

Destination Azahar

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CONTENT: noseX ScFi

UNIVERSE: The Swarm Cycle

Chapter 6 - Managing Expectations

Captain Kozlowski invited the two green ensigns and their families to meet with him in the wardroom of *Copernicus* for dinner the day after all of the logistics had been settled and the pods assigned to McKinsey and Nguyen had been secured to *Copernicus*. The three ship's officers that McKinsey and Nguyen had not yet met introduced themselves while waiting for the captain to arrive. They had barely finished the exchange of social pleasantries when Captain Kozlowski stepped into the wardroom.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Kozlowski greeted the assembled officers as he returned their salutes and said, "As you were. Ladies and gentlemen, our newest crewmates are new recruits. Part of the arrangements I made with Admiral Forney in having them assigned to our ship was to insure they received proper training as officers of the Fleet Auxiliary. I wanted this meeting to introduce everyone." Kozlowski made a show of scanning the room before adding, "For an astronomer and navigator I seem to have poor mathematical skills. It's clear that this room isn't large enough to accommodate everyone."

When the polite laughter died down Kozlowski turned to his personal organizer and head concubine. "Charlotte, would you please escort our guest's concubines and children to the general mess and gymnasium. I've had the gym set up for the kids to get acquainted. That should make enough room in these tight quarters for the remaining seven of us to be comfortable and become acquainted as well."

When the concubines and children cleared the room Kozlowski invited everyone to take a seat before asking the new arrivals, "Have either of you had any previous military training?"

McKinsey shook her head and Nguyen responded, "No, sir. We did get some sleep-training during the trip from Earth, though."

Kozlowski's shoulders slumped just enough to be noticed. "Well, nothing to be undone then. We'll start with the basics and work things from there. Mister Wallaby, I'm putting you in charge of a sleep-training curriculum as well as practical exercises, and I want everyone to assist. There is normally some leeway given among crewmen during a cruise, but we'll operate under a more formal protocol until we're certain that our new recruits understand the rules of conduct and respond with practiced reflexes."

Kozlowski was certain that it was a stroke of extreme luck to have these two available just when he needed them. During the earlier introductions of the rather large families and the informal discussions that followed, Kozlowski learned that two of Nguyen's concubines were accomplished engineers in their own right. He had read the personnel files for each of the adults, but had not fully appreciated the depth of Margret and Celeste's knowledge from the brief resumes attached to each file and the short interviews he had previously conducted with Nguyen and McKinsey.

During dinner Kozlowski also learned that Nguyen didn't really work for McKinsey. They had not met until after their extraction from Earth. They had only known of each other by reputation. Where McKinsey was assertive and well versed in social graces and values, Nguyen was quiet and relaxed. He appeared to be very comfortable with remaining in the background and working with his team.

After everyone finished a passable chocolate mousse and coffee, Kozlowski gently dismissed Nguyen and McKinsey with, "Well, I should be getting back to the bridge. I suggest that the two of you get settled in and familiarize yourselves with our small ship. Although, with your pods being transferred directly from *Asimov* there's not likely to be much settling in required."

After the newcomers left, Kozlowski indicated that his four officers should resume their seats and asked, "Opinions, anyone?"

Atanas was the first one to speak up. "I'm a little embarrassed about not checking deeper into the industrial replicator availability. They really showed me up with that little discovery."

"You shouldn't feel bad, Alec," Kozlowski replied. "They didn't find it, they invented it! Actually, I believe one of Nguyen's concubines invented it. Where you are a fine officer and an outstanding astronomer, these two families are outstanding creators of machines that build stuff. They don't build the stuff itself; they build the machines that build the stuff. Oh, you know what I mean!"

"McKinsey is smooth and shrewd," Ensign Johnson pointed out. "I've worked for a lot of people like her. She doesn't miss anything going on in a room and steps into the spotlight every chance she gets. I'm not sure that I like her, but that won't keep me from working closely with her."

"I'll bet Nguyen is a real character when he cuts loose," Ensign Wallaby shared his observation. "He may not be a party animal, but he has a quiet sense of humor buried in there somewhere at the very least. I heard one of his concubines say that his daughter is a loaded pistol, and will be fourteen soon."

"He has a fourteen-year-old daughter?" Ensign Stayton rarely spoke up, but couldn't contain herself. "Did he have her when he was twelve?"

Everyone laughed, but Atanas recovered first. "He's forty-five, Marina. You forget how much the nanites can turn back a biological clock. Plus, he's Asian, and they don't show their age very much until they become ancient. His son is a sophomore at Mississippi State."

"I haven't seen anything yet that makes me believe they'll cling to us when it's time for us to leave them behind on some distant rock," Kozlowski remarked in conclusion. "I think they'll do just fine. It'll take some kind of rare disaster to sneak up on that pair. Nguyen has even configured a medical bay and machine shop into his personal pod. We should be as prepared as those two when it's time for us to head to the far side of the Spur. Be thinking about what-if scenarios and grill them for ideas, gently, every chance you get. Does anyone have questions, comments?" Kozlowski scanned the table and each officer gave him a negative response.

Kozlowski nodded, "Thank you for your candor. We have a lot to do tomorrow, and I recommend we get plenty of rest while we can. That's all, then."

Tuan and Celeste were awakened the next morning by peals of laughter. "Sounds like the natives are getting restless," Tuan remarked. "I should probably get out there before Kim instigates a riot." He gave Celeste a gentle kiss, "Thank you for last night. I really needed to relax and unwind."

Celeste smiled at the praise, "You're very welcome. It was literally my pleasure to be of service."

The giggling pair stepped into the shower. Tuan donned a casual uniform, but Celeste remained gloriously nude as they stepped out of the master stateroom.

All of the kids, including Kim, were clustered around the kitchen table enjoying companionship and stacks of pancakes. Tuan sensed that a giggling food-fight could break out at the drop of the hat and wasn't sure that watching them go at it wouldn't be fun. But Beatrice was in control, although to a casual observer the scene was chaos. Her timing was impeccable. Just as the peak of mischief was approached, she would distract the instigator with a teasing word or playful touch.

Nancy was pitching in to help while Margret watched from a safe distance. Margret was clearly being entertained by the antics even though such activities were well outside of her comfort zone. She really hoped that she could just be an observer for a while, but knew that sooner or later she would be called upon to be the substitute ringmaster of this circus.

She had missed most of this with her own daughter and lived with a lot of guilt and regret because of it. She had a good excuse to foist Sharon onto her parents while she was in

college, but she could have taken over as 'mom' when she graduated by making a different career choice. She let work become her priority. In hindsight she knew it was really because being responsible for Sharon scared the b'Jesus out of her; very much like the terror that was just under the surface right now.

"It would appear that everyone had a good night's sleep and is all rested up for a big day," Tuan announced loudly enough to get everyone's attention. "What do we have planned for today?"

Margret spoke up from across the room, "Constance has asked that you, Celeste, and I join her in her quarters after breakfast. She suggested that we pool resources and let the kids explore the ship, pointing out areas that are dangerous, off-limits, and okay to enter."

After breakfast was finished and everyone was cleaned up, Tuan suggested shifts for the outing and the crowd made their way to the McKinsey pod. The curve of the ring joining the pods was much more pronounced for the four pods at each level of *Copernicus* compared to the sixteen pods per ring on *Asimov*. More than one of the group put a hand on the bulkhead to ward off vertigo.

Constance greeted everyone at the entrance to her pod. Twenty-one people pretty much filled the foyer and living room of the efficiently arranged pod, but no one felt claustrophobic. Judith would accompany the two thirteen-year-olds, Phaninath and Leroy would take the older kids, and Aswani and Beatrice would supervise the younger group during the outing. Nancy joined Judith and the teenagers at the last minute leaving Constance, Tuan, Celeste and Margret in a suddenly quiet room.

"Whew," Constance remarked while laughing. "I had no idea that so few kids could occupy so much space. It's as quiet as a tomb in here with them gone."

"The young ones are hard to ignore, and ignoring them can be dangerous to life, limb, and property." Tuan added with a chuckle. "Of course, when they're quiet is when you really need to investigate what they're up to. On rare occasions they may have fallen asleep, but most times they'll be getting into something that they know they're supposed to leave alone."

Constance turned to Margret and Celeste. "How are you guys adjusting to having kids underfoot?"

"That does seem to be the apropos term," Margret responded with a laugh. "I thoroughly enjoy watching them burn unbelievable amounts of energy." Celeste just nodded agreement.

Constance giggled, "Sometimes I get tired just watching them. But, that's not what I wanted to talk about this morning. Tuan and I have a considerable amount of training on our plate in the next three months." She opened a folder on the table and an oriented the pages for the other two women to view. "I've sketched some ideas for colony

accommodations and equipment as well as making use of larger replicators. The problem is that the AI tells me the replicator has to scan an object into its database. Do you think you guys can draw these up using a Computer Aided Design package and work out a way to convert the CAD files into replicator files? I don't accept that it's not possible."

Tuan followed Constance into the kitchen area after a silent invitation as Margret and Celeste thumbed through the drawings and notes. Where they were out of earshot, Tuan quietly asked, "Those drawings looked like they were for domed habitats and pumping stations. Do you expect water to be available in a hostile atmosphere?"

Constance nodded. "A planet that doesn't have water of some kind will be a serious terraforming challenge. We can't count on a breathable atmosphere at first, though. The Earth's delicate balance of carbon dioxide and oxygen is more luck than a natural phenomenon. The pods offer complete protection to the occupants, but kids will need some kind of outdoor activities to burn off their excess energy."

Tuan nodded as the AI announced it was time for the two ensigns to begin their initial session with Ensign Wallaby. The two of them made sure that Margret and Celeste could get back into Tuan's pod unassisted before heading for Wallaby's quarters.

"Speaking of training," Tuan said as they approached Wallaby's pod, "who's going to fly the shuttles once *Copernicus* leaves? I think Celeste and Nancy would be interested."

Constance smile in reflection, "I'm pretty sure Judith is adventurous enough to try. Aswani is very adventurous, but mostly in the bedroom. I don't know if Leroy has enough education to be a shuttle pilot, but his language skills are rapidly improving. The sleep-training pod is really helping him master the English language. He could be a contender for the job in a year or so. Phaninath panics too easily to handle an in-flight emergency. I might give it a lash, though. Maybe you can help me out by entertaining Aswani while I'm in the sleep-training pod learning to fly." Constance added the last with a little wink.

Tuan was still wearing a startled expression and Constance was chuckling when they were admitted into Ensign Wallaby's pod.

Wallaby was a good source of hints and tips and recognized that the new recruits were a bit old and had too much experience for most of the typical military training tactics to work with them. It really is a challenge to intimidate someone for having an insignia out of place when they're focused on making sure they have everything they needed to survive on a remote and hostile world for an unknown period of time.

Even though it was of minor interest to them, Tuan and Constance quickly grasped the concepts. There wasn't much difference between the respect to be shown superior officers and the respect to be shown upper plant management. In many ways the military was easier because of the consistency of expectations.