

THROUGH CHAOS

Books by Joshua A. Johnston

THE CHRONICLES OF SARCO

Edge of Oblivion | BOOK ONE

Into the Void | BOOK TWO

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THROUGH CHAOS

THE CHRONICLES OF SARCO

BOOK 3

JOSHUA A. JOHNSTON



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For Abby

THE FIVE RACES OF THE CONFEDERACY

The Aecons. Brilliant, arrogant, and secretive, the Aecons are the scientific and technological backbone of the Confederacy. Hailing from a planet of domed cities, their blue-skinned, black-eyed bodies are small and fragile.

The Riticans. A society that emphasizes peaceful coexistence where possible and violent retaliation when threatened, the Riticans excel in strategic decisions. They are large methane-breathers capable of enduring harsh environments.

The Hazonites. A race of matriarchal tree-dwellers, this once-expansionistic society survived a near genocide by the Riticans and now fills diverse roles within the Confederacy. To varying degrees, they can smell the feelings of those around them.

The Humans. Average by both mental and physical standards, Humans have little knowledge of their homeworld's history prior to the current Index era, which began thirteen centuries ago. They excel as diplomats and leaders, and the Confederacy's capital is situated in their home system.

The Exos. Asexual and individualistic, the Exos have no government, little culture, and a mindset oriented around task completion. They are adept with mechanics and engineering and have bodies tough enough to endure the vacuum of space.

SELECTED OFFICERS
THE CONFEDERAL NAVY

Navy Command, Nevea, Titan

Admiral Wr Ghiri—*Hazionite female, Head of Navy Intelligence*

Admiral Nhile-tonna-amel-fro-tigh-Garvak (Nhile Garvak)—
Ritican male, Head of Navy Special Operations

Navy Cruiser *Hattan*

Field Captain Tir Bvaso—*Hazionite female, ship's captain and fleet commander*

Senior Lieutenant Garo-konna-ichen-Ball (Garo Ball)—*Ritican male, first officer and weapons officer*

Senior Lieutenant Thorno-bnnsin-vrakkas-crisks-uisten-borno-Garn (Thorno Garn)—*Ritican male, senior security officer*

Lieutenant Orel Dayail—*Aecron male, communications officer*

Lieutenant Aioua Horae—*Aecron female, sciences officer*

Lieutenant Mollo Nairu—*Aecron male, medical officer*

Senior Deck Officer Nisshishothi (Niss) Pessosollo—*Human female, navigator*

Hattan Battle Group

Commander Redelia Aroo—*Aecron female, senior interceptor commander*

Senior Lieutenant Eil Morichar—*Hazionite female, interceptor commander*

Senior Lieutenant Amun-also-xixit-orrcsa-Plau (Amun Plau)—*Ritican male, interceptor commander*

Navy Interceptor Retaelus

Captain Jared Carter—*Human male, interceptor captain*

Senior Lieutenant Vetta-parso-bonna-truph-Quidd (Vetta Quidd)
—*Ritican female, first officer and weapons officer*

Lieutenant Omarami (Rami) Del—*Human female, communications officer*

Lieutenant Kilvin Wrsaw—*Hazionite male, navigator*

Deck Officer Darel Weye—*Aecron male, sciences and medical officer*

Deck Officer Triphox—*Exo, engineer*

PROLOGUE

VESTIS UNDERDOME, AEROEL

*I will judge thee in the place where thou wast created,
In the land of thy nativity.
And I will pour out mine indignation upon thee,
I will blow against thee in the fire of my wrath,
And deliver thee into the hand of brutish men,
And skillful to destroy.
Thou shalt be for fuel to the fire;
Thy blood shall be in the midst of the land;
Thou shalt be no more remembered.*

—Excerpt from a Human religious text, origin unknown

Weivu slipped cautiously through the shadows. The Vestis Underdome, like all underdomes on the homeworld, was a vast labyrinth of dim silhouettes, foul air, and large machinery. The Aecron felt the way forward with his hands, not trusting his old eyes to keep him from tripping over a random conduit or other unexpected obstacle.

He reached the designated location—a large space between a trio of anti-earthquake stabilizers—and waited. The only sounds he heard were his own breathing and the occasional drop of moisture onto the underdome's floor.

At length he heard other footsteps. This part always made him

nervous. He knew who they would be . . . but what if they were not? What if the Dome Authority had finally caught on to what he and the others were doing?

Three figures emerged from the shadows: two females and a male. He relaxed a little. They seemed to relax too, upon seeing him.

“Why the sudden meeting?” the male asked. “Is something wrong?”

There were many ways Weivu could have answered that question. Knowing the others as long as he had, he knew intuitively that being direct was best. “The Dome Authority came to Pera’s habitation yesterday. She was away, but she cannot return.”

Silence. Then, from one of the females: “So this is it. We must finally make a decision.”

“He is saying the decision is made for us, and we need to leave,” said the male.

“And leave everything behind?” said the other female. “Do you realize what you are saying? It would be the end to our lives as we know them. To our work.”

“Sarco’s work will continue wherever we are,” said the male.

“That is easy for you to say,” said the second female.

“Do not say that,” said the first female. “It will be hard for all of us.” She looked at Weivu. “But I do not see how we can leave. With all that has happened, travel from the surface is highly restricted.”

Weivu threw up his hands in frustration. “If I had another option, I would take it. Sending any information through the relays is no longer possible. They are watching too closely.”

“Where would we go?” asked the second female.

“That is part of the reason I brought you here.”

“This is a decision,” the first female said, “that requires the entire group.”

“It is not safe to assemble everyone,” said the male. “Especially now.”

“Let us assume we leave,” said the second female. “Where would we go? We cannot go to the Riticans; they would kill us and take

what information we carried. The Humans and Exos would simply deny us asylum and deport us back to the Aecrons.”

“What about your contacts in the Confederacy?” asked the first female.

“Congress has disbanded,” Weivu said, “and the Navy is all but shattered. All of those sources are either missing or have gone silent.”

She thought for a moment. Then: “What about the *Hattan*?”

Weivu gestured in the negative. “According to what I know, they are still on the other side of the Void. I do not know if they have returned or if they even still live.”

“That leaves the Hazionites,” the male said, “assuming they have the scientific ability to understand what we have.”

“Even if they do,” the second female said, “reaching a Hazionite world would be very difficult at this point. We would have to slip across the border by way of an outer colony world, and that is both complicated and fraught with other risks.”

“Nevertheless, that may turn out to be our best option among a host of poor options.”

Weivu took a short breath to find calm. “We need to talk to the others, and pray. Go now, and seek out your circles. I will let you know when we can meet again. Expect it soon. May the One guide your paths.”

“Go with Sarco,” the male said, and slipped back into the darkness. The others followed suit.

Weivu waited until he could no longer hear them before he departed. As he walked, his mind turned. Weivu worried, and not just for himself. He worried for his friends, and for the information they had so carefully acquired.

Information about the Aecrons, and the war.

And Malum.

That last part vexed him more than anything else. Why was a consortium of Humans—including a Confederal delegate, this Troye Carson—involved financially in Malum research? Why were

such volumes of currency being poured into aspects of the research that Weivu's associates on the Malum project weren't privy to?

Those were questions Weivu had to discover the answers to before he and the others could flee . . . although, somewhere deep in his mind, he feared he already knew the answers.

Sarco, help us.

1

MELAS'U / SACRED HOME EARTH INDEX 1307.004

Lieutenant Aioua Horae waited just inside the main cargo bay of the Confederate Navy cruiser *Hattan*, trying not to look impatient. All around her, workers moved with equal parts urgency and exhaustion, like Ritican missiles burning their final molecules of fuel. Aioua knew exactly how they felt.

The last four days had been a whirlwind of emotion and strain, much of it stemming from the massive battle above the Plury'be homeworld of Sacred Home. The *Hattan* and its small fleet, allied with several Plury'be factions, had clashed with other Plury'be factions allied with Dar and the Domain. It had been a risky political move for the *Hattan*, but the crew had taken up the charge because it offered a chance to strike a blow against the creators of Malum, the planet-ship that had nearly destroyed the Confederacy. The gambit had paid off; the *Hattan* and its allies had won the Battle of Sacred Home.

But at such great cost, Aioua thought sadly. So many lives lost.

The names of the dead felt like a weight bearing down on those who survived. Senior Lieutenant Venzz Kitt and the crew of the *Falcon*, cut down by hyperwave fire from a Domain-allied Plury'be cruiser. Lieutenant Brigg Drews and the crew of the *Shington*, killed during what amounted to a suicide run. Nho Ames, the hero

of Malum, the bearer of the fabled staff of Sarco, who perished battling Dar's forces. And many other names, good officers, who had died at their posts trying to defend their loved ones back across the Void.

All Aioua could do—all any of the survivors could do—was to try to find meaning in the midst of mourning. Venzz Kitt's ship had survived the attack despite the loss of its crew; having been retrieved, it now sat across the cargo bay from Aioua, Exo technicians supervising its decontamination. Brigg Drews's fatal run had cost his crew's lives but had saved one hundred and fifty others on board the *Hattan*. And two others—Nho's friend Rete and a Plury'be cleric named Au'p—had taken up Sarco's staff after Nho's death and chased the Domain's vaunted planet-ship out of the Sacred Home system.

But still, so many lives lost.

And even more uncertainty. The dust had scarcely settled from the Battle of Sacred Home when the *Hattan* fleet had been rocked by the inexplicable appearance of a Ritican battlecruiser: the *Rkshla-Voun*, under the command of Captain Tolar Dor. Encountering a Ritican ship here was a shock of the highest order; the *Hattan* was several months' travel away from Ritican space and was, until now, the only known Confederal ship on this side of the Great Void.

The Ritican captain's words still lingered in the minds of everyone who was on the bridge that day. "We need to speak immediately. I bring grave news regarding the Confederacy. It is no more."

After that, Captain Jared Carter had rushed off to speak to the Ritican captain in private. Under normal circumstances this might have created widespread speculation among the crew, even angst. But because the *Hattan* was so badly damaged, and so much needed to be done on and above Sacred Home, there was little time or energy for such talk. Now, four days later, Captain Carter was finally going to brief the crew on what had happened and what they were going to do.

Aioua's large onyx eyes snapped toward the sound of an incoming Navy shuttle, which floated into a decompressed portion of

the bay before being surrounded by a buffer field. The shuttle, the *Disgnin*, hovered briefly, then settled to a stop on the cargo bay floor. The sciences officer walked over to stand among the receiving party, which included a few security officers, a handful of Exos, and an impatient-looking Aecron medical officer.

The shuttle's airlock opened, and a group of Hazionite females filed out, their faces a mixture of fatigue and obvious relief as they greeted the receiving party. The irascible medical officer accosted each of them in turn, giving them a field exam before ordering them to the infirmary for a more thorough inspection.

Aioua stepped forward to greet the last of the disembarking Hazionites. "Commander," Aioua said, saluting with her fingers on her chest and a slight bow.

"Lieutenant," Tir said, returning the gesture, though her formality crumbled under a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

Aioua dropped her hand to her side. "It is good to see you, old friend."

"It is good to be back."

They stood there for a fraction of a second, in silence, before the medical officer hurried to Tir and prodded her with his sensor. "No evidence of serious injury," the medical officer said, "but I want you to report to the infirmary for a full examination."

"She cannot do that," Aioua said.

"I do not care if she is the first officer," the medical officer said, not looking at Aioua. "Doctor Nairu's orders were clear."

"And they are superseded by Captain Carter's. I have orders to bring Commander Bvaso to the bridge immediately for a briefing."

Both Tir and the medical officer looked at Aioua—her expression serious, his sour. He stepped aside. "So be it," he snapped. "But I will note it in my records."

"Thank you, Deck Officer," Tir said to the medic, stepping around him and following Aioua out the door.

When they were a ways down the long hallway, Aioua said, "Congratulations on your work down on the planet."

“We did what we were assigned to do,” Tir said, her voice noncommittal.

“That is an understatement. Your team infiltrated the planet, spoke to thousands of Plury’be, and helped inspire a revolution.” She glanced sideways at Tir. “I was told you even managed to survive facing an overseer.”

“I cannot speak to that.” The same noncommittal voice.

She is hiding something, Aioua thought. But why?

According to reports from the *Hattan’s* Plury’be allies, one of the cloud-shaped overseers had attacked Tir while she was on the planet’s surface. In the midst of the attack, the overseer abruptly withdrew. No one knew why, and Tir’s official reports back to the ship had done nothing to clear up the situation.

What made it so irregular was that overseers did not usually retreat from anything. In fact, the only known weapon effective against the overseers was Nho’s staff, which was not on the planet at the time of the attack. What, in the absence of the staff, could have caused the overseer to withdraw?

Almost without realizing it, Aioua slowed, her Aecron mind knitting fact and speculation as if they were the threads of a damaged skinsuit. Was Tir being noncommittal because she didn’t know? Or because she might know, and she didn’t want to talk about it? If so, why keep silent? Did the ordeal involve some private part of Tir’s life . . . like the same faith Nho carried when he wielded the staff?

That would be a possible explanation. It was one subject Tir was very private about, even with Aioua.

Realizing she had fallen behind somewhat, Aioua quickened her steps as Tir spoke over her shoulder. “The revolution has not succeeded yet,” she said, in an obvious ploy to redirect the conversation, “and when we departed the surface, there was speculation that Dar and his forces would retaliate.”

Aioua decided to let the previous conversation go. For now. “Speculation from where? Among our allies, or those who live on the planet?”

“Both. I asked Orel to see if he could determine whether this was a rumor or based on some other intelligence.”

“Hopefully they are only paranoid rumors.” They stepped into the lift and Aioua keyed for the bridge. “I assume you have heard about the Ritican battlecruiser.”

“I have, and Captain Carter and I have had brief conversations on the subject. For my own sanity, I have tried not to think much on it up to this point, with everything going on down on the surface.” Tir leaned against the lift wall. “I assume that is what this briefing is about.”

“I would also assume so,” Aioua said. “So far the captain is being quiet about the subject.”

Tir gestured to her portable. “Our first priority is repairing the ship. On this the captain and I agree. We cannot help the Plury’be or the Confederacy in our current state.” She ran her digits through the small shock of hair atop her head. “I did not realize how much damage the *Hattan* had sustained until I saw it from the shuttle a few moments ago.”

The lift opened, and they headed down the bridge deck’s central artery. “You should have seen it four days ago,” Aioua said.

They stepped onto the bridge. The watch crew greeted them with hasty salutes as they turned and proceeded into the conference room. They found it packed with senior staff. Tir peeled away from Aioua and headed toward the head of the table, acknowledging a flurry of salutations and cheers before taking a seat next to the captain. Aioua, meanwhile, found a spot along the left wall, next to two other Aecron officers.

Jared Carter looked around the room, his eyes at once weary and focused. Aioua knew he had to be more exhausted than anyone, trying to manage ship repair, the Ritican situation, and the ever-evolving developments down on the planet. As if to prove the point, Aioua noted the half-consumed cup of tea cradled in his hand. Knowing the captain, it was probably some variation on the cyranium blends he favored. The natural chemical stimulant in the

tea probably accounted for the focus in his eyes. The weariness in his eyes was everything else.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said, and the room went silent. “There are some important things we need to talk about today. But before we do, there are a couple of other things I want to say.”

Jared rubbed his eyes, then rested his hands on the table. “First, I want to thank you all for your incredible work over the last few days. I know I say that often, but that doesn’t make it any less true. These last months have tested you beyond what any Navy crew has ever been asked, and you have responded, every time. No captain could be more proud than I am.”

There were various assents around the room, including a couple of Humans who clapped and offered muted cheers. Jared continued. “I don’t have time to name every accomplishment, but I do want to give special attention to a few people. I want to acknowledge the tireless work of the engineering teams, who have done everything possible to effect repairs on the ship. I feel far more confident in our ability to defend ourselves now than I did just a few hours ago.”

More cheering. Aioua looked at the two engineering representatives present, a Human and an Exo. The Human smiled and nodded in appreciation; the Exo said, “The completion of the tasks continues.”

Jared looked to Aioua’s immediate left. “I also want to acknowledge Commander Aroo and the crew of the interceptor *Belico*. This morning they successfully retrieved the *Falcon*, which I’m told can be repaired once it has been purged of hyperwave particles. I can think of no better way to honor that crew’s sacrifice.”

There was a bittersweet moment of silence. Redelia gave a brief wave of acknowledgment.

Jared turned to his right, where Tir sat. “I also want to welcome Commander Bvaso back to the ship and congratulate her and her team on the work they have begun on the planet. Well done.”

The sad mood of the previous moment lifted, and there were cheers and shouts from around the room. Tir smiled a little.

Jared did too, but for only a moment. “And now,” he said, folding his hands in front of him and gazing back out on the crowd, “I need to talk about why you’re here. We have some serious matters to discuss.”

The room grew quiet—eerily so, Aioua thought.

Jared went on. “There are no embargoes on this information. I will be disseminating it to the rest of the crew as soon as this briefing is over. Everyone needs to know exactly what we’re dealing with.

“Obviously you are all wondering about the Ritican battlecruiser *Rkshla-Voun*. I apologize for not discussing this sooner, but Commander Bvaso and I both felt that our first priority was to effect repairs on our fleet. Now that those repairs are progressing, and now that I have a better understanding of what the *Rkshla-Voun* knows, I can pass along to you what I know.”

Jared projected a map of the Confederacy into the air above the table. Aioua felt something like a sentimental recognition . . . that sensation that comes from looking at something for the first time in a long time. She hadn’t had cause to look at this map since the *Hattan* had departed the Confederacy several months before. With all that had happened in the intervening period, it felt longer than that.

Red dots appeared across the map, on the fringes of Ritican space as well as in the area along the Aecron-Ritican border. Jared said, “There is no way to put this gently, so I’ll be direct: The Ritics and the Aecrons are at war, and the Confederal alliances that our Navy was established under have been shattered, perhaps irreparably.”

The words hung in the air for a long moment. Somehow Aioua was not surprised, and yet she was. Either way, hearing it vocalized set off a chain of emotions she was not expecting. Redelia reached over, either to steady Aioua or herself. Or both.

The map magnified the Far Outerlands of Ritican space. “To our best knowledge,” Jared said, “the problems began around the middle of the past year when the Aecron delegates in Congress, in

the course of criticizing Navy policy, inadvertently revealed that they had intercepted intelligence from the Riticans. Captain Dor is not certain of all the reasons for the Aecrons' espionage, but it is clear some of them involved determining the whereabouts of our ship. We can only assume that is what precipitated the ambush on our ship—the one involving those prototype pulse stream weapons—in the Far Outerlands.

“According to Captain Dor, the Riticans subsequently learned of the ambush and determined that the Aecrons had orchestrated it by way of a listening post secretly placed in Ritian space. The Riticans retaliated, destroying the listening post and several other secret installations. By then, though, the Aecrons' espionage activities had also uncovered clandestine Ritian plans to build and deploy a fleet across the Great Void to strike against Malum's creators.”

“A counteroffensive?” Redelia said. “Without telling the rest of the Confederacy?”

“The Riticans,” Jared said, tapping the table absently, “were apparently unsatisfied with the state of Congressional politics on the matter. They decided that acting alone against Malum's creators was the only way to protect themselves against future attacks.”

Thorno Garn, one of the Ritian security officers, said, “Ramas-Eduj.”

Everyone looked at him. The *Hattan* had been forced to divert to the Ramas-Eduj Manufactory after an apparent act of sabotage inside engineering. The interactions between the manufactory and the Navy cruiser had been, to put it politely, disagreeable.

“All those parts they were building,” Thorno explained. “It was far too busy for a mere frontier supplier. Those of us who went down there saw it. That manufactory must have been part of the Ritian fleet-building operation.”

“Not long after we left,” Jared said, “the Aecrons reached the same conclusion. They wiped out the manufactory and everyone in it, along with several other Ritian installations. Hostilities between the Riticans and Aecrons escalated not long after that.”

There was silence in the room as everyone took in the finality of those words. That the Aecrons were dangerous, everyone knew. They were possessed by a conditioning that made them violent to those who attempted to travel outside the Confederacy. The *Hattan* had barely survived two Aecron attacks: a conditioning-incited Aecron mutiny Nho had cured with the aid of his staff, and the ambush of experimental fighters in the Far Outerlands. But a full-fledged massacre of multiple Ritican facilities was on an order of magnitude greater than anything the *Hattan* had witnessed.

“If my people are reacting in their instinctively defensive manner,” said Vetta, “and the Aecrons are reacting according to their conditioning, there is no telling if or when this war will ever end.” She leaned in at the table. “Does Captain Dor know about the conditioning?”

“He said it’s general knowledge in the Confederacy now, although it has had little impact on the political situation.”

“What has the Navy done?” Redelia asked. “Or Congress? Or the other races? Surely the Humans and Hazionites would not sit idly by while our alliances collapse.”

Jared rested his hands under his chin. “It appears we are not the only Navy ship to have suffered a mutiny, but we are one of the few still in service in spite of it. Most of the fleet is unaccounted for. Ships that remain are largely without functional crews, their officers having resigned and returned to their home races. Navy Command has similarly fallen into anarchy, both on Titan and elsewhere. For those reasons and others, the Confederal Congress has been disbanded, and no one knows if or when it will reconvene.”

Aioua closed her eyes. She couldn’t fathom things being that far gone. In her lifetime, the Confederacy and the Navy had been constants. Who would protect the trade lanes? Keep peace among the sentient races?

“The Humans, I’m told, are mostly neutral,” Jared added, “although there is one among them who appears to be lobbying for Earth and its colonies to support the Aecrons. Captain Dor gave me a name: Confederal Delegate Troye Carson.”

“I know him,” said Orel Dayail, the Aecron communications officer. “He is an influential figure in Congress. Or was, if that body no longer exists.”

“I know him too,” Jared said, his lips forming a thin line. “I am one of his constituents. He’s an . . . opportunist, among other things, and his potential involvement disturbs me.” Jared looked at Tir. “As for the Hazionites, I was told they are worried about the Aecrons and are quietly supporting the Riticans.”

Someone let out a whistle. The Riticans and Hazionites had a history of animosity stretching back to the Corridor Wars. An alliance like that, to Aioua, spoke of desperation.

Tir asked, “We are hearing this from a Ritan captain. Is this the whole of the story? What do we know about this Captain Dor?”

“Our database indicates he is a decorated officer,” Orel said. “There is nothing to suggest that he is here for any reason other than what he says. And he provided us with a bevy of supporting data to validate his claims.”

Tir looked at Jared. “I would like to examine that data, sir.”

Jared pursed his lips. “I’m counting on it.”

Tir glanced at Aioua, as if to say, *I will need your help*. Aioua gestured in the affirmative, then asked, “Captain, how did this Ritan ship find us?”

“When Admiral Garvak first assigned us to this mission,” Jared said, absently rubbing his left temple, “he told me that there were contingencies in place in the event that we failed. The *Rkshla-Voun* was apparently that contingency, a joint effort between Garvak’s inner circle in the Confederal Navy and some key figures in the Ritan militia. As the war began to escalate, Captain Dor’s ship was deployed across the Void to find us and tell us what happened.

“Garvak apparently provided Captain Dor’s ship with our reports, which we had sent back through our long-range communications array. Dor was also provided with waypoints where he could receive updated reports from Garvak at specific times. The last came a few weeks ago. It indicated that Garvak would be unable to transmit further reports—Captain Dor is not sure why, but we

could probably guess—and that our last heading was Free Town. The *Rkshla-Voun* was able to establish contact with the Plury’be there, convince them that they were allies of ours, and eventually find their way here.”

In Aioua’s mind, it made sense. If the Navy was going to retrieve the *Hattan*, this was the only way. Because of the great distances involved, it took some time for reports sent from the *Hattan*’s array to reach Navy Command, and for several reasons, Garvak would not attempt to send (nor would Jared have expected) replies back. Aioua wasn’t sure how much of a difference the *Hattan* and its interceptors could make in a full war between the Aecrons and Riticans; obviously Garvak thought differently. If nothing else, the admiral felt the *Hattan* deserved to know what was going on back home.

Garro Ball, the weapons officer, said, “I assume, then, that we will be making to depart as soon as we can.”

Jared sighed deeply, and Aioua immediately sensed that something was not right. “There is a complication. This morning I received an urgent message from our Plury’be liaisons.” He projected a map of Plury’be space above the table. “Regarding this.”

Aioua gazed up at the tactical map, which showed a line of red dots along several fronts not far from the *Hattan*’s current location, just outside of Plury’be space.

“Our liaisons,” Jared explained, “have reason to believe that the Domain is massing along the Plury’be border.”

“To what end?” asked Tir.

“A probable counterstrike into Plury’be space.”

Everyone stared at the map in mute shock. That the Domain might retaliate against the forces over Sacred Home was not a surprise; to do so this quickly, and with so many ships, was not something anyone in the room would have predicted, Aioua included.

“By the Domes,” Redelia whispered.

At the table, Garro Ball said, “How reliable is this information?”

“This comes from the Silent Ones, the same faction that helped

us coordinate this battle in the first place,” Orel said. “They are the best-connected faction we know of in the Plury’be collective.”

Navigator Kilvin Wrsaw, leaning against a wall, pointed to the dots. “Several of these are inside Domain space. I did not think the Plury’be knew anything about what went on there.”

“They know very little,” Jared said, “but not entirely nothing. I don’t know all the particulars of how they came by this information, and I’m not sure our liaisons do either, but if the Silent Ones are right, the Plury’be could be looking at a full Domain invasion in one month, maybe two.”

Aioua took a short breath. Jared panned the map into a segment along the central border. “Dar has apparently decided to help Those of the Soul retake not only the Plury’be homeworld, but at least a dozen other planets near the Plury’be-Domain border. The Way of Law faction is already drawing resources into Wisdom for a possible defense there.”

“An attack on Wisdom?” Redelia was incredulous. “The planet that has never seen war?”

“I was present for the conversation with the Plury’be along with Captain Carter,” Orel said. “There is still much about their sociology we do not understand, but everything about the tone of that conversation suggested that none of the other Plury’be factions expected this. It is unprecedented. Those of the Soul have never operated in such a brazen way, nor has Dar. The Way of Law and their allied factions fear for the survival of their race.”

Jared stared down at the table. “The Plury’be,” he said, “are asking for our help.”

Aioua looked around the room, where Jared’s words were met by an assortment of uncertain stares. All of them were no doubt wondering what she was wondering: how this fit into going home.

Tir said, “How, exactly?”

Jared manipulated the map to reveal a small yellow dot. It was located outside Domain space in a point nearly opposite the Domain-Plury’be border. Orel explained, “The Plury’be are desperate for a way to stop Dar’s forces—perhaps a tactical weakness

or a way to strike directly at Dar himself. They are asking for assistance in seeking Dar's predecessor, a sentient known as the Exile. According to the Silent Ones, the Exile is located on a planet beyond the far side of Domain space."

"Why not send a ship of their own?" asked Vetta.

"Because," Orel said, "they have already tried and failed. According to the histories of the Silent Ones, a scout ship from a minor Plury'be faction known as the Deep Source ventured out to the Exile's world about six years ago. The scouts returned, claiming to have found nothing of interest, but those around them began to notice strange changes in their behavior. They became indifferent to their faction and its philosophies, and over time their indifference seemed to spread and consume the rest of the Deep Source faction. It subsequently collapsed. A few of its followers were subsumed under Those of the Soul; the rest became factionless, which is almost unheard of in Plury'be society."

Aioua cast a worried look at Redelia. "It sounds like a form of conditioning."

Redelia said, "Not a word I want to hear."

"The Silent Ones," said Orel, "were able to acquire the scout ship's records and determine that the sensory data on the Exile's planet had been altered—perhaps by the scout ship's own crew, although they are not certain. The Silent Ones still believe that important information is to be found on that planet, but no faction dares try to send an expedition now. The No Greater believe some sort of evil lurks there—they specifically used the term *That Which Distorts*."

The Plury'be name for the enemy of the One, Aioua thought. Their name for the Outcasted.

"They are asking for us to take the staff there, then," Tir said.

"That was the implication, yes."

Redelia looked at Kilvin. "How long would it take to get there?"

Kilvin eyed the map. "If we travel directly through the Domain, probably a week."

"There is a complication," Orel said. "According to the Silent

Ones, the Domain possesses some sort of fold detection technology not known to any other recorded race. If we attempted to cross the Domain, we would be caught.”

Aioua stared blankly at the map. *Fold detection technology?* Even the Aecrons had no such capabilities, although it was not for lack of trying.

“To travel around the Domain,” Kilvin said, stepping forward and tracing one of his hand digits in a wide arc around the Domain border, “would take at least twenty days, perhaps more. And another twenty days to return to this side of Domain space and then return to the Confederacy.”

“Forty days,” Redelia said. “More than a full Index month.”

“And that does not include the week we will need before we are even ready to leave this system,” added Aioua.

Vetta said, “We cannot easily ignore this, as much as I wish I could say otherwise. If the Plury’be were to fall entirely, the Domain would be equipped to turn its full attention on the Confederacy.”

“Or what is left of it,” said Tir. “We do not even know what remains back home.”

Assuming the Ritican captain speaks the truth. Tir didn’t say it, but Aioua strongly suspected her friend was thinking it.

“All the more reason,” Vetta said, “why we cannot ignore the Domain. If the Confederacy is as fractured as we fear, it is in no position to repel an invasion.”

“I also feel,” Jared said, “like we owe the Plury’be whatever assistance we can offer. They helped us land a blow against a common enemy . . . and now they’re paying for it.”

Redelia said, “You feel responsible.”

Jared nodded. “Without us, they don’t attack Sacred Home and trigger this backlash.”

“I think there is more to this than that,” Garo said. “A Domain fleet of this size and scope is far too large to be a hastily assembled act of retribution.”

Jared rested his palms on the table. “You’re suggesting this has been in the works for a while.”

“I would not be surprised. The contest here at Sacred Home may have merely been an excuse for carrying out a plan Dar and Those of the Soul had already prepared.”

“Regardless of the reason,” said Vetta, “a war is upon them.”

Redelia looked at Jared. “What do you propose we do?”

Jared pushed off from the table, leaning back in his chair. “I’m open to suggestions.”

2

MELAS'U / SACRED HOME EARTH INDEX 1307.006

Jared applied a pinch of pepper to the soup in front of him. “So what do you make of Tolar Dor’s data?” he said to Tir.

He was sitting with Tir, Redelia, and Vetta Quidd for dinner in the senior officers’ lounge. Jared did not like to use the room often—he preferred to eat in the main dining area with other officers when he was able—but today’s business had to be conducted behind closed doors. Two days had passed since the senior officers’ briefing, and the time had come to make some decisions.

Tir gestured to her portable. “It is compelling, and Aioua does not believe it has been tampered with. I am . . . less skeptical now.”

He smiled. “That will have to do until our fleet gets back to the Confederacy. How long until we can get under way?”

“Now that I have returned to full duty and reorganized the repair teams,” Tir said in a dry voice, “five days.”

“Engineering was not the same without your oversight,” said Redelia.

“Agreed,” said Jared, though it was a major understatement. “I also heard some good news regarding their work on the *Falcon* right before coming up here.”

Redelia perked up a little. “Is it purged?”

Tir said, “Sciences pronounced it clean of hyperwave particles and safe for entry. It will be ready for redeployment in a few days.”

“Already?”

“The Plury’be were of great assistance in the decontamination process—they obviously understand how to purge their own weapons—and the ship suffered only mild to moderate damage across its systems.”

Jared set his eating utensil down. This next conversation was not going to be easy, but it needed to happen now rather than later. “Speaking of the Plury’be . . . I spoke with their liaisons again last night about their request for help.”

“You have been thinking about this a great deal,” said Redelia. It was a statement, not a question.

Jared rubbed his eyes. “Yes.”

“So what Navy help are we speaking of here, hypothetically?” Tir asked. “The entire fleet?”

So now we come to the question, Jared thought. “We all agree the *Hattan* is needed back home as quickly as possible. In my view, it should be one of our interceptors.”

Redelia leaned forward, her opaque eyes boring into Jared with an intensity he found uncomfortable—although not unfamiliar. “Understand the scope of what you are saying. You are proposing leaving one of our interceptors alone in this region. They would have to cross the Great Void—a journey of several months—without any fleet support. Depending on the outcome of the Exile trip, there is no telling how long they would be separated from other Confederals. The psychological aspect of it alone is probably beyond the expertise of anyone on board.”

“That’s correct.”

“And you are also proposing sending them to a planet that . . . did something to the last ship to venture there,” Redelia said. “They would need the staff, which in turn would separate it from the rest of the fleet.”

“Also correct. Au’p has offered to join us as its bearer.”

Tir tilted her head a little. “You want to give the staff to the Plury’be cleric?”

Jared spread his hands on the table. “It’s an option. Au’p and Rete both were responsible for repulsing the regulator.”

Redelia asked, “Have you spoken to Rete of it?”

“Not yet.”

“That is a difficult thing to ask of him,” Redelia said. “Nho was Rete’s friend. The staff is . . . a remnant of that friendship. And their common bond in the Sarconian order.”

“I know,” Jared said. “I didn’t say it was easy. But it would make sense. Rete is a civilian who didn’t ask to come on this mission, and he has been through a great deal in his life.”

“You are not sure he can handle this.”

Jared bit his lip. He didn’t want to answer that question.

“The crew may not be able to handle it either,” Vetta murmured. “The counseling department was overwhelmed even before Nho’s death. They need Rete now more than ever.”

Jared said, “There is another practical benefit to bringing Au’p: It would give the interceptor one less crew member to provision for the return trip across the Void.”

“Those are valid points,” Tir said. “And I would argue that, given the circumstances, while Rete’s opinion bears consideration, it is superseded by other things, including the interests of the Confederacy . . . assuming we determine that to be the case here.”

“That is cruel,” Redelia said.

“I know,” Tir admitted. There was no malice in her voice. “But you also know it is true.”

Redelia leaned back in her chair and looked at the ceiling. “By the Domes,” she said softly.

Tir looked at Jared. “Assuming the staff goes with an interceptor, how is the *Hattan* to deal with the Aecron conditioning back in the Confederacy?”

“I do not know how we would begin to deal with the Aecron conditioning even *with* the staff,” Vetta said. “It took us hours to use the staff to help just our own crew. The staff’s power is

unquestioned, but I do not know to what degree it is a practical solution for that problem, unless it operates in other ways that we have not yet discovered.”

“As much as I hate to say so, I agree,” Redelia said, sitting up straight and turning her gaze toward Jared. “But I want to return to my original concern. Are we speaking of leaving an interceptor here, in this region, alone?”

“Stopping Dar is important,” Jared said. “Every bit as important as saving the Confederacy. I feel strongly about that. But I also understand the gravity of what you’re saying.” He looked down at his soup. “It would have to be volunteer.”

There was a protracted period of silence. No one spoke, or even touched their food. Jared did not look at them for fear of having to reckon with the glares they must be summoning at that moment.

Vetta said, abruptly, “I volunteer to lead it.”

Redelia said, “We still have not settled on whether we should do this.”

Jared glanced at Vetta with a smile. “I’ve never doubted your bravery, Vetta, but you won’t be the mission leader.”

Tir said to Redelia, “I would imagine he is looking to recruit you.”

Jared took a deep breath. *And now for this.* “No. It needs to be me.”

Tir gave a sound of surprise. Redelia, who had started to pick up her eating utensil, set it down loudly at Jared’s words. “My apologies, Captain, since, as an Aecron, I am not the best at reading Human expressions—was that an attempt at humor?”

“No. I’m very serious.” It took great effort for him to look at her. “I need to lead the Exile mission.”

Tir and Vetta seemed too shocked to speak. Redelia spoke again. “You cannot do that, sir. You are the commanding officer of this fleet. You cannot abdicate that to take on this assignment.”

Jared waved that away. “There is no shortage of capable officers who could lead the *Hattan* battle group in my stead.” He looked at his Hazonite first officer. “Tir could command effectively. All three of you could.”

Redelia looked to Vetta for help. Vetta said calmly, “Redelia is right. You cannot go. The Confederacy needs you. You are the hero of Malum, and that standing will be critical in helping to rally support against the Aecrons and this Human delegate—Troye Carson—who Tolar says is trying to ally with the Aecrons. None of us has that same political weight.”

Redelia added, “The only other person who might have carried as much influence is Nho, and he is no longer with us. I know Tir agrees with me.”

“I do,” Tir said tersely.

Jared raised his hands to stop them. “Listen. Listen to me, carefully. Please. Your logic is sound. It’s the same logic I would use if I were in your position, although you are vastly overestimating my political weight. But this isn’t merely about reason. This is about a—” he searched for the word “—conviction of the heart.” He looked directly at Redelia. “You know I’m not one normally given to intuition or feelings.”

“No. You are one of the most practical leaders I know, which is why I am struggling to understand this. Is this about you feeling personally responsible for putting the Plury’be in this situation? If so, I think Garo was right: This is likely something the Domain has been planning for some time.”

“Maybe, but we were the catalyst, whether we like it or not. It feels wrong to leave them in this position. I helped put them in danger. I need to help them get out of it.”

“We all helped put them in danger, not just you,” Vetta said. “Allow me to be your proxy.”

“Or let me,” said Redelia. “If it is the only way you will not go, I will do it. I will take the *Belico*.”

Jared shook his head. “It has to be me.”

“Why, sir? Because of guilt? I have never known you to be a martyr.”

Jared put his hand on his forehead, rubbed his temple, then dropped his hand. “I’m not trying to be a martyr, and this isn’t just a feeling. There’s something deeper in play. I’ve felt it almost

from the moment the Plury'be told us about the Domain invasion. It's—I don't know what to call it, except . . ." His voice trailed off.

He picked up again a few moments later. "It's like the feeling I had inside Malum, when Nho faced the warden and needed help. I knew I had to be the one to bring the fight. I feel that way now. I've seen—experienced—Dar's minions beaten back. Something inside me says that this Exile is important—crucially important—in stopping Dar, and I need to be the one to find him."

Redelia closed her eyes as if in thought. When she opened them again, she said, "The crew would be devastated if you left."

"They will be devastated no matter who goes."

"With respect, you underestimate yourself, sir," Tir said.

Jared leveled a gaze at her. "I don't think so. You're ready to do this. You've been with this ship almost from the beginning, before any of us, and you have demonstrated repeatedly that you are ready. Honestly, you were the more qualified of the two of us; were it not for Nho's insistence, this ship and this mission would have been yours."

Tir looked at the others, then at him. "I will need time to process this."

Jared nodded. "I don't fault you. This is a titanic decision." He looked back to Redelia. "Garo Ball would be the most obvious choice to take on the role of first officer, but I would like you to also serve as counsel for Tir as the senior interceptor commander."

Redelia's voice was skeptical. "I also need time to process."

He nodded again. He hadn't expected Tir or Redelia to embrace the idea, but it was hard not to feel the sting of their lack of confidence. But, he knew, time to process was not a rejection, and that was important.

• • •

Jared found Rete Sorte in one of the upper observation decks, alone, staring out at the planet Sacred Home. He held Sarco's staff at his side. Nho's old friend gave Jared barely a glance as he approached.

"I'm surprised you're not in the commons," Jared said.

“I need a little . . . time away from others’ problems,” Rete said. He added, “I miss him.”

Jared stood alongside Rete, staring out the window, which could be covered in armor plating during combat situations. The Plury’be homeworld, completely covered in urban civilization, sparkled in the sunlight. “I miss him too. He and I faced what you and Au’p faced. I’ll never forget what he did for me, for all of us.”

They stood there in silence. Jared said, finally, “I came to talk to you about something. It is a request, but one also made in confidence.”

Rete looked at him. “What is it?”

“You’ve heard about our situation.”

“That’s why I’m not in the commons, Captain. I can take only so much talk about Confederate wars and Plury’be invasions.”

Nho had worked with the ship’s counseling department in providing support to the crew, and Rete had assisted him. Nho was, given the strenuous nature of their mission, very busy, so his death had thrown a lot of responsibility onto Rete.

Jared said, “We’re discussing leaving an interceptor behind to scout the Exile’s world while the *Hattan* returns. We believe there may be something . . . dark . . . in play there. Something conventional weapons may not be able to handle.”

Rete looked at the wooden object in his hand, then at Jared. “So you need an unconventional one,” he said, lifting the staff slightly off the ground.

“Maybe.”

“And the bearer would go with it.”

“That’s right.”

Rete turned back to the window and sighed deeply. Jared added, “Au’p has offered to be that bearer. It would mean less provisioning for the return trip.”

Still looking ahead, Rete said, “Do you think I could handle it?”

Jared hesitated longer than he wanted to. “I don’t know.”

Rete poked absently with his feet at the floor. “I don’t think

I could leave these people anyway, as much as I hate them sometimes.” He looked at Jared. “Is it wrong for me to say that?”

Jared shook his head. “No.”

“Who will lead the mission?”

Jared tried not to flinch, although he should have known this question was coming. “It may be me.”

Rete arched an eyebrow. “How many among the crew know?”

“Only a few.”

He smiled, although it didn’t reach his sad eyes. “Then I suppose I definitely can’t leave these people behind, can I?” He held the staff out to Jared. “You used this once, didn’t you?”

Jared grasped it and held it aloft, feeling its weight. Light and wooden, good balance. “With Nho, yes. When we fought Malum.”

“Then it’s yours. And the Plury’be’s. Take it with my blessing.”

“No,” Jared said, handing it back. “I’d like you to give it to Au’p yourself.”

Rete gripped it and pulled it back in close. “I’ll do that.”

• • •

Later that evening, Jared returned to his quarters to read the day’s reports and ponder the measure of what he’d suggested to his senior officers. He was effectively giving up command of the *Hattan*—perhaps forever—in favor of a lone mission in a small interceptor months away from any Confederate contacts. How he would explain it to the crew, he did not know. He didn’t even know how to explain it to himself.

He only knew that it was the right thing to do.

Jared’s door chimed. “Enter.”

The door opened, and a massive, rust-colored Ritan walked in. Vetta Quidd. She was followed by a parade of officers. A wiry, ash-colored Hazionite: navigator Kilvin Wrsaw. A short, blue-skinned Aecron: medical officer Darel Weye. A Human with a lean, angular face and cropped brown hair: communications officer Rami Del. And an Exo that looked like most other Exos, although Jared recognized this one as Triphox.

His old crew from the *Retaelus*.

Jared casually tossed his portable onto a nearby table. “Well, this is a surprise,” he said. “What’s the occasion?”

Kilvin looked at the others, looked back at Jared, and said, “We came to talk about your desire to lead the Exile mission.”

“Are you here to try to talk me out of it?”

“No,” said Kilvin. He paused. “We are here to talk you into taking us with you.”

Jared opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“We went to battle with you against Malum,” said Vetta. “It is only fitting that we help you find a way to stop Malum’s creator.”

“There is an important task to complete,” clicked Triphox.

Jared stared at them, his mouth hanging open as he tried to figure out what to say. The selection of a crew for a trip like this was not one to make flippantly; there were so many variables, including expertise, resilience, temperament, and a compatible personality with other members of the crew. He was in no position to make snap judgments about such high-stakes decisions.

So it was a surprise even to him when he said, “Then it seems we have some planning to do.”