

Chapter 3

Montana

The village was situated on the banks of a wide river cutting through the equatorial jungle. Several wooden huts were scattered through the trees, uninhabited most of the time, now filled to capacity with guests to the sacred ceremony being held. Ninety percent of the Xakalar had jumped on the technology bandwagon offered by the humans. Ten percent still lived the traditional life, such as offered in this village, and kept alive the traditions of the people.

Tens of thousands of Xakalar swarmed the settlement, along with several hundred humans who had been invited to the ceremony, one raising warriors to the status of tribal elders. All of the Xakalar had left their modern devices behind, and

were dressed in their native garb, which meant nothing but some leather straps to hold their bladed weapons and pouches. The natives didn't have the nudity taboos still held by some human societies, though not by those of Montana. Their myriad of scars were on display, pink on their dark brown skins, showing through the black fur which no longer grew over those wounds.

Matt looked over at his friend, here to be honored by the chiefs of the Grand Council of the People. He sported the scars of a hunter, those of a warrior, then the newly devised markings of a warrior of the planetary military, including his rank. No one would see those scars while he was in uniform, or shipsuit, but he carried them proudly even then. Matt looked down on his chest, where wore the painted facsimiles of his own achievements, having been inducted into the tribes at an early age. He wore one real scar, bestowed upon him in recognition of becoming a warrior.

"Nervous?" he asked of Xelarn, who was here to receive an honor like no other ever bestowed on one so young.

"A little," said the Xakalar.

"You'll do fine," said Maggie, walking beside them unselfconscious of her own nudity. Edgar and Patricia walked behind. They were honorary parents of the young male they had welcomed into their house that he might study the sciences of the Earth, and make it into the space academy on Luna, where all

Montana officers went to study.

"Give me the courage to prevail over the trial," said the Xakalar in his native language, looking over at his father, the chief of his particular tribe, who now lived in one of the human towns.

"You are among the bravest of our people, my son," replied Chief Xarala, the grin on his face showing his sharp predator's teeth. "You were brave enough to go into space. You will do well in this test."

Matt smiled at the reference to space. His friend had told him once that if all Xakalar could summon the courage to leave their world, none would return. He had said that zero gravity was freedom, something every Xakalar would love to live in. But the great majority preferred to stay planet bound. And the ones who went to other worlds had jobs to perform, though even many of them made sure they spent time in zero g. There was also the fact that they needed gravity to carry and birth their children, just like humans.

The smells of cooking meat reach their olfactory senses. Humans and Xakalar could not eat the same foods. The difference in proteins would kill any of the beings that tried to eat the food of the other. Xakalar food smelled wrong to humans. Not horribly foul, just weird. Enough to keep most humans away. The native vegetation of the planet would kill terran herbivores,

and visa versa, something that had caused a lot of tension among the two species when humans had first come. Xakalars had said as much about human food. It smelled like something that turned their stomachs. Matt could pick up the scent of the cattle that were turning over fires as well, something that made his mouth water despite the other odors.

The small group wended their way through the encampment, greeting beings they knew. Humans not familiar with Xakalar had trouble telling them apart, though those who had been in frequent contact had devised tricks to differentiate them. Certain scars here, a larger than normal nostril there, a central eye slightly lower on the forehead. He waved and shouted greetings to those he knew, while Xelarn and his father fielded many more calls. Not everyone was friendly to the humans or those who dealt with them. There were still some hard feelings among the older generation toward the newcomers who had come and disrupted their traditional lifestyle, and made over parts of the planet to take care of their own life forms.

The central fire beckoned, a huge blaze of wood, carefully selected for its lack of toxins that might affect the human guests. Thousands of Xakalar and humans sat around the blaze, far enough away that the great heat didn't cause great discomfort. Some scores of the people danced to the sounds of the drums closer to the fire, looking like giant land crabs on

their four support limbs, waving their upper limbs to the sky above the clearing. A few held a quartet of swords in their upper limbs, performing the traditional weapons dance, the blades flashing in the firelight, moving so fast and so close that the spectators held their breath for fear that the beings, males and females, might slice off pieces of their anatomies. He had seen Xelarn do such a dance, years before, and hoped he would not be called on to do it tonight.

Males and females were more or less equal in the tribe, all acting as warriors and hunters. Pregnant and nursing females were the exception, protected. Matt saw one mother sitting against a tree with what he supposed was her husband. She held one baby next to her chest, the infant sucking away. Xakalar were not mammalians. They drank the blood of their elders until they were old enough to take solid food. The male next to her held another child, probably the twin of the first, nursing it as well. That was an advantage of the Xakalar biology. Any member of their species could provide sustenance to any infant, and they tended to raise children in a communal effort. Overhead, in the tree above, played an older child, probably age five, the coordination of eight limbs making him more agile than an Earthly primate in the arboreal realm.

"Matt. Xelarn. Good to see you." A portly man stood up from his seat around the circle and headed toward them, hand held

out.

"Thomas," said Matt's dad. "Still out looking for votes?"

"Not for another couple of years," said Thomas

Malson, laughing, then gripping Matt's hand, in a moment trading it for one of Xelarn's. "And congratulations to you, young man. Soon you will sit in the ruling councils of your people.

Which means he gets to vote for his people in the combined council, thought Matt, looking at the man who had known his father for all of the younger Chin's life, but whom he had never been able to warm up to. *Now you can hope you have another ally in the council.* That might be true or not, but otherwise it was none of his business.

The celebration went on for some hours, the Xakalar drinking their traditional intoxicant, some smoking the hallucinatory herbs they favored, careful to keep the smoke away from their human guests. The humans subsisted mostly on beer, though some had brought stronger libations. And then the moment came, and the names were called out.

"Go get them, tiger," said Maggie, smiling at the Xakalar, who gave his version of a smile back. Everyone who knew him could tell that he was nervous. Matt knew he wanted to look brave, to show no sign of pain. He also knew how unusual that would be in this ceremony.

Xelarn walked into the circle to stand before the supreme

chief, the overall spokesman for the Xakalar people on Montana. Seven other males and females walked forward, all much older than Xelarn, with long pedigrees of service to their people. All would be elevated to the rank of elder if they were deemed worthy.

First they were made to imbibe a concoction that was only given to those to be elevated. It was said to induce visions. Matt was sure it would induce a vision of death if he drank it, followed quickly by the actual state.

A few minutes passed, and the supreme chief barked questions at the prospective elders. All answered back in quiet voices, too soft for those in the crowd to hear. This went on for about fifteen minutes, until the chief seemed satisfied. He pointed the spear he held in his hand at one of the initiates. That male shrank back, and several strong warriors ran out and grabbed him, pulling him out of the line and back into the crowd. There would be no repercussions for failing. The male would simply go back into the society in his former capacity, though he might feel shame for some time because of his failure.

"He made it," said Maggie, grabbing her brother's arm and squeezing.

He's made it so far, thought Matt. Now came the trial of marking.

Another male came forward, holding a couple sharp knives in

his two upper hands. He stepped before one of the initiates, who had all knelt down on their four support legs, then lowered their torsos until they were flat on the ground. The male went to work on the first, knives flashing expertly in his hands. The male writhed in pain as the scaring was done on his back, but uttered not a sound. A female came up and started smearing salve on the initiates back. No, no longer an initiate, as he had been marked as an elder.

The male moved on to the next, this one a female. The process went from beginning to end without a sound. It continued on through all of the initiates. Matt thought it had to be torture for Xelarn as he waited his turn, last. Finally they got to his friend, and the male cut quickly, leaving the scars behind. The fur would not grow over the scars, those bald spots drawing attention to the markings that would otherwise be hidden.

Xelarn made not a move, not a sound, enduring the agonizing procedure like a true warrior. When it was over he rose back to his feet and turned to face the crowd, along with the other new elders. And he was now the youngest elder in the history of his tribe, due to his achievements in the fleet.

The elders followed the supreme chief to a hut, where their wounds would be tended, making sure there was no infection. The rest of the settlement erupted into celebration. The leadership

of the people had been assured, their legacy would continue.

The next morning Matt awoke with a hangover, one readily cured with one pill. He had three more days of leave, then it was back into space. He had been invited to a hunt this afternoon, and it was something he was really looking forward to.

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"Admiral. We've picked up warp signatures outside the system, from the general direction of Pisces."

Vice Admiral Yamanishi Kenji looked up from the flat comp he was working on to look at the man on the wide com screen against the far wall of his office, wondering what unannounced visitors they were receiving. He shifted in his seat behind the desk made of Montanan hardwood and brought up to the station, running a hand through the black stubble on his scalp. He was tall for a pure blooded Japanese, a legacy of being raised for his early years in one of the habitats with less than full Earth gravity, before his family returned to Japan.

The ranking officer in the system, he had nominal command of all warships in Montana space. Nominal in that two thirds of the ships in the system could disobey his orders if they felt they went against the wishes of their governments. And since he had sent six ships out on a scouting mission to the frontier, his actual command was even smaller by a quarter in total number

of vessels. One of the words then penetrated his thoughts. Pisces, out toward the frontier, in the direction his scouting force had gone. Could they be coming back? If not, could those they had gone in search of have come here. Anxiety caused his voice to crack as he thought about the possibility of being the first human commander to fight a fleet action against the unknown.

"Any identification on those ships? And how many are we talking about?" He pulled up a plot of the system on the central holo over his desk. Since his post was several light hours from the pickets who would have picked up those signatures, all they would have received so far were the warp pulses of those vessels. More detailed information was at least two hours away, the time it took the laser com to reach this part of the system.

"*New Chicago* reports three distinct signatures, source unknown. They are trying to work triangulation with one of the destroyers in her group."

New Chicago was a cruiser, the leader of the picket force that was out there to detect anything that might be heading into the system, or even just scouting them out. Normally a ship like that wouldn't be assigned picket duty, but with what had been going on out on the frontier, the outer alert force had been strengthened, each of the other powers assigning one or more extra vessels to the task.

"Any idea what they meant by source unknown?"

"No idea, sir. We... Wait, we're receiving another code string."

Kenji waited, drumming his fingers on the screen of the ultra thin computer that was his portable brain. He looked around his office for a moment, taking in the pictures that switched images every fifteen seconds or so. One showed him shaking hands with the old commander of the Earth fleet. While he was watching it changed to a picture of the mouth of the Tone river, part of his Japanese homeland, and no more than a five kilometers from his ancestral home. He missed Earth, but would have given his soul for a command of such importance as he now occupied.

"Three ships, sir. Range between forty and sixty AUs. Stellar coordinates follow."

The predicted positions of the ships appeared on the plot. They were still very far out, but with warp drive they could get into the system in an instant. Still, three ships didn't seem like much of a threat, except they didn't know how large they were, or what kind of tech they contained. They might be an easy mark for his force of over forty warp ships, augmented by another nine interplanetary ships from the Montana fleet. Or they might be able to speed through the system taking out everything he had in one pass.

"Sound the alert," he ordered over the com. "I want all ships ready for combat. But I want absolutely no movement of ships in warp drive. Is that understood? No warp movement unless I order it."

"Yes, sir. And if they attack?"

"Then every ship can do whatever they need to do to survive."

Kenji leaned forward on his desk, steepling his fingers. If this enemy thought there weren't many warp drive ships in this system they might attack. They had been destroying undefended colonies, and he wanted them to come in here, fat, sassy and sure of themselves. If he could surprise them he might be able to capture one of them, and then they would know what they were dealing with.

Two hours later the laser com brought more detailed information from the picket, though it didn't really add much. They were destroyer sized, and that was all they could tell. Nothing about maximum warp, weapons, the capabilities of the crew. All the information Kenji would want if he were going into battle with them. The unknowns spent the next couple of hours moving outside the system for no apparent purpose. They seemed to be scouting, also trying to figure out what they might be facing. But the admiral's orders stood, and not one warp drive ship powered up, with the exception of the couple of pickets

that were sending com bursts into the system.

The admiral was about to order a force to go out and confront the presumed aliens, since he couldn't keep his fleet at full alert forever. Before he could another com burst came in from the pickets. The three alien ships had all warped out, heading back in the direction of Pisces at five hundred times the speed of light.

So they're faster than us, thought Kenji. That didn't mean they were more advanced in other ways, but a betting man sure wouldn't wager against it.

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"I'm sorry, Captain. We keep sending requests of the chain of command, and they keep making promises," said Matt, standing before the desk of the commanding officer of the *Zackary Peterson*. On a ship the size of the destroyer there was no room for extravagance, and the captain's office was cramped enough without two humans and a Xakalar crammed inside. With little deck space, all of the captain's mementos were shown in holo screens on three walls, the viewer to the ship's com system on the fourth.

"Dammit," yelled Commander Charles Flannery, glaring up at the second officer and weapons master of his command. Flannery looked as Irish as his name, with a reddened face of freckles

and hair the color of a ginger tabby cat. "How in the hell am I supposed to get this thing operational without Nullium. And the largest deposit in the Galaxy sitting less than a light hour away."

And it should be all ours, thought Matt, what he was sure the captain wanted to say. It should have been theirs, to exploit as they wished. Colonies were supposed to own everything in their systems. Of course they would have shared it with the rest of humanity, for a good price. The wealth would have flowed into the Montana system, and they would become a major power. They would have had their choice of immigrants, building the ideal society. Instead, they had to beg for the resource that should have been theirs for the taking, and there didn't seem to be anything they could do about it.

"We could boost out to the deposits ourselves, Commander," said Xelarn, standing beside his friend.

Matt nodded. The *Peterson* had a secondary fusion drive, capable of boosting her for short periods of time at up to three gravities. The problem was, the robotic vessels that harvested the Nullium, needed to use the warp drive, were always busy. Nullium was difficult to harvest, its antigravity properties pushing it away from regular matter. One of the robots could harvest nearly a ton a day, playing a magnetic field ahead to increase the negative pull of the matter, then scooping it up

with a positive field. That was about half of what the *Peterson* needed to fill its two warp rings and make all of its torpedoes operational. There were over thirty of the robots working the deposits, bringing the Nullium back to the station in orbit outside the ring. Thirty tons a day, and it was going into warp transport ships to bring back to their home-worlds. A transport would take six hundred tons, or twenty days worth of harvest, back to their point of origin, then the next would get its fill, on and on until every transport in existence would get a load and the process would start again. Montana was not in that queue, and could expect to get what they let it have, a mere ten tons, every three months.

Montana had ordered harvester robots from the industrial robotics works of Earth, but there always seemed to be an order ahead of them. Five more were said to be on the way out, but all would go into the main production queue, and the colony world would again get the short end of the stick. And any complaints would meet with the standard excuse. Montana was being well defended by all the other powers in human space, and didn't really need warp ships.

"And we'll just have to wait out there in line until they decide to throw us some scraps," growled Flannery. "With more Nullium than the human species will use in a million years, and we get the leavings of what they harvest."

Matt was sure that many in the command structure of the small navy felt the same rage, but what could they do? Political means didn't seem to work, and they didn't have the military muscle to press their claim. They estimated that there was a quadrillion tons of prime Nullium, the ice crystals that had spent the most time orbiting through the region of ruptured space that looked into the dark matter dimension. That was enough for over ninety-one billion years at present consumption rates. Of course that rate would go up, and they might eventually reach one hundred thousand times the production, which would still last for over nine hundred thousand years. And that didn't even account for the second class Nullium, the crystals in the inner and outer rings next to the prime, which would add more quadrillions of the substance, maybe not as powerful, but still useful.

"So what do we do, sir?" asked Matt, unable to come up with an answer himself. Would they eventually get a harvester robot of their own, or would Earth keep grabbing every mechanical before it could get in Montanan hands?

"I'm going to talk to the admiralty myself, in person," said the officer, pushing himself up from his seat so forcefully that he had to grab onto the desk to stop from going into the ceiling. "I'm going to let them know that we're dead in space until they get off their asses and get us what we need."

On the face of it, that seemed like a bad course of action, a mere commander going to face down flag officers. But this was the first warp destroyer of the building fleet, and Flannery had been hand picked for this position because of his ability. If anyone could get them to act, he was the one. But would action by the Montana admiralty really do anything? Or would six destroyers, Peterson and her soon to be completed sisters, still be sitting in the system a year from now?

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Chin floated outside the destroyer, looking for any flaws in the outer snouts of the laser cannon. Three of his techs, including Chief Petty Officer Sondra Peterson, his good right hand, were suspended in the microgravity of the asteroid as they worked in the heated atmosphere of the large docking bay.

"How's it look, Chief?" shouted Matt to the senior NCO. She had asked for assignment to this ship in particular, since it had been named after her cousin, who had died during the founding of Montana colony. She had wanted to be a plank holder to the vessel named after her relative, and being good at her job was a definite plus.

"Looking A-okay, sir," replied the small woman, her hand grabbing onto one of the many handholds across the hull as she examined one of the two forward turbo-laser mounts.

They had already checked out the two rear mounts, and all had been certified as being in perfect condition. Next they would be looking at the missile tubes, which would require sending robots into the magnetic accelerators to check out every centimeter of the four conduits. And then they would go over the eight point defense lasers and the single forward particle beam.

Like any us this it going to do us a whole hell of a lot of good, thought the lt. commander. Oh, they could come in handy in normal space, in an emergency. But *Peterson* had not been made to live in normal space, and they only had the torpedoes for use in warp. There were ongoing projects at the research bases of all the major powers to come up with other weapons. As far as he knew there had not been any breakthroughs. So the only thing they would have, offensive or defensive, were the torpedoes. She carried thirty two of the warp weapons, which were of absolutely no use at the moment, until they could get their rings loaded with Nullium.

Other than that, it was a beautiful ship, the equal of any destroyer deployed by the other powers. One hundred and fifty-three meters in length, with a tapered cylindrical hull forty meters at its widest point, with four pylons ten meters in length protruding from circles on the forward and rear triads of the hull, rings sweeping around the far end of both sets of supports, the actual Alcubierre drive. *Peterson* massed over

thirty thousand tons fully loaded, and was crewed by one hundred and twelve people, human and Xakalar. She was capable of a pseudospeed of over three hundred and fifty times light for a brief period, three hundred sustained.

The larger powers had bigger ships. All had light and heavy cruisers, from eighty to a hundred thousand tons, while the Earth also had a one hundred and seventy thousand ton battle cruiser and a couple of three hundred thousand ton battleships. Rumor had it that a few of the more populous systems were also working on getting capital ships into space. Matt wasn't really sure of the rationale behind the larger ships, since all were restricted to the use of warp torpedoes for their main armament, though they could be a handful in normal space with their enormous banks of beam weapons. Or they might mount many more larger, more effective warp torpedoes, but couldn't have much more in the way of intrinsic defenses. Could they?

"Everything checks out, sir," came the voice of Chief Peterson from around the hull. "Anything else we need to do out here?"

Besides getting us enough of what we need for our shakedown cruise? thought the officer. "Not a thing, chief. Let's pack it in."

The team entered through the already opened hangar deck, the small docking facility for the limited number of basic craft

the ship was carrying. That included one warp shuttle, one landing shuttle, and three of the vehicles used to transfer personnel from ship to ship. They crowded the interior of the thirty-eight meter wide by fifteen meter deep chamber, and it looked like it would be a total mess if they needed to get all of the craft out into space quickly. The answer to that was they wouldn't get them out into space quickly. They weren't battle craft, only transports. There were two airlocks leading out from the hangar. When open to space there was a cold plasma field that kept atmosphere in the hangar, but most crew trusted the matter of the curved outer hatches much more. Right now both airlocks were open, since the ship was still in the air of the building slip. The rear hatch led back to engineering, the fiefdom of his friend, Xelarn. The forward one led into the living and working spaces of the rest of the vessel. Officer's country was fifteen meters up the central corridor, one of the two lifts just outside the lock, the other near the bridge.

The combat information center (CIC), also known as axillary control, was up one lift level. The interior of the ship was a confusing maze to most people, arranged as it was in concentric circles which allowed the spinning of the vessel to provide varying degrees of pseudo-gravity. Every crew member was trained to navigate the maze, in total darkness, and be able to reach every control interface, in every department. Not everyone was

able to do it, and they had been given duties in the fleet that didn't involve shipboard deployments. Matt hadn't been sure if he could do it, swimming through zero g with no visible indications of where he was, sweat rolling down his face, behind the faceplate that didn't allow him to wipe. He had almost given up, but the thought of disappointing his friend, Xelarn, had kept him going, until he had finally made it to the final station and inputted the proper code, seven minutes or so under the deadline.

Matt pushed himself down the corridor which acted more as a swimming tube than a walkway. Handholds along the way aided him in movement and orientation, and the skilled spacer was down the twenty-five meters of corridor in seconds, passing by the hatch that led to the officers' quarters where his small cabin was located. He pushed himself to a stop before the heavy bridge hatch, pushing the panel and waiting for it to whisk aside.

"Commander on the bridge," yelled out the first person to see him float in, a petty officer standing beside a rating who was working at the sensor station. That woman jumped to her feet, the petty officer grabbing her waist before she could float up into the ceiling.

"As you were," said Matt, grinning. Since the captain and XO were both off the station, he was in command, of a ship that was going nowhere. Xelarn was his acting executive officer at

the moment, though he was too busy in engineering to worry about anything else. The rating resumed her seat, the petty officer looking a question at the newly arrived officer. Chin shook his head, letting the man know he could continue to work with the rating.

The captain's chair in the center of the ten by ten meter bridge looked inviting, if he wanted to engage in flights of fancy. He took a second to look around the bridge, at the two stations on either side of the captain's chair with its encapsulated spacesuit behind it. The suits for the rest of the command crew sat in tubes against the walls forward of the side stations. Matt decided he would take his own seat, on the left hand forward station, set in a depression in the floor. He laughed at the steps leading down, still wondering why they were there in this space that would never have gravity, placed in the center of the vessel for maximum protection. Instead, he floated to the seat and grabbed the handhold on the back, flipping around and into the chair in one smooth motion. To his right was the other depressed station, that of the pilot/helmsman, a chief warrant who was an expert ship handler.

Matt activated his station and pulled up a schematic of the ship and the dock it sat it. *Open the hatches*, he thought, daydreaming. *Boost us out into space*. He closed his eyes and thought through the sequence. The ship moving out of the dock on

thrusters, moving some kilometers away on the secondary fusion drive, then engaging the warp drive and heading out of the system.

It will happen, he thought, opening his eyes and looking at the main viewer. When was the question.