

Chapter 2

"Ms. Smythe?" asked the young man in the military uniform, the twin silver disks of a lieutenant junior grade on his collar.

Natalia Smythe smiled at the youngster, noting with pleasure his smile. Natalia was still considered a good looking woman in her fifties, and had been what was considered a knockout in her twenties. Tall and slender still, with a smile that turned men's knees to jelly. Because she had a fine brain and was at the top of her field, she felt no guilt at having used her physical abilities to get her foot in the door, since she had been the best person for the job in most cases. She was acknowledged as one of the best minds in the field of xeno-archeology, the study of extinct alien cultures. Smythe hadn't done any field work for a decade, instead teaching at Cambridge, still one of the premiere universities on Earth, but was excited

at the possibility that she might be able to go off planet once again.

"Yes, Lieutenant. I am she." The wind was blowing hard on the top of the skyscraper, two thousand meters above the ground, and Natalia's long hair blew into her face, forcing her to put a hand up to keep it out of her eyes. The Thames glistened in the early morning sunlight, surrounded by the low historic buildings of the waterfront, Parliament and the famous bridge across the river. A kilometer or so back were the modern skyscrapers of the megacity, one of the largest in Europe.

"I'm Lieutenant Jorgensen, ma'am," said the young man, holding out his hand. It was still cold this high, even in early March, and the fair skin of the man was reddening in the wind.

"Nice to meet you, Lieutenant," she said, clasping the hand in a firm grip, shivering for a moment despite her warm clothing and hoping they would get inside quickly. Though the cold was probably having more affect on her than the Nordic type in front of her, she was sure her chocolate brown skin was not showing the effects like his pale freckled hyde.

"The admiral is looking forward to meeting with you, ma'am," said the young man, leading the way from the rooftop landing platform toward the lift.

Natalia took one last look at the city, a view which always fascinated her. Towering megascrapers reached scores of

kilometers in each direction, beyond really, but that was as far as she could see from her vantage. A couple of huge arcologies stood on the horizon, cities in their own right. A kilometer high by several in length.

Three hundred million people, thought Natalia as she glanced back at the stream of aircars floating over central London. And it was only the third largest city in Europe, after Berlin and Paris. The sight made her miss her native Tanzania, where she had grown up on the edge of the East Africa Wildlife Refuge, one of the select families allowed to live in that region.

The lift looked out over the city, and she continued to study the human ant nest that was London as they descended fifty-two floors to the admiral's office. It was a short walk to the office, and Jorgensen ushered her into the outer chamber, where the admiral's secretary logged her in and contacted the senior officer.

"You can go on in, ma'am," said the middle-aged woman before Natalia had even gotten settled in her seat.

The secretary opened the door and motioned for her to go in. The admiral was sitting behind his desk, looking at the holographic representation of a warship projected over his desk. An enormous window, five meters high by fifteen wide and almost ten meters behind the huge desk, looked out on the city. It

caught Natalia's attention for the moment, and she didn't see the admiral leave his seat and walk around his desk.

"Dr. Smythe," said Fleet Admiral Sergei Yanotov, offering his hand. "I have been looking forward to meeting you."

Natalia took the hand of the heavysset Russian officer, expecting a heavy and clumsy shake, surprised at the gentleness of the man. Yanotov gestured to a chair in the conversation nook to the right side of the office. Natalia took the offered chair and the admiral sat in the closest chair to her.

"I wanted to pick your brain, Dr. Smythe," said the admiral, reaching for the coffee pot sitting on the central table and raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, please. And black is fine." Natalia looked into the eyes of the admiral, and realized that she was looking at a significant intellect. From what she had read he had graduated at the top of his class at the space academy on Luna, and had several advanced degrees. And not in easy fields. "And what can I tell you?"

"You were on Montana twenty years ago, before the discovery of the Nullium deposits. From what I have read, you actually made it into one of the ancient pyramids. The first and the last, from what I gather."

"Yes, sir. For some reason the pyramid opened for me and my team. We were trapped in the damned thing for two weeks, then,

for reasons unknown, it opened up for us and let us out."

"And since then we have not been able to get back to where you were," said Yanokov, leaning forward in his chair. "We were finally able to get through the entrance, but we didn't find what you did. What we found was a series of dead ends, and none of our deep radar scans showed anything other than solid, well, whatever the hell that material is. We still can't figure it out."

Natalia nodded. When she was on Montana material scientists had been trying to puzzle out the unknown stone like substance, but it resisted all efforts to take samples. They had been able to vaporize some of that surface with powerful lasers and gathered the vapor to study. All they had found were the constituent elements, and not the arrangement that made it an almost indestructible material. Some had suggested using nukes or kinetics to break in, but cooler heads had prevailed, and the destruction of a treasure for no sure reward was deemed irresponsible.

"I'm afraid I can't help you to get back into the pyramid, Admiral. Though I understand teams have entered the multiple ruins we've found on other worlds."

"And they were all empty," said the admiral with a scowl. "Oh, we found some really interesting pictures, none of them of what we think were the sophonts. And lots of unreadable script.

But nothing of use."

Meaning no weapons or technology the fleet can use, thought Natalia. The military only cared about what they could be of use to them. They had no interest in knowledge for its own sake.

"But you don't believe that these aliens were the ones responsible for killing the original ecology of Montana, or of Hammurabi?"

"No. I don't." There were many theories about why Montana, and the later colony planet of Hammurabi, had fossil evidence of recent Phylums of life that no longer existed on those worlds, while both had almost identical ecologies that had been been transplanted over them. On worlds that were scores of light years apart. Including the intelligent species known as Xakalar.

"And you don't think they are the Xakalar?"

"I doubt it, Admiral. The corridors, rooms and doors of that complex just felt, wrong, for a form like the Xakalar. Whatever used them were larger, probably more than three meters in height, though not very bulky."

The admiral looked relieved after she had spoken, though she didn't know why. Xakalar had been a primitive culture until humans had raised them up. The ones on Montana had embraced human tech, though Hammurabi still had a ways to go to get to their level. But the same had been true of the Montana Xakalar at one point.

"Why are you concerned about the Xakalar, Admiral?" Natalie had interacted with the Xakalar on Montana often, and still saw a few in her classes at Cambridge. Since the Nullium deposits had been discovered, and warp transport became more common, there was more movement between the systems. She had gone out to Montana on a slower than light colony ship, expecting to spend the rest of her life out there. Then warp travel had become more accessible, if not particularly common, and she had been able to return to Earth.

"You know that we have incorporated the Xakalar into our naval structure. Those people have unusual skills in zero gravity, and we would be fools to not use those attributes."

"I understand that, Admiral. Is there something wrong with them, something that brought this line of thought to the fore?"

"What I am about to tell you is top secret, Doctor. I know you have the clearance, and now you have the need to know."

Natalia leaned forward, her curiosity piqued.

"One of our colonies was destroyed, out on the far edge of human space."

Natalia blew out her breath in shock. "Who did it?"

"We don't know, and the scout ship that was sent to investigate went silent after it sent a couple of very brief messages. We fear it was also destroyed. Whatever it was, we don't believe it was human, whatever it was. Which leaves..."

Space faring aliens, thought the archaeologist. The dream of humankind, and the nightmare. And it looked like it was to be the nightmare.

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The heat from the shuttle beat against Matt as he walked down the stairs. He glanced back at the thirty year old orbit to ground craft that had probably come aboard a followup slower-than-light colony ship. Except for its larger size and better engines and alloys, it was almost a match for the ground to orbit shuttles used in the early space age, with a wide body and stubby wings. It still did good service, taking people and materials from the surface to orbital stations and back. The blackened alloy on the bottom glowed in places, and it would have to sit on the tarmac for several hours before the return trip.

"Not something we have to worry about," said Matt under his breath.

"What was that?" asked Xelarn, moving down the steps with the strange gait his people used on human stairs.

"Nothing," said Matt with a smile, looking back over the tarmac to the terminal. The way the Xakalar moved in gravity was always something newcomers to the world remarked upon. In a way

they looked like marine mammals, at ease in the zero gravity of the water, clumsy on the land. That wasn't quite true, since Xakalar could move quickly when necessary, though healthy humans had never had to worry about losing a foot race against the creatures.

Xelarn has his travel bags strapped across his torso, a small satchel in his lower left hand. Matt could carry more than the alien, though his backpack probably massed less than what his partner carried. Matt adjusted his own gait a bit to let his friend keep up without having to strain, and they made a beeline for the terminal. Several dozen more modern shuttles and purpose built atmospheric transports were mated to the building, allowing those passengers to pass back and forth without exposure to the weather. Matt looked up at the sky. There were a few clouds in the otherwise clear and dry atmosphere.

The temperature hovered around five degrees centigrade, chilly, but not too much for the natives, human and Xakalar. There were some Earther military personnel walking about, some on their way to work assignments at the spaceport, some armed security. All wore heavier jackets than the citizens, and some shivered as they walked. Matt was fine with that. The more uncomfortable the intruders were, the better, as far as he was concerned.

The terminal itself was warm, set for the comfort of the

visitors. Xelarn would have felt uncomfortable before his time in space, where the environment was always regulated. Now he merely complained under his breath about people who didn't know proper temperatures when they experienced them.

There were more off worlders in the terminal, and Matt once again wished they would be wised off his planet, leaving it to the people who had come to settle this world. The Consortium of Worlds, Earth and all the larger colonies, considered this system theirs, only the surface of the world truly belonging to the original colonists and the natives. And even here they intruded, coming down to the comfort of real gravity and breathable atmosphere that wasn't enclosed in metallic chambers. Montana could kick them off the surface by force, but while the other worlds controlled space they couldn't win in the long term. So the Montanans had to put up with their unwelcome guests.

"Matt," yelled a woman's voice after they had walked from the secured area into the waiting room. "Matt."

A beautiful redhead woman came charging out of the crowd of people waiting for family members, her arms clasping Matt as she flew into him.

"Hey, sis. Good to see you too."

The young woman gave Matt a quick squeeze, then looked over at the alien. "Hi, Xelarn. I hope you're keeping my brother out

of trouble."

"I try, Maggie. I try. But it would take all of my time to keep him from making serious errors."

"Very funny, my hairy friend," replied Jake after a short laugh. "I'll be sure to tell your father the same."

"But first you're going to spend some time with your family?" asked Maggie, her eyes twinkling.

"Of course we are. As soon as we get a car, we'll go see the folks."

"I already have a car waiting," said Maggie, grabbing Matt by the hand and pulling him along.

Matt let her drag him, slightly, as he looked around the terminal on the way. The many shops were booming with business, and the walkways were swarming with people. He didn't have any problem with that. But he did have a problem with the nationalities of some of those people, especially the ones in uniform.

People from Sol system were everywhere, mostly Earthers, spacers, marines and soldiers, though there was also a smattering of people in Marsforce uniforms. He didn't expect to see any Belters, since those tended to avoid gravity wells unless absolutely necessary. Some other powers were represented as well. New Earth, Paradise, Hope, New Bangalore, Europa, Beijing and others. All with their distinctive uniforms, if

standardized rank and specialty insignia. Systems that had been colonized for a century, or several, and had reached populations of from tens to hundreds of millions. Interstellar powers in their own right, though none quite the equal to Earth.

Matt saw them all as invaders. Montana system had declared its independence from Earth soon after being colonized. That was the pattern, first an Earth colony, until the train of sublight ships had been established, the population grown to a couple of hundred thousand, then the people establishing their own government. Since there were only a half dozen warp ships in operation at that time, and none capable of carrying more than thirty people, there was really nothing Earth could do about it. Then Nullium had been discovered in the system, the wondrous material that projected the force of negative gravity, the opposite of regular matter. And suddenly there was enough material for scores of warp ships, then hundreds, and now over a thousand, with more launched every week. Earth had wanted it. And all the other powers, not content to let Earth become the only interstellar power, had come as well, like jackals surrounding carrion and trying to get a bite. They had averted a war, barely, with the signing of the compact to distribute the resource. Everyone had won.

Everyone but us, thought Matt as he stared at a couple of spacers from Hope, trying to haggle a deal with a Montanan

selling local produce and the good beef the planet was famous for. Montana had owned the system. Now they only owned the planet and its single worthless moon. It could tap into the resources of its own system, but to no greater extent than the other powers. The other powers had brought in enough force to press their claims, leaving Montana helpless to reclaim its own territory. And if that wasn't bad enough, the invaders had forced Montana to allow them access at will to the planet, with its fresh food, gravity, and women.

"Hey. Gorgeous," yelled out a voice from the side of the walkway. "What you doing with a loser like that, when you could have a real man."

"Just ignore him, Matt," said Maggie, reaching back to grip his arm.

"Yes, my brother," said Xelarn, closing up on the commander's other side. "This is not the time or place for a fight."

Matt was confused for a moment, wondering what they were talking about. Until the three human spacers stepped in their way. All were enlisted men, all had cruel leers across their faces, and all smelled of alcohol.

"You want to hang around spacers, baby, you need to hang around us," said the largest man, wearing the uniform of Paradise. "This backwater's navy is a joke."

"I wouldn't waste my time spitting on you," said Maggie, her face screwing up in anger.

"Don't you know to salute an officer when you stand in front of one?" asked Matt, not a bit surprised that his sister, who moments before had cautioned him on acting with belligerence, had responded the way she had. It ran in their family.

"When I see a real officer I'll salute," said another of the men, this with the insignia of a chief petty officer on his collar. "Now, how about it sweet thing? Come spend some time with real men."

"You violate the codes of your military, Chief," said Xelarn, moving forward. "Try to show some honor."

"And keep your dog on a leash," said the third man, cold eyes staring at the Xakalar.

Matt could feel the rage rising in him, and was about to strike out at the spacers. He closed his fists and looked at the largest of the men. His father had always taught him to go after the greatest threat first, and that was just what he was going to do. He brought his hand back.

"What the hell is going on here, Chief?" growled an angry voice. A lieutenant junior grade in the uniform of the Paradise navy came jogging up, her dark eyes taking in the situation. Her mahogany skin was flushed with anger, and she looked up at the

petty officer from her diminutive height.

"Nothing, ma'am," said the chief. "We were just having a conversation with these locals."

"They insulted my friends," said Xelarn, looking eye to eye with the short human female. "They insulted me."

"Yes, sir," said the Paradise officer, rendering a perfect hand salute to the Xakalar, then turning to look at Matt, waiting until they returned the honor before she dropped her hand.

The lieutenant then rounded on her people, hands on her hips. "Chief, I want you and your people back up on your ship as soon as you can get to a departing shuttle. Do you understand me?"

"But, ma'am. We still have two days of shore leave."

"Not anymore, you don't. And give me any more lip and I'll make sure you lose some rank, if your captain doesn't decide to take it away for your undisciplined actions. These are officers of an ally. And the young woman.."

"My sister," said Matt, causing the face of the woman to redden even more.

"Get your asses out of here now, Chief. But only after you apologize to these people."

Matt was happy to get out of the terminal and into the parking garage. Most of the vehicles in the city were ground

cars, but Maggie had taken the family aircar to pick up her brother. In minutes the three were in the air over New Helena. With five hundred thousand people it was the largest city on the planet. There were some skyscrapers in the business section, the headquarters of the largest corporations and banking concerns of the world. The rest was a spread out low rise, nothing more than five or six stories, most much less. On a sparsely populated planet with plenty of room cities tended to develop that way. Only when population pressures demanded it would the cities turn into termite mounds of sky and megascrapers.

They flew over the plains for twenty minutes at three hundred kilometers an hour, covering the distance to the ranch house of Matt's family. Everything below them had come from Earth biology. The plants, the herds of cattle, even the birds, lizards and small mammals that made a prairie a living thing. Humankind had only settled this one continent, and human ecology had only colonized ten percent of that whole. By treaty with the Xakalar it would never get above forty percent of the entire world, and the natives had already staked claim to many of the richest areas, forests, jungles and large regions of grasslands.

"You will stay with us, of course, Xelarn?" asked Maggie as the car settled onto its landing pad at the ranch compound, about twenty meters from the low ranch house, just outside the

wooden fence. The house was painted wood, a dun color that blended in with the dry prairie. Behind it were the working buildings; the stables and equipment buildings.

"A day," said the Xakalar. "Maybe two. And then I must get back to my home and see my own kin."

"Hell, partner. You've kin here as well." Matt knew there was more to it than seeing kin, since the Xakalar had a great honor awaiting him.

The parents had come out of the double door at the front of the house and stood waiting. The trio climbed out of the car and the two older adults walked toward them.

"It's so good to see the two of you again," said Patricia Chin, his mother, a tall woman of German descent with the same red hair as her daughter. She held out her hands first to Xelarn, who had spent much time on this ranch with them while absorbing human education.

"We're happy to see you too, son," said Edgar, his dad, putting an arm around Matt's shoulders. He was the opposite of his wife, short, pure Chinese by way of America on Earth, with the same dark eyes as his son.

Matt took a breath of air, looking up at the sky where a hawk soared, looking for prey. It's good to be home, he thought, ready to enjoy the unspoiled wilderness of the planet. Once he was back in space, there was no telling when he would return.

#

BD+03 339 A

Serenity had only been colonized seven years before. One colony ship, five years later a followup, as per standard procedure. Founded as a religious colony of the Universal Church of Later Day Saints, all of the colonists were members of that denomination, and all the people had wanted to do was to leave the overcrowded swarm of the Earth and live on a world that gave them breathing room. They believed this world had been given to them by the Lord, and they had been fruitful and multiplied. Now the colony consisted of just over ninety-nine thousand adults, since there had been some casualties, and over four hundred thousand children, making it a very lively place.

The colony had no space force, the colonists all preferring to dwell on a living world. The standard space based sensors were in orbit, but none contained warp signature detectors. They did have a warp pulse generator, set within the small asteroid belt away from the planet. The Universal Mormons were not fools, nor were they pacifists, though they were peaceful. They were armed against the dangers of the planet, or anyone who might try to take their world from them.

The warp ships drove into the system at just under the

speed of light, headed straight for the planet. Orbital detectors picked them up when they came out of warp two hundred thousand kilometers from the planet, and the alert went out to the adults of the colony. They scrambled to get the weapons all had in their extended households. Unfortunately for them, they were the wrong weapons.

The aliens fired kinetic weapons into every large habitation they could spot from space. The streamlined arrows of hard alloys streaked into the system so fast they looked like beams of light. Hitting the center of every habitation with a significant population, they flashed like nuclear weapons and raised massive clouds of dust and fire into the air. The ground rumbled around the planet, sending wildlife into panicked flight. Within minutes every city and town had been reduced to rubble, mushroom clouds towering overhead. Next came the landing boats, first to strafe over the smaller habitats outside the cities, then to disgorge the land warriors. The surviving colonists were not cowards. They fought back with rifles and the few heavy weapons they possessed. The invaders lost a couple of shuttles to shoulder fired rockets, and score of warriors to people who grew up shooting. But with the enemy controlling the orbitals it was not a contest. Mothers and fathers fought to their last breath to protect their children. Most were killed before the invaders mercilessly slaughtered the small children,

though some lived long enough to see their hope for the future massacred before their eyes. Within an hour there were no living humans on the world.

A signal went out from the world, sent from one of the homesteads which had not been targeted by kinetics, just before the alien shuttle flew overhead and blasted it out of existence. It went to the warp pulse generator out in the belt, which proceeded to send a signal to Earth. Unknown ships, presumed to be aliens, were attacking the planet. The signal was short, brief, and repeated over and over again, until the aliens silenced it. Six days later it was received on Earth.

#

Earth.

"We have another attack, Madame President," said Fleet Admiral Sergei Yanotov to the woman framed in the holo projection.

The face of President Dalisay Bautista registered her shock. "Where was it?" she blurted. "Do we know who did it?"

"As to where it was, the Serenity colony, a new one around the K class star BD+03 339 A. As to who, we haven't a clue. The message said they thought it was aliens. But which aliens? Your guess is as good as mine."

"That's not good enough, Admiral," yelled Bautista, fighting her shock with anger. "It is the job of the fleet to know what is happening out there, and defend us against any threats. If you are not doing your job, then maybe I need to find someone else to fill your position."

"That is entirely up to you, Madame President," said the gruff officer. He started thinking about retirement, which might not be a bad thing, since he wouldn't have to deal any more with politicians. On the flip side, this was something he had been preparing for his entire life, a real, honest to God war with the unknown. And he would hate to miss it. He looked back up at the woman. "We are doing what we can to figure this out. The force should be leaving Montana within a day."

"Still heading to the location of the Home colony? But we need something to go out to Serenity."

Yanotov shook his head. They could spend years chasing these creatures all over the fringes of human space, showing up after the fact, when the Earth forces could really accomplish nothing. "What we need to do, Madame President, is figure out where they will strike next, and have something waiting there for them."

"And can you tell me where they will strike next, Admiral?"

"Not yet. But I have people working on that. Looking at where they have hit, connecting the data points, and determining

their most probable point of origin."

"And you think they will come up with something?"

With two data points? thought Yanotov. *Not a chance.* But he couldn't tell her that, not at this time. "We will, hopefully, find a pattern. And then we can act. I think the best bet is to send scouts out all over that region, and see if they can detect warp signatures."

"And then?"

"And then we get more data points to feed into the analysis. Believe me, Madame President. I want nothing more than to find out who these bastards are, and where they come from, so we can meet them with a battle fleet."

"Can you beat them, Admiral?" asked Bautista, her eyes imploring him. "Is the human species ready to take on an alien race?"

Yanotov wished he could tell her yes. There were too many unknowns. Technology, production base, population, species capabilities. Questions no human commander had faced since the days of exploration on Earth. And questions he might not be able to answer for some time.

"I just don't know, Madame President. I would recommend an increase in military expenditures. We have a lot of space to cover, and not enough ships to do it. We need to lay down more ships as soon as possible."

The president looked at him for a few moments, and he could almost see the wheels turning in her head. Politicians, he thought with distaste. The answer was obvious, but she had to think about what others might say.

"What about the other powers?"

"I would talk with them as well, ma'am. But we both know they don't have the shipbuilding capacity that we do. Not all of them put together. So, yes, we need to get them on board, but we need take the lead in this."

"Very well," said the president, closing her eyes. "I'll bring this up in a meeting of the council, and talk to some people in Parliament. I'll get you the funding, no matter what it costs me."

"Thank you."

The holo died, and Yanotov wondered how long he would have to wait. There was one other thing he could do. Contact the companies that were working on the ships in the building slips. He would need to light a fire under their asses and get those ships launched as soon as possible. It would cost more, and he had to hope the funds were forthcoming, but the money was not his problem. Preparing to defend the human race was.