and his insanity. I guess you could say they are determined to fulfill the mission but nervous about what could happen.”

“I'm nervous about what already might have happened.” Glock leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. “NavInt was very late catching this. We should have been there when Lefler cracked down on the Woogies.”

“I can't believe he would actually murder a whole group of people.”

“It has happened over and over in human history, Kyle. We seem to have the ability to create monsters.”

“But, we warned them.”

“Yes, we did,” Glock said. “I hope that had an effect, but I doubt it. That's why the League and the Navy sent us out – we're the stick.”

“And we're just one ship, and we're a long way from home.”

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“Precisely.”

### IV

“Nice of them to send a colonel along with us this time,” Glock said.

Colonel Anton Morgenhaus nodded. “No question this has the attention of the league mandarins. If they don't do anything else, they are tasked with protecting basic rights. Carlo Roma told me they had seriously dropped the ball on this one.”

While the Merchants and Manufacturers League Corps of Marines was formally a part of the League Navy, in practice, they carried nearly as much authority as the Navy brass. Morgenhaus was nominally Glock's equal, but the captain had a year's more time in rank than the colonel.

“I'm surprised one of them would admit to as much.”

“Roma is an honest man. He said their attention is focused on the Centaurans, and they should have been paying attention to our own backyard as well.”

Glock snorted. “I should hope to think so. But, with the Centaurans sitting across the street, I suppose the League can be excused for being distracted.

The Alpha Centauri star system did not have the honor of being the first interstellar colony in the sphere of man – that honor went to Festalborg at Tau Ceti. But the planet Centauri in orbit around Proxima Centauri was the first to be terraformed. Several hundred years of work had gone into creating a life-sustaining biosphere for the planet, and the people there had created a paradise. They had also developed a virulent strain of imperialism.

“Too true. I just wish they had learned their lesson out at Tau Ceti. What did it take them, fifteen years to get things settled down again?”

“Something like that, although one could argue that they still don't really have it pacified. Then there's Earth.”

Now Morgenhaus chuckled. “Nobody else has been able to rule Earth. Other than for the carnage, it would be entertaining to watch them try.”

“I suppose we should review your plans for the landing since that's why we're meeting,” Glock said.

Morgenhaus nodded. “Yes. Let's. I'm really not looking forward to this mission.”

“What is the level of risk?”

“On a personal level, I'm not terribly worried. We can achieve force superiority anywhere locally. These people have no military to speak of. The political aspect, though, is just horrendous. When word gets out that we have arrested Lefler, the greens on a dozen planets will erupt.”

“That's the league's problem, Anton.”

“Oh, I know. But we serve the League, and it has a lot of other problems to deal with as well. I wish we could figure out how to do this very low profile.”

Glock shook his head. “Not gonna happen. So what's the drill?”

“We drop a cordon around Government House in that toy village of theirs and arrest Lefler and his lieutenants. I announce myself as governor, and then hell lets out for lunch.”

“You don't think it'll give the populace pause if we charge him with murder?”

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“Come on, Ethan, who do you think helped him throw the Woogies out? It would be nice if it were a small cadre of zealots, but it looks like the entire planetary population is behind him.”

“So, is there any hope of changing their minds?”

Morgenhaus shook his head. “No. That was one of the big fallacies of the so-called police actions before the crash on Earth. The bleeding hearts that managed those just *knew* that if we could separate the factions and speak softly and carefully to them, they would suddenly understand and make nice. The only way to win at this is to break their will. And that requires stomping them into the ground.”

“And the league would never allow that.”

“Right. So we got to take out the leadership and then take out new leadership whenever it appears. So we'll be here for fifty years.”

“But we don't have fifty years, Anton.”

“Notice the cynicism?”

### V

The communications drone was a small one. It was the size of a small groundcar but shaped like a bird. With its stealthy design, it easily slipped past the security forces on Xanadan and climbed into orbit. It detected a carrier signal from *Gdansk*. It rotated on its horizontal axis and aimed a communications laser at the incoming cruiser.

“Incoming message, Sir.”

Commander Donner nodded to the communications tech. “Thank you, Luran. Make sure to plot the movement of the drone. If the opportunity arises, we would like to retrieve it.”

“Aye, aye, Sir. Message is now in the can.”

Donner pushed a contact on the command chair.

“Captain's Ready Room, Yeoman Puckett speaking.”

“This is the Exec. Is the skipper available?”

“This is the skipper, Kyle.” Glock must have been next to Puckett and grabbed the comm unit.

“Sir, we have received a message from a drone in Xanadan orbit. Navint encryption.”

“Very well, Exec. Please ask Colonel Morgenhaus if he would come to the Ready Room.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper.”

Glock turned to his yeoman. “Now, Puckett, you need to go about your business. I have a classified meeting coming up soon.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

Five minutes the door signaled, and the colonel walked in. “Apparently, our Navint source has been able to maintain cover.”

“I wonder how he got a drone past planetary security.”

Glock shook his head. “I'd be surprised if he couldn't. I don't think their security is that good. Anyway, shall we?”

“Of course, Ethan.”

Twenty minutes later, Glock and Morgenhaus stared at each other.



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“I can't believe even Lefler would do something like that. How many Harmonites were on planet?”

The colonel shook his head. “Last count we had was a little over eight hundred.”

“So they murdered hundreds of people in one night? Is that confirmed?”

“According to Navint, this source is gold plated.”

“Are you going to pull him out?”

“I don't know at this point. He is supposed to be highly placed. I may have to arrest him along with Lefler's gang.”

“Do you know who it is?”

“No,” the colonel shook his head. “He will introduce himself to me with a code phrase if it becomes necessary. I would prefer to keep a source like that on planet – a way to keep an ear to the ground, you see.”

Glock nodded. “I understand. I guess we're going with the primary plan, then.”

“Right. I'd better get the troops lined up.”

“We're about four hours out. We've transmitted our *bona fides* to Xanadan, so they know there's a navy vessel headed in.”

“I wish we could just slip into orbit and surprise everybody.”

Glock smiled. “So do I. However, it would be hard to do that without somebody waking up.”

“I guess they'll wake up when we have boots on the ground.”

“That they will, Colonel.”

As *Gdansk* sailed towards its orbit around Xanadan, the navigator, Lieutenant-Commander Ted Welsh, took the time to indulge in his hobby – surveying star systems. This was his first trip to the galactic south of Earth, and he was unfamiliar with the Faros system. While the reasons for the journey were unpleasant, he still looked forward to studying a new star system.

Faros was a normal M-type star, slightly warmer than Sol. Xanadan was the third planet in the system. Welsh quickly spotted a fourth and fifth planet. They had already passed the orbits of the two gas giants as they came in-system.

And here was something out of the ordinary: the fourth planet was much closer to Faros than would be expected. Everywhere else Welsh had traveled, Bode's Law prevailed. The fourth planet should have been much further out. The navigator raised an eyebrow as he entered the information. He would have to do some astrographic research when he went off duty. There were certainly sure to be comments in the astronomy journals about this anomaly.

## VI

“What is the meaning of this?” Horace Lefler jumped to his feet as Colonel Morgenhaus strode through the doorway of his office. “You have no right to come bursting in like this.”

There was a muffled shriek outside the office.

“And what are you doing to Cynthianna?”

“Mr. Lefler,” Morgenhaus said, “I am placing you under arrest for the mass murder of eight-hundred-fifteen people.”

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Lefler turned pale. “You... you have no right to do this. You have no standing here.”

“I represent the Merchants and Manufacturers League. The founders had to sign the Universal Rights Covenant to colonize this planet. It is still binding.”

“We don't infringe on anybody's rights – except for yours. We reject your right to come in here. This is an independent world. Let me repeat, you have no standing here.”

A captain stuck his head in the door. “Sir, we have a room prepared.”

Morgenhaus nodded. “Very well.” He looked at the marine sergeant. “Please take Mr. Lefler to the detention room Captain Ferriss has prepared.”

“Sir!”

The four marines closed in on Lefler and pulled his hands behind him. He went from being pale to white.

“I protest. I am the First Citizen of Xanadan. I will *not* be treated as a common criminal.”

The colonel said nothing more as Lefler was marched from the office. He followed and stepped into the outer office. A tall blond woman sat at her desk, but with the chair pushed back against the wall. One of the marines had his rifle trained on her.

“Problems, Corporal?”

“We had to keep her from grabbing her comm unit, Sir. And there's a button under the desk.”

“Good work, then, Corp. Let's get her away from the desk before she finds something else to do.”

“Yes, Sir. At once.”

Her eyes flashed as she stood up. “I don't know who you think you are or what you are doing here, but you must think you are the bee's knees to do this. And I, for one, am not impressed.”

Morgenhaus looked down at the nameplate on the desk. *Cynthianna Sterling*. “Well, Ms. Sterling, I suppose it doesn't matter what you think, as you are *also* under arrest. Corporal, you will keep her under restraint until we have a detention room prepared for her.”

“You... Can't... Do this to me!” she screamed as they pulled her away from the desk.

“Oh, I think we can,” he replied as he stepped closer.

She had been gauging the range and spat on him. He looked down at the spittle on the front of his uniform and carefully wiped it with a handkerchief. He swung his head at the corporal, who then marched Cynthianna from the room.

Morgenhaus moved back to Lefler's office and pulled out his comm. He punched a code and waited.

“Major Jackson, Sir.”

“Status, Ralph?”

“Sir, we have control of the central communications facility. We can stream your announcement at your convenience.”

Morgenhaus nodded. Because of the Xanadans' fetish for a pristine environment, they had centralized all of the industrial and technological functions on planet. With the League Marines in control of the comm facility, they controlled all communications on the surface, and in low orbit.

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“Very well, Captain, go ahead and stream the announcement. We have control of Government House and the planetary police offices.”

“At once, Sir.”

Morgenhaus disconnected, then punched another code.

“Captain Weber, Sir.”

“Status, Captain?”

“Sir, we have control of the cyber systems. One of the AIs managed to shut itself down, but we have everything else.”

“Very good, Dave. Was the AI managing anything critical?”

“It was a backup for the communications systems. Apparently, it figured out what was happening when we cut the link from Comm Central and suicided.”

“Probably for the better, anyway.” Morgenhaus thought for a moment. “Are you into the other systems?”

“Yes, Sir. We're still breaking the codes, but the crypto here is old. I anticipate no problem. It's a matter of time.”

“Very good, Captain.”

The colonel disconnected and punched another code.

“Major Clarke, Sir.”

“Major, Ralph Jackson will be streaming the announcement anytime. Get your people ready in case the populace decides to take to the streets.”

“Yes, Sir. It's very quiet out there so far.”

“Good. Stay on your toes.”

“Yes, Sir.”

## VII

Cynthianna Sterling whirled around when the door opened. Colonel Anton Morgenhaus stepped into the room. After the guard pulled the door closed behind him, he motioned her to a chair. He stepped behind the desk and sat down. The marines had quickly cleared all communications equipment from several offices in Government House and were using them for detention rooms.

Morgenhaus opened his attaché case and set a device on the desktop. It chirped, and a small green light began blinking.

“Okay, it is safe to talk.” He looked across at the blue-eyed blonde. “*Bee's knees*, Ms. Sterling? How about *coochy coo*?”

She snorted. “My control has this love for obscure phrases. I suppose it makes for good tradecraft, even if it is a little strange.”

He pulled another device out of the case and held it up. “If you would press this to your eye, please. I need to get a retina scan to lock down your identity.”

“Very well.” She took the device and held it to her left eye, then her right. After a few moments, the device chirped, and a red light turned green. “Does that satisfy you, Colonel?”

He nodded. “Yes. I didn't expect our contact to effectively be the number two person in the government.”

She shrugged and then looked directly at him. “I am a *Green*, Colonel. This planet represents a thousand-year dream of my people. Mankind ruined Earth. They are ruining

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other planets as fast as they can. We want this world to reflect God's creation, His original creation, as much as possible.”

Morgenhaus nodded. “I guess I can respect that, Cynthianna. But, I don't understand why you do not recognize our efforts to care for the environment on the other planets.”

She grimaced and shook her head. “*Responsible Development*. It's just another code word for raping the environment. We do not do that here.”

“I like to think of myself as a conservationist.”

“Those words are just excuses. It amounts to the same thing whether you kill an ecosystem quickly or slowly.”

“God commanded man to subdue the Earth, and I think He opened the cosmos for us.”

She gazed at him for a while. “I believe the Bible too, you know. That verse you quoted, I think, is an excuse to avoid our stewardship over creation.”

He shrugged. “I guess we aren't going to convince each other today.”

“You could be convinced, Colonel.”

Now he stared at her for a few moments before replying. “Maybe; maybe not. But here we are,” the colonel murmured.

“So we are. You do not know how much I hate having your stormtroopers here. But I also cannot countenance the murder of innocent people, no matter how misguided they were. I'll be honest; Horace Lefler is a monster.”

“I think we can agree on that point. How did you ever get involved with the man?”

She looked off into the distance as if reliving the memory. “I met him when he was on a speaking tour in the Palatinate on Earth. I fell in love with him and followed him here. You see, I didn't know at the time that for Xanadans, all their dalliances are temporary.”

“The jilted lover, then?” Morgenhaus asked.

“You mean that's why I turned against him? Not really. You see, he is still fond of me. No, I am as dedicated to the success of the Faros system as he is. But I believe in an overriding morality, and he does not. Whatever the goal, there is no justification for these kinds of methods. When he moved against the Woogies, I decided I could no longer support him.”

“That's what prompted the League Council to move into action.”

She grimaced. “The Woogies have been friends of my family for hundreds of years. So, I guess you could call it personal in this case.”

“There's another question I must ask you.”

She cocked her head as she looked at him. “Why do I think I will not like the question, Colonel?”

“You may not. In fact, you probably won't. The League can't afford to garrison the planet indefinitely. Also, we truly believe in local self-government for each planet or star system. As soon as possible, we need a native head of government here.”

She started shaking her head, slowly at first, then more violently. “I see where you're going, Colonel and I won't do it. I would be viewed as a traitor.”

“So, why did you turn against Horace Lefler? Isn't *that* viewed as treason, Ms. Sterling?”

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“I understand what you're saying, Colonel. While I willingly betrayed Horace, and would do so again, I am doing it because I cannot betray Xanadan.”

“So your highest loyalty is to Xanadan,” Morgenhaus said. “Within that context, what does it matter if you are viewed as a traitor? It's simply the right thing to do. The more effective you can be, the sooner we can get the Marines out of here. We really do prefer to have you people run your own affairs.”

She stood up. “I must think about this, Colonel. Will you leave me now?”

### VIII

“We want to know what right you had to just barge in here and take over! We weren't bothering you.”

Colonel Anton Morgenhaus leaned back in his chair and gazed about the room. Much to his surprise, the denizens of Xanadan had not demonstrated in the streets but instead had politely requested a town-hall meeting. Several dozen people from Brampton itself were in attendance. Representatives from many other villages had carefully asked permission to fly in for the meeting, and Morgenhaus willingly accepted the request. He looked at the bearded man standing at the podium. Of medium height with dark brown hair, the man looked ferocious but seemed almost placid, as did the others in the room.

Captain Ethan Glock of the *Gdansk* also attended the meeting and sat next to Morgenhaus. He looked over at the colonel. So, Morgenhaus cleared his throat.

“First of all, I want to thank all of you for observing a modicum of politeness. I will readily admit these are unpleasant times for you and us. I appreciate your meeting with us today. My hope is that we will understand one another better. It would be naive of me to think we would ever agree on some things. But that's the situation we find ourselves in.”

“But... Sir,” the bearded man continued, “that does not explain your actions or the League's actions.”

“Correct. One of the reasons for the migration to the stars was that people wanted a place where they could be left alone, such as this place. And let's be honest, the League is not interested in how you govern yourselves. The League mainly desires a peaceful environment to conduct business.”

“And we don't want you here,” a woman in the back said loudly. “We don't need your interference in our business.”

Morgenhaus raised an eyebrow. “Truthfully, ma'am, the League is not interested in spending time here either. Notice the scarcity of interstellar traffic in the Faros system. There are a lot of other places where the profits are greater, and the customers are easier to deal with.”

“You still haven't answered the question.”

Glock sighed heavily. Morgenhaus put a hand on his arm to calm him.

“I'm getting there. The only condition the league places upon human colonies is that they sign the Universal Rights Covenant. The founder of this colony signed it. However you may decide to implement a government here, the declaration remains inviolable. It grants freedom of speech, religion, assembly, and economic freedom.”

“But that is subject to limitations, particularly concerning a society as a whole.” This from another man in the group.

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“That is correct within reason. I think if you look at a history of the League, you will find that it has tolerated a fair degree of, shall we say, diversity in how the covenant is implemented on separate worlds. But it also puts some hard limitations on government as well. Have you ever wondered why the Arabians have never established colonies?”

There was silence now, so Morgenhaus continued. “Sharia is the basis of their civil law, and we cannot modify it because it both predates the League and is on Earth. But we can prevent it from spreading. There are Muslim communities in several colonies, but they are forbidden to implement Sharia. They must submit to the prevailing law and the covenant. Does everyone understand this?”

“That sounds discriminatory to me,” came another voice in the group.

“Normally it would be so,” Morgenhaus responded, “however, the Arabians on Earth have never forsworn their desire to impose Sharia on everybody – at the point of a gun, if necessary. They also refuse to sign the Universal Rights Covenant. The consensus of civil society is that it is unacceptable.”

He paused for a few moments. No one responded further.

“Okay, when a group of Greens decided to establish this colony, the attitude of the League was that this would be an interesting experiment. And I must say, on the whole, you have done extremely well.”

“Then why not leave us alone?”

Morgenhaus grimaced and nodded. “Why indeed? Because you stepped over a line. If you had encouraged a dissident minority to leave by buying out their holdings and businesses, the League probably would have winked and looked the other way. In the long run, it probably would have a bad effect on the colony. That's neither here nor there. But, when you murdered a group of people simply because they did not share your ideals, we had to pay attention. This is not simply a difference of opinion with the League. Humanity has always recognized murder as something fundamentally immoral. And in my opinion, that's a mild word.”

“So we should have just let a group of sub-humans spread their infection about the galaxy?”

Morgenhaus looked around the room, trying to discern who spoke. He felt his anger growing.

“And who makes the determination about who is *human*? You deem someone sub-human because they don't share your lofty ideals of environmentalism? That makes you as guilty of murder as your leaders, who are under arrest.”

“So what are you going to do with us, then?” This from the bearded man.

Morgenhaus drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “What would I like to do, or what will I do?”

When there was no response, only silence, he continued.

“You murdered over eight-hundred innocents who were minding their own business and obeying the rules you placed upon the citizenry. Their only crime was worshiping a god you did not approve of. I wish I could make you understand the magnitude of your crime. You are sitting here today, and your only concern is how you can make the Marines and the Navy go away and leave you alone.”

“Why don't you do that? You don't want to be here any more than we want you.”

Again, the anonymous speaker. Morgenhaus stood up and leaned over, pressing his hands into the table.

## Cataclysm

“Let me explain something to you. I wish you would understand, but you probably won't. We keep the Arabians locked up in their domain on Earth because they believe anyone who disagrees with them is not really *human*. If we turned them loose on the sphere of man, the bloodletting would dwarf what you have done. I wish I could take you all into orbit and expose you to vacuum. I want to do that because I don't believe you will ever understand what I am saying. And we cannot keep you locked up here forever. Sooner or later, you will find an opportunity and a reason to murder another group of beings who simply wish to mind their own business.”

“But the environment is more important than people!” A woman stood up and jabbed her fist into the air.

“I rest my case. Though the thought is tempting, the League would not permit me to sterilize this planet. To do so would make me as bad as you. No, I plan to appoint a new government made up of citizens of this world. We will observe and supervise, but try as much as possible to minimize our presence here.”

The meeting lasted another hour but mainly continued the theme of Morgenhaus and the people politely talking past each other. Finally Morgenhaus called a halt.

“It appears we have covered everything. We have now plowed the same ground three times. I appreciate your patience, but I honestly don't think we will accomplish anything more today.”

Morgenhaus and Glock stood up and exited the room through the door next to the dais. The marine guards stayed in the room until the rest of the people left.

“I think,” Glock said, “I would dearly love to have your patience, Anton.”

Morgenhaus chuckled mirthlessly. “I was on the commission that *settled* the first war on Addison's Planet.” He held up his fingers in quote marks around *settled*.”

“What was that like?”

“Like this, except these people are so polite it's scary.”

“All I can say is it's probably a good thing I didn't have a gun with me today.”

The colonel snorted. “I wasn't carrying, either. These people are an *infection*. I just don't know if we can keep it from spreading.”

## IX

The *Gdansk's* navigator sat in the corner of the officers' mess and studied his comp term. He munched on a sandwich he had constructed from the mid-rats table and had his requisite glass of Hyperatomic Jungle Juice. A mix of fruit and vegetable juices fortified with electrolytes and mild stimulants, the beverage competed with coffee as the on-duty drink of choice for all Navy personnel.

One of the engineering officers slipped into the chair across from him with his own sandwich. He watched the navigator as he was absorbed in his comp term before deciding to interrupt.

“Sup, Ted?”

The navigator looked up. “Hey, Georgie. Just trying to puzzle through the readings I've collected on this star system. Something weird.”

“I don't think there's anything normal about this star system – starting with the people.”

## Cataclysm

“You got that right. When we came in-system, I did a quick survey, which diverged from the navy's last survey. I mean significantly.”

“Like what?”

“Well, for example, the count on planets is wrong, and some are in the wrong places.”

“Ha! Do the spectral measurements on Faros match up?”

“Yup. Same star. That's what I wondered at first – maybe we had the wrong charts, or something got turned around back at Earth.”

“Wouldn't be the first time. So the star's right, but everything else is wrong?”

“No. Just the inner planets. Everything else seems to be within norms.”

“So, follow Occam's Razor.”

“Uh, Georgie, you've got me on that one.”

“Some ancient guy on Earth. Anyway, the gist of the theorem is *The simplest explanation is probably the correct one.*”

“And what would that be, oh wise one?”

The engineering rating grinned. “That's easy, Commander. The planetary system will not go about rearranging itself, so, ergo, somebody back at Fleet Headquarters screwed up. What you do is try to get a complete survey while you are here and take it back to Earth. It's always fun to make someone look like an idiot, as long as they're not too highly placed.”

The navigator considered the advice as he finished his sandwich. The idea looked better and better.

Kyle Donner looked up as the door alert chirped. “Come!”

The Captain's Ready Room door opened, and the Navigator walked in.

“Yes, Ted?”

“Sir, I've been reviewing the survey for the Faros system, and it's just a mess. I'd like permission to conduct a full survey of the system – or as full as possible with our onboard resources.”

Donner leaned back in the chair. With the captain on-planet helping with the pacification, Donner was challenged to keep the crew occupied.

“Oookay. What do you mean *just a mess*, Commander?”

“Well, Sir, the inner planets are in the wrong places, according to the charts. And we have one more planet than reported. The locations and distances from Faros are inconsistent too.”

Donner pondered what the navigator said. “So, what do you need to conduct the survey, Nav?”

“I can do some from shipboard sensor readings, but it would really help if we could launch a couple of recon drones. It always helps to triangulate.”

“Okay, go ahead with the shipboard sensors. Do not launch any drones just yet. I'd like to talk to the Skipper about it first.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Thanks for bringing this to our attention. Those clowns back at Fleet probably messed up the records as usual.”

“Yes, Sir. Although, it looks like whoever did the original survey didn't know what the... well, what he was doing.”

Donner grinned. “I've got to ask this, Nav, but are you qualified on Survey?”



## Cataclysm

“Uh, no, Sir. I kind of study it in my spare time. It's sort of a hobby.”

Donner stuck his tongue into his cheek. “Hobby, eh? Okay, Ted, hop to it. If we get nothing else from this trip, I'd like to have accurate charts of the system.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

Donner smiled after the navigator left the ready room. The League Navy tried to pick intellectually inquisitive officers for its ships, and as a result, all sorts of interesting little side projects often engaged the crews. In this case, the happy result would be a new set of charts for the system and a reprimand to somebody else for sloppy work.

X

Captain Ethan Glock watched as a group of enlisted personnel from *Gdansk* moved freight from the shuttle to a small electric truck. Someone had done careful planning for this mission, and Glock was impressed. Part of the cargo was the requisite computational and communications equipment. The load also included a substantial stock of basic rations. No one knew whether the Xanadans would sell food to the occupiers, so having something to fall back on was wise. The navy had promised a follow-up visit with a freighter carrying more supplies.

So far, in Glock's opinion, the occupation had gone smoothly. The Xanadans were unhappy with the League but remained polite and passive. The League Marines were firm but mannerly. The locals went about their business and mainly ignored the League presence. Glock still worried about the possibility of a resistance movement springing up, but there was no evidence of such.

The lieutenant in command of the shuttle stepped up to the captain. “All done here, Sir.”

“Very well, Lieutenant. You have an efficient crew. Whenever you get clearance, please return to the ship. We can use one of the marine units if we need a shuttle.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

Glock stepped away from the spacecraft so the wash from its turbines didn't muss his uniform. As he waited for the takeoff, he looked around again. Xanadan was undeniably a beautiful world. Its relatively small axle tilt and lack of a moon boasted a placid climate. The Xanadans had imported enough Terran biology to support human life but carefully left most of the planet untouched. The native plants were lovely, and the animals colorful. There was little here dangerous to humans.

After the shuttle lifted off and the marines hauled off the cargo, Glock headed back to Government House and Colonel Morgenhaus.

“That's the last of the victuals for you, Colonel.”

Morgenhaus nodded. “Your people are very efficient, Ethan. I shall note that in my report back to Earth.”

Glock nodded. “Thank-you. I hate sloppy crews. Having a new ship like *Gdansk* allowed us to select a rather... above-average crew.”

“If everything drops into the crapper, which I fervently hope will not happen, we will need tip-top people to stay on top of things.”

Glock looked nervously about the office. “Are you getting indications of unrest?”

“Actually, no. I mean, the locals are not happy with us, but they freely sell us food, and they are cooperative. It's odd, really.”

## Cataclysm

“Colonel, if they want to go on being odd in this manner, I would not discourage them.”

Morgenhaus laughed. “Believe me, we are keeping our footprint as light as possible. I guarantee you the Greens all over the known universe will be screaming bloody murder about our act of environmental imperialism, as they call it. I don't want to give them an excuse to engage in any action whatsoever.”

“Has anybody considered bringing in a pet Green to be the acting governor or something?”

Morgenhaus raised an eyebrow. “Actually, yes. I've been thinking about this, and you should be on the need-to-know list. We have a resource on planet right now that may be able to do the job.”

Glock thought about the comment for a few moments. “That tall blond woman?”

Now Morgenhaus looked surprised. “Very perceptive, Captain. How did you smoke that one out?”

“Something just seemed funny. I can't explain it.”

“The woman is a dedicated green and loves this world. She was mainly incensed by Lefler's inhuman conduct. I am trying to talk her into assuming the position of acting governor. If she refuses, I will put myself in that position, but you can see potential opportunities.”

“I do. She was your inside source?”

Morgenhaus put a finger to his lips as he shook his head. “Let's just say that while a minority of the people here were involved in murder on a grand scale, the majority were horrified by what happened. I think we truly have a chance to pick up the pieces and get this colony on track again.”

“And let the Greens run it?”

“Why not? They bought and paid for it. They did the work to make it viable. If they behave themselves, this is the best place for them. They will have their world, and it's a nice one, too. And it will function as a pressure relief for the rest of the human universe. If the greens on other worlds get sufficiently unhappy, they can always immigrate here.”

“I thought they limited the population here,” Glock said.

“They do, but I think there is room for a modest increase without putting strain on the ecology they created.”

After a quick two-knock at the door, a marine captain stepped in.

“Sir, sorry to interrupt, but Lefler has escaped.”

The colonel looked at the navy captain. “It seems we were premature in patting ourselves on the back.” To the marine captain, “Okay, Captain Ferriss, let's have it.”

“Yes, Sir. When we brought Mr. Lefler's meal to him and opened the door, the room was empty.”

“And I suppose the guard was there the whole time.”

“No, Sir. The guard said he had stepped down the hall to use the fresher. He was gone maybe forty-five seconds.”

“And is Ms. Sterling gone too?”

“No, Sir. She is still in her room.”

“Okay, you know the drill. Get the search teams out, and see if we can locate him. You are going to have to search every house in the village.”

## Cataclysm

“Yes, Sir. I understand.”

“Then you'd better get your team busy. Then go get the guard and come report to me.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

After the guard captain left, the colonel gazed at Glock briefly. “These are the things that can happen on missions like this. And this is about as bad as it can get. If we lose Lefler into the planetary population, there will be no end to the trouble he could stir up.”

“Anything I can do to help, Anton?”

“If you would be willing to hang around, I have come to enjoy your advice.”

“Very well.”

### XI

Colonel Anton Morgenhaus looked with displeasure at the unfortunate guard captain, who was standing at attention before him.

“You searched the entire village and found nothing.”

“Yes, Sir. We searched every building. We even found several hideaways. Horace Lefler is not in the village, Sir.”

“You believe that, do you, Captain Ferriss?”

“Yes, Sir, I do.”

“And how could he leave the village without anyone seeing him?”

“Sir, I do not know.”

“Very well, Captain. You have put the guard on report?”

“Yes, Sir. He left his post.”

“Okay. We will need to decide the best time to deal with him. You may go.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

Captain Ethan Glock sat on the sinfully comfortable sofa along one office wall and watched the guard captain depart.

“If someone doesn't want to be found, Anton, they can be hard to catch. Particularly on a world like this one.”

Morgenhaus threw his arms in the air as he returned to the desk. “Oh, I know that. I can only fault him for his guard leaving his post to take a fresher break. Unfortunately, I will have to write up the captain for that one.”

“Not to mention Captain Ferriss's career.”

“At this point, I could care less. That one little error could cost us this entire operation.”

“Surely not.”

“Surely, *yes*, Ethan. Lefler is a *leader*. Certainly, he's not a nice man. He's a common murderer. But people follow him. The idiots elected him to be their First Citizen. He won't have to travel far to be out of our sight. We've only garrisoned a half dozen villages. Outside of that, he can go anywhere he pleases.”

“Are your drones up?”

“Heck, yes, the drones are up!”

“Sorry, I'm just trying to verbalize the problem to myself.”

Morgenhaus raised a hand. “Ah, sorry, Ethan. Things were going so well; I hate having something like this happen. I shouldn't take it out on you.”

## Cataclysm

“Not a problem. Let me call the ship. I can have Donner drop a couple of spysats into orbit. Do you have anyone who can analyze the take?”

“Yes, and I would appreciate that.”

Commander Kyle Donner had just spent eighteen hours in the Ready Room clearing away the reports from the department heads. He was ready for bed. His comm cheeped.

“Captain's Ready Room, Commander Donner speaking.”

“Sir, an incoming call from the Skipper. Shall I transfer it?”

“Yes, please.”

“Hey, Kyle. How are things in orbit?”

Donner smiled at his captain's informality. “Nominal, Skipper. We're mainly monitoring the traffic to and from the three space stations.”

“A bit of bad news, I'm afraid. Horace Lefler managed to escape.”

Donner's breath hissed between his teeth. “Did he have some help, or did we screw up?”

“A little of both. Anyway, I need you to launch two spysats. The colonel will send the connection data so his people, here on the ground, can review the take.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper. We'll get right on it.”

“Thanks, Kyle.”

Donner broke the connection and dialed the Tactical Officer.

“Mr. Yates?”

“Yes, Exec?”

“I hope I didn't get you out of bed.”

“No, Sir. I was just getting ready to crawl in. What can I help you with?”

“I need you in the Ready Room as soon as you can get here.”

“Aye, aye, Sir. On my way.”

Either the Tactical Officer slept in his clothes or was a quick dresser. His uniform was in place when he walked into the ready room and was neat too.

“Thanks for coming, Vernon. I need you to prep and launch a couple of spysats. Horace Lefler managed to escape.”

“Wowser! I mean, Sir.”

“I take your point,” Donner smiled. “The colonel will send the details on who you will send the take to.”

“Has he got the computational power to analyze the take?”

“He's got a Class 3 AI down there.”

“That's as good as we have on the ship. I guess it will do the job.”

“And he has probably got somebody trained for that kind of recon.”

The TACO nodded. “I'd better get on it then, Sir.”

“Okay. Go get busy. Call me if you need anything.”

“Don't you ever sleep, Exec?”

“I thought I would get caught up while we were here in orbit, but I was wrong.”

## XII

Lieutenant-Commander Ted Welsh was having the time of his life. He considered himself a very good navigator but rarely had the opportunity to indulge in his hobby

## Cataclysm

while on the clock for the Navy. It was 3AM ship's time, and he had commandeered the Tactical Officer's station after Yates had gone to bed. Since this was the middle of the night, and Welsh was technically off-duty, Lieutenant Molly Rewald had the deck watch. She was bemused by the navigator's efforts with the tactical sensors.

As far as he knew, Welsh had located all of the planets in the system. He was now trying to determine their orbits. This was a time-consuming process because (a) it just takes a while to line up enough observations to get orbital information, and (b) he really was not competent on the tactical systems. He reached the conclusion he probably needed to talk the TACO into giving him some training.

Commander Welsh was not a night owl. Normally he crawled into his bunk as early as circumstances would allow. But he was having too much fun and too excited about the project to sleep. So here he was, monitoring the tactical sensors in the middle of the night.

Apparently, he was not the only day bird. Periodically he would hear Lieutenant Rewald get out of the command chair and pace the perimeter of the bridge.

"Sleepy tonight, Lieutenant?" he said as she passed him on one of her trips.

"Sure am, Sir. I never have liked these graveyard watches. Maybe when I finally make senior TACO, I'll get a normal night's sleep."

Welsh grinned. "Don't count on it. Along with the increased responsibility comes less sleep. You saw what time the Exec went to bed."

Rewald groaned. "You are not making my evening, Sir."

Sensing a movement out of the corner of his eye, Welsh swung back to look at the screen. "Now I wonder what that is?"

Rewald stopped her pacing and quickly stepped over to the tactical station. She bent over to look at the screens. "Commander, could you give me the station for a few minutes? It looks like we have a rabbit here. You might want to start laying out some possible courses if we have to go after this guy."

"Right, Lieutenant." Welsh climbed out of the chair, and just as quickly, Rewald slipped into it. She typed a couple of commands and then adjusted the screen. She then punched a button on the console.

"This is Commander Donner."

"This is the OD, Exec. We have a small ship of some kind just leaving station Alpha and is piling on acceleration away from here."

"Okay, Lieutenant. Wake up, engineering, and recall the bridge watch. We're probably going hunting."

"Aye, aye, Sir."

"I'll be up there as soon as I can."

Rewald stepped over to the command chair and punched a button on the arm.

"Engineering."

"This is the OD. The Exec wants the systems powered up, and probably it needs to be like right now."

"Aye, aye, OD. We're on it."

Rewald thought for a moment and pushed another button. She was answered with a sleepy hello.

"Commander Yates, this is Molly. I think we got a rabbit. Pulled away from Station Alpha. I got the Exec and Engineering up. Maybe...."

## Cataclysm

“Maybe is right. I'll be up in a few minutes.”

Within ten minutes, the bridge was fully occupied. Welsh was in the navigator's chair. Molly Rewald was at her station in Tactical. Dusty Schroeder was on the helm. Donner strode into the room.

“Status, Tactical?”

“Sir, it looks like a small destroyer or maybe a corvette. I suppose even a private yacht. It pulled away from Station Alpha and is heading out at 245 degrees.”

He looked over at the communications officer. “Comm, hail him and ask him to cut his acceleration. I want to do an inspection.”

He punched a button on the arm of the command chair.

“Captain Glock,” came the voice out of the speaker.

“Skipper, we have a small starship doing a rabbit away from Station Alpha. Request permission to run him down for an inspection.”

“Granted, Exec. I wonder if Lefler managed to get himself aboard. Keep me posted.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

Donner looked at his status displays. “Okay, Nav, I need a course.”

“Yes, Sir. We should come to 180 and run until we clear orbit. Then go to 245 this plane.”

“You got that, Helm?”

“Yes, Sir. 180 until we clear the planetary approaches, and then to 245; same plane.”

“Very well,” Donner said, “execute!”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

The *Gdansk* gracefully slipped away from her position in orbit and began the long chase.

### XIII

“This bird is really moving,” the Tactical Officer murmured. He turned in his chair. “Exec, bogie one is pulling about three-hundred-fifty gravities.”

Donner nodded. “Very well. Helm, bring us to eighty percent on the drives.”

“Eighty percent, aye, Sir.”

*Gdansk*, being new build, could run down most anything in space she could handle and away from anything she couldn't. At eighty percent, she eased up to four-hundred gravities

Lieutenant Rewald leaned over and pointed to something on Yates' screen. He studied it for a few moments.

“Exec, Station Alpha is shifting orbit.”

“What?” Donner leaned forward, then shifted back in his seat to look at his tactical repeater. “What the devil?”

“He's pushing out a lot of delta-V. I don't know where he thinks he's going. Wait a minute; Beta is starting to move also.”

Donner shook his head. “Comm, send a message to the captain with status. Vernon, keep an eye on things, but I want to corral bogie one. The stations won't go far.”

## Cataclysm

“Aye, aye, Sir. Uh, Nav, do you need this program you're running on my spare screen?”

Welsh looked up. “Yes, can you transfer it to my spare?”

“Sure thing. Interesting scenario you're developing.”

The navigator gave him a puzzled look as the tactical officer transferred the program. Welsh's second screen flickered, and the display came up. He looked at the dotted red line, which plotted the orbit of the fourth planet. He jumped to his feet.

“Oh, no! Oh, no! Oh, no! Exec. My God! The fourth planet is going to collide with Xanadan!”

Now Donner was on his feet and leaning over the display. “What are you talking about?”

“I've been trying to nail down the system survey, and none of the orbits made sense. I don't think the fourth planet was here when they did the original survey. Look at the probable track.” He pointed to the yellow line arcing out of the Faros system.

“And it's dead on course for Xanadan, Ted. How long do we have?”

“I don't know, Sir. Maybe an hour. It's right on top of them.”

Donner whirled and pointed to the communications tech. “Lauran, Send this message to the Skipper and Colonel Morgenhaus. Keep sending until they acknowledge.”

“Ready, Exec,” the comm tech said.

“Condition Zebra. Get off the planet immediately. Incoming planetary collision. Repeat: incoming planetary collision. End message. Now, send it!”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

“Nav, are we clear of a possible debris field?”

“Unknown, Sir.” Welsh studied his screen. “Suggest we come to two-seven-five, sub fifteen.”

“Make it so, Helm.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

Yates looked up. “Exec, may we assume that bogie one is not our primary interest right now?”

Donner looked over at Yates. “Sorry, TACO, yes, we can forget about the bogie for the moment. Nav, how long should we maintain acceleration to keep us out of the debris?”

Welsh shook his head. “Sir, I don't know. We're about sixty-eight thousand miles out right now.”

Donner scratched his head. “Okay, Helm, give me a vector, oh, say, 200 in the same plane. Then hold acceleration until we're half a million miles out. Then cut acceleration.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

Donner continued. “Tactical, there's going to be a lot of debris. Watch for anything coming this way.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

Rewald pointed out something on Yates' screen. He spoke up. “Sir, Space Station Gamma has started accelerating.”

“Is he going to get clear?”

“Unknown, Sir.”

“Let's get the time and impact point dialed in.”

## Cataclysm

“Sir, the Skipper, and the Colonel have both acknowledged,” said the comm tech. “The Skipper ordered us to stand clear.”

Donner nodded. In this situation, the safety of the ship was his primary concern. If Ted Welsh's calculations were correct, and it seemed they were, then the inner system around Faros would shortly be a junkyard. And a lot of people were going to die.

Captain Ethan Glock knocked and entered Colonel Morgenhaus's suite. “Anton, I've got one shuttle picking up our personnel in the outer villages. The other shuttle will be here momentarily.”

Morgenhaus nodded. “Does it make you feel guilty leaving the people of this planet to die?”

Glock shook his head. “We've got our duty, Anton. And, yes, I do.”

A shriek of turbines announced the shuttle's arrival in the street in front of Government House. The two officers looked at each other and walked to the door. Morgenhaus stopped in the hallway and opened a locked door. A sleepy-looking Cynthianna Sterling sat up in bed.

“What's going on.”

“Grab your clothes,” Morgenhaus said, “we're leaving. Right now.”

“You didn't answer my question.”

“We've got a big rock incoming – it'll probably wipe out the whole planet.”

“What? What about the people here?”

“I'm sorry, there's no time. We'll be lucky to make it out of here by ourselves. Now, come on!”

She swung out of bed and grabbed a robe. Morgenhaus waited at the door for her. Glock trotted down the stairs and out into the street. The local garrison quickly loaded the shuttle as several other marines sprinted towards the craft. Glock scanned the sky, and the crescent of the incoming rogue planet was directly overhead. It almost seemed to swell visibly as he watched.

Morgenhaus stepped out into the street, followed by Cynthianna. She stopped to look up.

“Come on,” he said, “there's no time.”

“I'm not going.”

“What? Of course, you are. Now get in.”

“I'm not going, Anton.”

He stopped and looked at her. “What are you saying?”

“This is my world, Anton. I love it. I can't leave all these people.”

The loadmaster yelled from the shuttle. “Colonel, come on. There's no time.”

Glock trotted up the ramp and into the shuttle. Morgenhaus looked at Cynthianna.

“There's no time to argue, Cynthianna.”

“Then go.”

Morgenhaus stood in the street and stared at her for another few seconds, then turned and sprinted toward the shuttle. As soon as he stepped aboard, the loadmaster hit the button. As the hatch began to close, the shuttle lurched into the air. With a scream of turbines, the craft clawed for altitude.

XIV



## Cataclysm

“The first shuttle is clear, Sir,” Lieutenant-Commander Yates said. “Okay, the second one is coming up now. The Skipper and the Colonel are on the second one.”

“Are they going to get clear?”

Yates shook his head. “I cannot say, as yet, Sir.”

“What about the orbital stations?”

“Alpha *may* get clear. I don't think the other two have a chance.”

Donner punched a button on the arm of his chair.

“Science Lab. This is Lieutenant Shields.”

“Are you set up to observe, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, Sir. The constellation of drones is in place and recording.”

“Okay, then. Please start modeling the debris field. I need to know if Yanadan is in danger as well.”

“Aye, aye, Sir. And we're on it. Any news on the Skipper?”

“He's on his way out. I don't know if he's going to make it.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.”

“Mr. Yates, do you have a time to impact?”

“About fifteen minutes, Sir.”

Donner chewed on a thumbnail. His fear for the Captain and the Colonel did not quite mask the hollow pit in his stomach over the thousands of lives that would shortly be snuffed out.

Horace Lefler sat on the screened porch of the mountain chalet he had borrowed from a friend. He was finishing a very satisfactory breakfast as he leaned back in his chair to sip from his cup of coffee. He decided things were going well. The arrival of the navy was not unexpected, and he was able to put some contingencies in place. There were really not enough marines on the ground to maintain any kind of control over the populace. The people understood the need to remain passive. Sooner or later, something serious would pop up in the League, and the occupiers would be gone. Then he would be back in business.

It was a very quiet morning. Lefler glanced around and cocked his head. The normal birdsong was completely absent. He thought it strange. He took another sip of his coffee and pondered. A deep rumble rolled through the hills, and the house trembled. Lefler frowned. This area was not known to be geologically active. In fact, earthquakes were rare anyplace on Xanadan. This was curious.

He stood and stepped through the screened door into the garden that decorated the back of the chalet. He walked into the garden and stopped to sip his coffee again. He looked up and gasped. The next temblor knocked him to the ground. He lay on his back as the ground heaved around him, staring at the monstrosity that filled half the sky. As he heard the house collapse, he wondered what it would feel like to die.

Ruben Glover and Joey Conner sat in the control room of Space Station Beta. Around them, the station's structure creaked and groaned as it was subjected to an acceleration it had not been designed for.

Conner looked over at the other man. “We're not going to make it.”

“How much more acceleration would be required to break free?”

“Ruben, the station is coming apart already.”

“How much more?”

“Maybe another twenty percent.”

## Cataclysm

Glover nodded. “We will surely die if we don't. Go ahead and ease more power into the drives. At this point, we've got nothing to lose.”

Conner nodded and typed a command into his terminal. The fusion jet in the station's core began increasing its output. “We're going to start losing pieces of the structure.”

“We'll just have to lose them.”

“If we unbalance too far, we won't be able to hold it.”

“If we don't, we don't.”

The two men watched the controls and kept glancing at the approaching rogue planet.

“I can't believe this,” Glover said. “It's like the fist of God.”

“Don't be silly. It's a hostile universe, and we drew the short straw.”

Glover shook his head and cut off his comm screen. There was no time to answer the panicked calls from around the station.

Ahead of them, a massive bolt of lightning sundered the rapidly closing space between the two worlds. The station began swaying in the grip of competing gravity fields. With a screech and a groan, one of the arms of the station tore away; then, both men screamed as the station buckled under the forces of gravity and the surging drive.

The marine shuttle bucked indescribably as the pilots wove its path between two colliding planets. The gravitic shear drive shrieked as the pilots engaged it within the atmosphere – definitely against the book. But there was no longer a vacuum between Xanadan and the rogue world as the gravitational forces reached out, and the two atmospheres began merging. The air was wild with lightnings as the voltage potential found multiple paths to slake its raging thirst.

Glock glanced around the shuttle cabin as they flew through the maelstrom. Assuming they survived the trip, there would be some injuries to treat. Colonel Morgenhaus's head lolled – during one particularly violent lurch, he had banged it against the side bulkhead. Glock hoped his neck wasn't broken. Glancing out of the port, he could now see the curvature of both worlds. It was going to be *very* close.

## XV

*A ringside seat, thought Commander Kyle Donner, as he sat in the command chair. Who woulda thunk it? An opportunity to see the celestial event of the millennium. And I get to watch the death of thousands of people.*

Gdansk had launched its entire fleet of reconnaissance drones. The fifteen tiny craft flitted about the Faros star system and now collected data from their vantage points. As the two planets approached collision, the flicker of the lightnings between them grew into a solid shaft of blue-white light as the unbalanced voltage poured between them. The facing sides of the worlds began distending, and a lurid orange glare peered through cracks in the crust.

The bridge of Gdansk was silent as they watched the stellar tsunami. The actual intersection of the two worlds seemed to happen in slow motion, even though the collision speed was several tens of miles per second. The two planets merged into one and almost immediately began expanding again. The force of the collision drove the ejecta away in a huge explosion.

## Cataclysm

“What a mess!” Donner commented.

The navigator looked back at the Executive Officer with tears running down his face. “I could've figured this out sooner, Sir.”

“Come on, Ted,” Donner said softly, “You did more than anyone else. We, at least, got some of our people out.”

“But so many died.”

“So they did. It would have happened whether or not we were here.”

The communications tech raised her hand. “Signal from the Skipper's shuttle, Sir! They made it out.”

Donner gave a deep sigh and rested his head in his hands. Then he looked up. “Acknowledge receipt. Tell them we'll put on the porch light.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

“Tactical, any sign of orbital station Alpha?” They had observed the breakup of Beta and Gamma.

“Nothing, Sir. But our screens are pretty cluttered right now.”

“Keep watching. Helm, plot a course to take us in closer. Coordinate with tactical to keep us out of the debris field. But if somebody made it out of that, we need to be in position for possible SAR.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

Four hours later, Donner stood in the Boat Bay and watched as the Sick Bay Attendants carried several litters containing injured marines out of the shuttle. Finally, Captain Glock stepped out of the hatch, assisting Colonel Morgenhaus.

The Bosun's pipe trilled, followed by the announcement, “*Gdansk* arriving.”

Donner saluted the captain, who simply nodded. He had both arms around the colonel to keep him upright. Two of the SBAs hurried over and took control of the colonel. Glock then walked over to Donner and shook his hand.

“Unbelievable day, Kyle.”

“I just can't believe it, Sir.” He shook his head and could think of nothing further to say.

“Is it true our navigator figured things out?”

“Yes, although we probably would have figured it out sooner or later.”

“It couldn't have been any later for us,” Glock said. “When we get back to Earth, I'm going to put a recording of that flight into the simulator. And I'm putting the pilots in for medals, as well as for Ted Welsh. He saved our lives. How's the ship?”

“Nominal, Skipper,” Donner grinned. “The ship and the crew performed well, Sir.”

“Has the Science Department plotted the debris field?”

Donner grimaced. “Yes, Sir. In about fourteen months, it will intersect with Yanadan's orbit. Our people believe that planet probably won't survive it either.”

“Okay. Get a message off to them warning them to prepare for evacuation. Find out their population numbers. We're going to have to get back to Earth and put together a rescue fleet.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper.”

“Can you hold the fort for a while longer?”

“Yes, Skipper.”

“Good. I need to go lie down.”

## Cataclysm

“No, Skipper, you need to go to Sick Bay.”

Donner nodded at the sole remaining SBA in the boat bay. “Please escort the Captain to Sick Bay.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

Donner shook his head and began his walk to the bridge.

### XVI

Commodore Ethan Glock stood in a corner of the bridge and watched Captain Kyle Donner bring the cruiser *Gdansk* into orbit about Yanadan in the Faros system. Along with *Gdansk* were fourteen starliners and seven destroyers. This was all the admiralty had been able to scare up on short notice, but Glock thought it would be adequate. Yanadan had only recently begun terraforming and was not heavily populated.

Donner gave the *done with engines* command and stood up. He walked over to where the Commodore was observing.

“I had a thought, Commodore.”

Glock nodded. “And what is your thought?”

“Do you suppose God sent that planet into the system as judgment for what those people did?”

“How long have you been thinking about that question, Kyle?”

“It was the first thing that came to my mind when Welsh figured out what was happening.”

“And six months later, you want me to confirm that to you?”

“No, Sir. I just wanted to see if you thought I was crazy.”

Glock folded his arms across his chest and puffed his cheeks. “I must confess that when I received your message to evacuate, I had much the same thought.”

“You did, Sir?”

“Yes, I did. As to the answer to the question?” He looked at the new captain of the cruiser. “I don't think we'll know in this life.” He snorted and shook his head. “But, between you and me, the timing was awfully convenient, don't you think?”