

Chapter 1

Star HR 8734. 64.3 Light Years for Sol in the Constellation Pisces.

"We're starting to pick up the disk of the moon coming around the giant, ma'am," said Ensign Naxos Panagos.

Lieutenant Commander Elise Jansson leaned forward in her chair, arrested by the straps that held her in place in the zero gravity. She ran a hand through her short red hair, feeling a bit of the warp transit sickness all living beings experienced. The rim of the moon, tidally locked to the world it orbited, was coming around the super-Jupiter gas giant. The grav lens system brought the moon into clear focus, and she could make out the blurred edge that indicated a gas envelop. It was supposed to be a beautiful planet, with rich forests and grasslands, wide shallow oceans, proteins compatible with human physiology.

"Where are the damned forests?" shouted the Commander Jansson as the globe came into full view and the grav lens zoomed in on the surface. The forests, a deep green on the surveys of the world, should have been apparent on the continent in view. It had covered over two fifths of the eastern part of the continent, separated by mountains and deserts from the slightly smaller woodlands of the west. Now, everything had the dun color of exposed earth, only the deep desert regions looking the same. No, there was one small section over on the west coast, but it was the wrong color, more of a purplish blue, like someone was planting things from some other environment there. Something that humans wouldn't do, at least not to an entire world.

"I'm running the images through the computer, ma'am," said Naxos. "Comparing it to the maps we have on file. So far nothing. No towns, no landing fields, no farms. I'm increasing discrimination, in case there are some smaller objects."

"What's that?" asked Commander Jansson, pointing to the planet, her interface linking with the view and zooming in on what looked like a large crater near the east coast of the continent.

"It looks like the mark of a kinetic strike," replied Panagos, squinting as he looked at the same image on the screen over his station. "Fairly recent, to."

An hour after running the world through the computer they had found nothing. The space station that should have been built from the huge sub-light colony ship that had brought them here, ready to accept the following vessels that were schedule to arrive every five years, was not in orbit. No trace of life, or civilization, with the exception of the purplish vegetation, which showed up on visuals as a dense forest of large, weird shaped trees. The commander was sure she had seen their like before, but she couldn't place them.

"Warm up the warp com," she ordered the communications officer, Lieutenant Junior Grade Patka Agnihotri. "When it's ready, send this message I'm composing to Earth."

The warp com could pulse the drive of the ship in discrete signals, much like the seafaring powers. Two pulses a second, it could be used to send a limited message to Earth what they had found, but not the details. Navigation aligned the ship with the signal, and in the seven days it took for the pulse to reach it, traveling by wave propagation at thirty-four thousand times the speed of light. The signal traveled in a straight line, unimpeded at the source which could be picked up for light hours in any direction.

The commander sent the message she had composed to the communications officer, shunting it across to the woman's board. It was just the basics for now, that the colony was not there, the moon had been changed by factors unknown and was no longer as it had been, that something had been planted there in the place of the indigenous vegetation. It would still take several minutes for

one transmission, and protocol was to send it over and over again for an hour, to make sure all of it would get through. If possible.

"I'm picking up space compression signatures from the inner system, ma'am," said Naxos, looking back wide eyed at his captain. "Four objects, heading in our direction."

"How large?" asked the commander, feeling a shiver run down her spine. They were the only warp ship out this way, and as far as they knew only humans had that kind of vessel.

"Estimating five hundred thousand tons, ma'am. Moving at a pseudospeed of four hundred and thirty c."

Now sweat beaded on the commander's face. There were only two Alcubierre drive ships near that size in human space, battleships that belonged to Earth's fleet. And the greatest speed that had been achieved by a human Alcubierre drive ship until recently was three hundred and forty-one warps, the equivalent of that many times the speed of light across normal space. Her ship could only make two ninety, so there was no running from these guys, and she doubted they would be able to outfight them. But they had to try to get away.

"Send a quick pulse back to base. Under attack by forces unknown. Then get us the hell out of here."

As soon as the com officer finished with the simple four pulse code the helm turned the ship away and engaged the

Alcubierre drive. Space blurred on the viewer as space was warped around the vessel. It went from a standing stop to a pseudospeed of a hundred lights in ten seconds, and continued climbing to maximum from there. It wasn't really moving, not as most ships moved. It was actually compressing the space in front while expanding that to the rear, making the ship and its bubble slide along like a bead on a string. The ships following were compressing space at a much more furious rate, and were closing on the *Sacagawea* quickly.

The human ship was the smallest of the operational vessels of the human fleets. Eighty meters long with a hull of thirty meters in width, tapering at both ends to flattened areas ten meters wide. The single ring that was the Alcubierre drive extended fifteen meters further from the hull. The ship massed under five thousand tons, and carried a crew of thirty-five. And, like most ships, only carried the warp torpedoes that were the only weapons humanity had developed for fighting in warp.

"Can you get a targeting solution on them, Lieutenant?"

Naxos looked at his board for a moment, nodding, then shaking his head. "I having a lot of trouble getting a fix on them, ma'am. But I can get a shot that brings the torpedo close enough that it might be able to acquire."

"Do it."

"Targeting?"

Jansson thought for a moment, all the time she had. One torpedo to each of the chasing ships, all on one, or some combination.

"Target them all on the leader." Maybe if they took that one out the others would drop back for search and rescue. Not much of a hope, but all they had.

Naxos nodded, then went to work on the board he had reconfigured to a tactical station. He pressed the commit panel a moment after the target centered in the viewer. The warp field didn't allow much in the way of vision, light was distorted as it transited the bubble, light ahead blue shifted, that behind pushed to the red part of the spectrum. But the computer was indicating it was as close to a lock as he was going to get. Outside the ship four small objects, each four meters in length and visual duplicates of the ship, dropped out of their compartment in the amidships section of the vessel, riding within the frigate's warp bubble. The warp bubble acted as much like a protective field, coherent light not able to penetrate, and matter being ripped apart unless it was of sufficient mass. They moved away, spinning up their own warp rings, then sliced through the ship's bubble, their own field protecting them from the stresses that would tear apart any material object as small as they. As soon as they were out in space they oriented and took off, heading for the enemy vessel

at over nine hundred warps, their smaller path through space allowing for much greater speed.

Objects left all of the chasing ships, speeding out and curving into interception paths. All of her torpedoes were blown out of space before they had covered half the distance, and four of the enemy weapons continued on.

"Contact in twelve seconds," called out Naxos, his voice strangely calm in the way of warriors in combat.

It was a surreal experience. Without inertia it was as if they were standing still in space, and not accelerating and decelerating as the helm tried to go into all the evasive maneuvers he could think of. Every couple of seconds there was a sharp shake as the warp drive fail to compress space as smoothly as it was expanding it to the rear.

The commander waited for her death, but the objects slowed, one poking through the *Sacagawea's* warp field and releasing a wave of energy. The ship shook as if every system on the ship went down, and it dropped out of warp to a standstill in deep space.

"Get our systems back up," yelled the commander, looking around the bridge with a feeling of panic. Nothing was working, everything was dark. She had been ready for death, but she didn't like the implications of what the aliens had done to them. Without power they couldn't even engage the self-destruct

systems. Not until engineering could cut through the heavy bulkheads that controlled access to the anti-matter containers. All she could do at the moment was wait while the crew tried to bring power back to the ship. The hull shook as something bumped into their side, the inertia of normal space once more a real and discernible force. A screech of metal was the next sound she heard, as something cut through the hull.

"Prepare to repel boarders," she called out, a command she had never thought she would give in a vessel such as this. Not that it would do much good if they carried as many people as she thought.

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Montana: G 1-5V class star, 45.7 Light Years from Sol in the Constellation Scorpius.

Lt. Commander Matthew Chin cursed under his breath once again as he tried to turn the retaining bolt on the panel of the warp torpedo. He felt like slamming his socket wrench into the body of the five meter long object, then thought of the price of the expensive piece of hardware he was working on. Not the most expensive thing on the ship, but still worth a couple of million Earth credits, discounting the Nullium with which it would eventually be charged.

Matthew ran a hand through his short, dark hair, his almost black eyes narrowing in thought. Leave was coming soon, that is if he could get everything taken care of that was his responsibility. He was looking forward to hitting the dirt of Montana, and being in the company of females who were not in his chain of command. With his dark Eurasian looks and the body he spent hours working on each day, he had an easy time with the ladies. And there was his friend's elevation ceremony to attend. But he wouldn't get there if the weapons of the *Zachary Peterson*, DD27, the first Alcubierre drive destroyer of the small Montana navy, weren't in perfect working order. He wished he could just pass this task on to the people working in his section, but they were hard at work on other systems.

"Why don't you take a break," said a familiar voice from behind, the accent recognizable by anyone who had grown up on Montana. There were no 'th' sounds in that speech, and the being for the life of it couldn't pronounce an 's', though 'x' and 'z' sounds were predominant.

"Because, Lt. Commander Xelarn," said Matt, turning to look at his friend floating in the air near the hatch of the small compartment, "I want to get back home and reacquaint myself with some human females."

Xelarn made a buzzing noise that passed for laughter in his people. "The human sex drive will be the death of your species someday. Mark my words."

Matt smiled, looking over his friend, who was as non-human as an alien got in human space. In a gravity well the Xakalar male walked on four widespread legs, looking much like variations of human arms. The meter of lower body lifted three quarters of meter of the ground, and was mounted in the front by a three quarter meter torso that looked very human, though with some differences. Four arms were attached to the torso, each with the same four digit manipulation organs that were attached to the *legs*. The head was attached to the torso by a neck that was almost nonexistent, except when the creature wanted to extend it. One large eye was situated in the center of the head, an almost lipless mouth below, sharp teeth showing in a very human smile. At first humans had not seen how the Xakalar possessed the excellent depth perception that they did, owning only a single eye. That orb actually had a dozen different nerve bundles radiating back and down to the brain, giving them an integrated three dimensional vision much better than that of humans.

The alien was now stretched out in the air, torso forward and at the same level as the thorax, allowing the creature the use of all his manipulating organs. Humans had been surprised at

how agile Xakalar were once they got into zero gee, almost like they had been made for it. And they could fit through much more narrow spaces than humans, again, like they had been a space dwelling species, just like their legends said.

"I truly feel sorry for you, my friend," said Matt after a barking laugh. "I know you only have sex to reproduce, and only when the females are in heat. Too bad that only happens once a year."

"It leaves us time for other, more important, activities," said the alien, swimming through the air like a fish in a lake. With a flip of his widened *hands* he came to a stop, his eye focused on the warp torpedo. "And what seems to be the problem?"

"Don't you have some engines to look after?" said Matt, shrugging his shoulders and turning back to work on the panel, pulling hard at a bolt that wouldn't budge.

"My engines are in perfect shape." Xelarn was the chief engineer of the destroyer. "I'm ready to go home and see my family."

"The damned things don't work," said Matt with a sneer, looking up at the Xakalar.

"And they won't, until we get a load of Nullium on board. Not my fault, or my problem. The fleet will get it to us when they want to." The Xakalar looked down at the panel, then

reached forward and ran a hand over the bolt. "I could try that, if you want."

Matt glared at his friend. The Xakalar were so much better at many things than humans, and men were much better than them at so many other things. It made them the perfect combination for space. The one thing the Xakalar were not was stronger than humans. Matt saw no way the alien could loosen a bolt he couldn't. So with a smile he handed his friend the socket wrench. "Be my guest."

Matt moved out of the way as Xelarn pulled himself closer to the torpedo, using a handhold on the rack holding the device. He placed the socket on the bolt and tried to give it a turn, a buzzing hiss coming from his mouth as his muscles tightened and the bolt refused to budge.

The human laughed and was about to grab the wrench back so he could do his job, but Xelarn started to vibrate his hand, at the same time sending out a sonic tone that caused objects in the room to buzz with vibration. He continued this for some seconds, then turned the wrench, the bolt rotating a complete turn.

"I think you can get it now, my friend."

"How in the hell did you do that?" asked Matt, staring at the bolt, then at his friend. "I didn't know you could do that."

"I didn't either, until a couple of hours ago. I, too, had a bolt that wouldn't budge on an access panel. So, I did to it what I did with this one, and it came free."

"And how in the hell did you figure it out? Trial and error?"

"It, just happened. As if it was something my body and mind knew how to do, even if consciously I didn't. Now, what did you need that panel off for?"

"For this," said Matt, reaching into the opening and pulling out a small circuit board, taking a duplicate from his side pouch and pushing it back into the slot. "Damn diagnostic said it was out, and I couldn't leave the ship if I had a malfunctioning bird." Of course, the torp still wouldn't work, not until it had Nullium injected into its warp ring. And like the ship, it would have to wait for the fleet to deliver it to the asteroid dock they were berthed in. Once they got the exotic matter aboard they could take their shakedown cruise, and the most powerful ship in the local navy would be in service.

"It checks out," said Matt in triumph as he ran the diagnostic on the weapon.

"So, it will hit the broad side of a planet when you fire it?" said Xelarn with a laugh.

"Hopefully much better than that," said Matt, looking back at his friend. "If that's the best we can do, we're screwed."

"Now," said the black furred alien, patting the human on the shoulder with a right middle hand. "How about a break? I think we can both use it. I didn't know when I joined this shipwreck that you humans were such slave drivers."

"Sounds good," said Matt, straightening, then walking toward the hatch, his magnetic soles resisting each step to keep him on the deck, while his friend floated along. The alien could use the deck if he needed to, since his suit had deployable gloves with the same magnetic grips. He just didn't need to very often, to the envy of the human crew.

It was too bad they couldn't enjoy eating the same meal, since the species shared very few of the same proteins. It meant they had to carry different rations for the Xakalar than the humans. Considering what they added to the mix, Matt would have said it was worth the effort.

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Sol system.

The warp drive system had revolutionized space travel, and communication. Vessels were now able to go from the Solar system to the edge of explored space in a couple of months, instead of almost a hundred years. It was still cheaper to send large numbers of people by sublight colony ship. Or at least it had

been until the discovery of large quantities of the substance Nullium in the Montana system. The rare mineral was the only thing that would power the Alcubierre drive. Communications were still slow. Warp com sped it up, allowing for simple messages to be sent across human space in weeks. More detailed messages still took a warp ship to deliver, much like the mail steamers used centuries ago.

"We're receiving a transmission by warp pulse, sir," said one of the techs in the back of the station control room. "From Pisces."

Captain Akimasa Nagumo walked leisurely over to the com station, comfortable in the half gravity of the rotating habitat. He didn't have any reason to feel trepidation at an incoming message from that constellation. There were, after all, three colonies in that region of space, one well established, two relatively new. And a number of warp drive vessels performing various missions. Ships and colonies were constantly sending warp messages to each other and to Earth.

The pulsing of the message was coming over the speakers near the tech's station. Nagumo could read the code, much as any naval officer, but he had come in late to the first transmission and hadn't caught it all. What he had caught was alarming, and he waited through the second transmission to get a better idea.

"Send this one the Earth, immediately," he ordered as soon as the message became clear. Earth might have already gotten the message, since the warp pulse would propagate across the system and beyond in an instant. Since this was something they really needed to hear, he wasn't about to take that chance.

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"And this was all we got?" asked Earth President Dalisay Bautista, her eyes locked on the image of her chief military officer. The Filipino woman had only occupied the office for less than a year, it being her turn on the rotating council.

Admiral Sergei Yanotov was both sitting behind the desk in his huge office, and in a chair around the council table on another continent. The officer had a large heavy desk with a number of electronic devices built into the surface. Pictures of his various commands, mostly insystem warships, populated the near wall, while a model of the latest capital ship of his fleet sat on the credenza against that wall. The conversation nook on the other side of the room was currently hidden by a three dimensional holograph of human space. Behind the desk was a view of daytime London, with buildings towering thousands of meters into the air that was filled with aircraft moving along the flyways.

The council chamber was also a large room, dominated by an enormous teakwood table. In front of each of the score of

comfortable chairs was a computer terminal, and a projector on the ceiling was showing the same hologram of human space. The floor to ceiling windows along one wall were darkened, but the lights on the megascrapers of Mexico City were visible as muted patterns. There were also pictures on the walls, these being generic reproductions of famous landscapes, such as found in most government offices.

His holographic self in the council chamber sent back the images being projected into his occipital lobe, overriding the input from his eyes. With a thought and a blink he could return his vision to his office and its bank of screens, his hearing still engaged in the conference.

"That is all they sent, ma'am," replied the commander of Earth's space fleet, the senior service, and thus the de facto chief of the entire military.

"Do you think they sent anything else after that message?" asked Dong Hu, the Chinese minister for space industry and exploitation. "And why didn't they send more information?"

"I seriously doubt they had the time, Minister. The second message was that ships were coming out of the system after them in warp. And then, nothing. I fear the worst."

"And who could have done it?" asked Fazekas Csilla, the minister of education, filling the European slot from her native

Hungary. "Is one of the other human powers playing games with us?"

Who the hell do you think? thought the admiral, his holographic image giving her a look as if pondering the question, while his real self wanted to glare at her.

"I doubt that, ma'am," said the admiral, letting her assume he had been thinking about the question. "No government in its right mind would play games with our fleet. We outnumber the combined resources of all the independent colony worlds. They know we could launch a strike they couldn't stop."

"Then who?" yelled the frustrated president, slamming a hand down on the table she actually sat at. "We cannot allow another power to destroy one of our colonies, and then one of our naval vessels."

"Could it be aliens?" asked Taalib Samallo, the Indonesian minister of state.

"All of the aliens we know are too primitive to have a ship out there, much less terraform a planet in just months," said Csilla, shaking her head. "And even the Xakalar only serve as crew on human ships, so it couldn't be them."

"Which leaves a power from out of our sphere," said Yanotov, wondering why these people were not getting it. He saw the blank looks of the twelve ministers and their leader aimed at him, and wondered how in the hell Earth had ever ended up

with this leadership team. "This could be a first contact situation, Madame President, Ministers. Aliens we have never seen before, with the tech base to travel between stars."

"Damn," said Havva Sakir, the Turkish minister of science, and one of the few ministers the admiral actually respected. She looked around the table at the others. "An alien power we have never had contact with. You know what this means?"

"It could mean an invasion," said Yanotov. "An attack by an unknown power, with unknown resources and capabilities."

"And you think they might be strong enough to take on humanity?" asked Dong, puffing out his chest.

"That's just the point, Minister. We don't have enough intelligence on them to make any kind of assessment." *In fact, we know nothing about them, you idiot, except they attacked some of our people,* he thought. If the admiral had his way, he would have skipped this meeting and started planning his own response. Unfortunately, civilian control was the name of the game, and he was forced to play it.

"What do you want to do, Admiral?" asked the president, who actually couldn't make a decision by herself. That would have to wait for a vote.

"I would like to send a force out there and see what they can find."

"How large a force?" asked Sakir, who seemed to have grasped the implications immediately.

"A small squadron, hopefully enough to take a look and get away with the intelligence we need," said Yanotov, looking at one of the screens in his office to see what he had available in that sector.

"Why not send the whole fleet?" asked Csilla. "That way you could be sure they would get something back."

"Or they might not come back at all," said Yanotov, emphasizing each word. "I don't want to enter a war with whoever these people are without knowing something about them. Right now I know nothing, and I don't want to send all of our power into the unknown."

"Besides," said the president, "we need to talk with Mars and the Belt before we send all of our warp assets to the far side of known space."

Yanotov had known that restriction would come up. Mars and the Belt were independent entities, tied to Earth by the same mutual defense treaties as the extrasolar colonies. They possessed little in the way of warp vessels, though both had significant interplanetary fleets. The admiral took one more look at his screens and grunted. All three of the Earth capital ships were in the system, part of home fleet. By this time next year he would have four more of them, plus another dozen

cruisers and several score destroyers. He could scrape together a scout force without a problem and send them out, weakening home fleet but little. But it would take almost three months to get them out to HR 8734. There were Earth ships all over known space, several at each of the newer colonies, those which had not declared their independence. And then there was Montana, home to the most important strategic resources in the human space. They had the only known natural deposits of Nullium, and that resource was by agreement the property of all human governments. So everyone had some ships in that system to safeguard their piece of the action. And Earth had more than anyone else.

"I can send a small squadron from Montana out to the target star," he finally said. "A couple of destroyers and four frigates. That should be enough to get some information back if they play it smart."

"And what about our defense of the Nullium resource?" asked Dong, who as minister of space industry and exploitation was most concerned with that material.

"We'll still have seven ships in the system, and along with those from everyone else, that still makes it a very powerful force." He wasn't sure if it would be powerful enough, since they didn't know what the enemy had. But he doubted those six

ships would make much difference if they, whoever they were, decided to take Montana.

"Anyone objection to letting Admiral Yanotov send a scout mission out to HR 8734?" asked the president. There were no objections.

"I'll go ahead and send the message to Vice Admiral Kenji to get together a squadron and send them out. It will take four days for him to get the message."

"And when will we be hearing something back?" asked Bautista.

"If everything goes well, in about a month and a half. Remember, Madame President. They will be going in as stealthy as possible, and stealth doesn't go along with speed."

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The warp shuttle from the asteroid dock to the planet was crowded. Everyone not needed for duty aboard the base had wanted to go on leave for Independence Day. Not all could go, and there weren't enough of the warp craft to take them. Matt felt lucky to have gotten leave, since his ship was due for builder's trials in the near future.

"If the Earthers ever get those sensor components to us," he said, sitting back in his seat and looking at his Xakalar friend. "And we get some Nullium."

"Fortunately for us, they are late on the delivery," said Xelarn, looking at a holo movie floating in front of his chair.

Matt nodded. Earth still made some of the best parts for warp drive ships, made to exacting standards in their orbital factories around the home world. Montana could make what they needed in a pinch, but the chief of the naval staff had decided that they would have the best for their first destroyer, and the five others that would follow by the end of the year. The fleet wanted the ships, but with all the other powers deploying ships to this system, it wasn't as if they weren't well protected. The system had really grown since he had been born here, one of the first crop of children among a people who had as many children as possible, trying to grow the colony. He looked over at his friend again, who had been born to his people two years after Matt's birth. At that time they still had not established cooperation with the Xakalar, who were considered savages to the colonists. Twelve tense years followed, while the friendship was forged between human and Xakalar children, and the Commonwealth of Montana was established with independence from Earth. They were still technically independent from Earth, but the discovery of Nullium around the innermost gas giant had changed their relationship with the mother world, and all the other more developed colonies.

Show me the system, thought Matt over his implant, closing his eyes, watching as the images were projected into his occipital lobe. Montana appeared in his vision, the third of the rocky planets out from the G class star. It was not a duplicate of Earth, though it was close enough for colonization. Smaller, shallower oceans, many more mountain ranges separating great expanses of desert or grassy plains. Some large purple forests along river valleys, or in the equatorial regions. Montana was a cold planet, five degrees centigrade cooler than Earth. It had a medium sized close orbiting moon, about a third the mass of Luna. There was still the original station, put up by the colonists to process incoming colony ships. But it had been joined by a larger station owned by the Earth, as well as industrial complexes that were leased to various commercial concerns.

Next out was Kali, named, like most of the planets of the system, after Hindu deities. Matt still didn't know why that was the case of their system. The story went that the captain of the first exploration ship liked the sound of their names. Kali was a dead world, similar to but larger than Mars, with slightly more atmosphere. The initial asteroid belt lay between Kali and the first gas giant, Durga, with about the same mass as the belt in the Sol system. Durga was near the size of Neptune, with a dense ring. That ring was what made Montana an important system

in the scheme of things. Something, no one was sure what, had fractured the dimensional barrier between the branes of the known universe and the one which contained the masses of dark matter that pushed space apart in his.

It was strange space, and not one that living creatures could survive. Sensors did not detect the spot of total darkness that absorbed all electromagnetic radiation that impacted it. The space seemed to be trapped outside of the planet and orbited with it. Matter could pass through it, disappearing for moments before making its appearance again, and was forever changed. The gravitational constant of our universe was lowered, the amount of pull of any given mass on any other. Enough trips through and it was reversed, and the particles actually repelled masses that had not been changed, imitating dark matter. Antigravity was achieved in that space, to a small degree, though the changed masses behaved toward each other the same as normal matter. It was a tricky operation to harvest Nullium, which pushed away from anything that tried to capture it.

Quadrillions of tons of dirty ice, all had been affected somewhat. One division of the ring in particular, which orbited through the dark space, as it was called, was the purest, most powerful form of Nullium. Further outward and inward was lesser grade Nullium, which could still be useful, though not as much. And Nullium was necessary for the workings of warp drives. Space

compression/expansion drives needed the effects of antigravity to work, using the balance of attraction and repulsion to warp space, and Nullium was the only known substance that could produce the reverse of gravity. It could still be made in very energy intensive processes that yielded small quantities of the substance, or it could be harvested in almost unlimited quantities by the robotic miners that moved through the ring, scooping in the Nullium with magnetic fields and compressing it into storage containers, bringing the material back to the human station in far orbit. As far as humanity knew, this was the only natural source of the substance in the Universe. That might not be true, but it was the only one they knew of. And it had sparked a revolution in warp transportation.

A second belt was between Durga and the super-Jupiter Hanuman. Five times more dense than the one in Sol system, it was loaded with all kinds of metals useful in space industry. Hanuman was four times the mass of Jupiter, with a score of large and almost a hundred small moons in orbit. From there it was two more gas planets, and then a Kuiper belt, home to millions of iceballs orbiting in the depths of space.

The system was filled with ships, a few of them owned by Montana, many more by Earth and the eleven major colonies. Interplanetary warships whose only purpose were to guard the system and its singular resource. Warp freighters, bringing the

products of the major worlds out to enrich Montana, while carrying Nullium back to their home systems. Liners that now brought more colonists, scientists, miners, military personnel, swelling the population of the system by almost a million a year.

Montana itself was still the center of population, with over eight million human citizens, six million Xakalar, and almost two million non-citizens from a variety of worlds. The last were an enduring source of tension on a world that still considered itself independent, but had lost control of most of its solar system to the Consortium of Worlds.

Matt opened his eyes, noting that most of an hour had passed. They still had several hours before they reached the orbital station of Montana. The warp shuttle could have gotten them there in minutes at faster than light, but it was considered risky to collapse space too far in front of a vessel in a busy system, so a tenth of light was all they would do. They were fortunate enough that there was a warp shuttle assigned to the destroyer, and in its case its ring had been fully loaded with Nullium. He looked over at Xelarn, who was fast asleep, air whistling through his one large nostril. *Might as well get some sleep myself*, thought the commander, closing his eyes again while activating his reticular system through his implant and drifting swiftly into a deep sleep.