

Destination Azahar

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CONTENT: noseX ScFi

UNIVERSE: The Swarm Cycle

Chapter 10 - Absolute Power

The Nguyen residence was entertained by a good bit of screaming wafting from the master suite the next morning before the smiling pair emerged for breakfast.

Kim was the first to send a salvo in Tuan's direction, "My God, Pop! You need to cut us some slack. It was bad enough with you and Bea on *Copernicus*. You and Nancy had the whole planet shaking enough to throw me out of bed this morning." She jumped out of his reach and giggled when Tuan tried to swat her retreating butt.

Tensions were markedly relieved in the Tuan household now that Nancy had faced down two of her demons. She began frolicking with the older kids even after receiving the somewhat sobering news from the pod's AI that she was pregnant with a little girl. She had at least six months of childhood left and planned to take advantage of every minute of it. Okay, children don't typically have their tunnel stroked several times a day, but Nancy felt like she had to make up for lost time and recruited assistance from Celeste when Tuan was not around or was too exhausted. Other than that excursion into the grownup realm, she intended behave as an adolescent.

Everyone was amused by Nancy's antics, including the typically conservative Constance. Constance had moved out of her standard pod and into the huge triple-decker that she had designed. It incorporated features from several American mansions including an open library with a second story balcony across the foyer from a two-story conservatory with murals of gardens, sculptures and a small stage next to a grand piano. A grand staircase led from the foyer to the adult quarters upstairs that had sitting rooms between the common hall and the bedchambers.

"You need to expand my old pod and move out of your little cracker box, Tuan." It became a repetitive theme, and Tuan finally relented, but he opted for something much smaller and far less formal than what Constance had done. He enjoyed the closeness of his family and wanted to maintain that connection.

Tension kept building in the McKinsey household as Constance became more demanding and less tolerant. She began deliberately humiliating her concubines, including Judith. She even sniped at the kids when they were around. Aswani was grateful for the huge residence because it allowed her children to remain in the basement where they were somewhat shielded from the verbal abuse.

It came to a head when Constance invited everyone to her new quarters to celebrate the grand opening of the first dome-covered playground on the surface of Azahar. She wanted Aswani to take on all three men at the same time while everyone watched. She became verbally abusive to Tuan and his whole family when he refused to participate.

Judith tried to calm Constance by telling her, "Honey, you just can't keep treating people like this."

"Why not!" Constance shouted. "Who's going to stop me? One of these sniveling men? That wimp Nguyen? You? I can do what I want, when I want, to whomever I want!" With that outburst she slapped Judith and stormed out of the dining room and up the grand staircase to her suite on the top floor.

Phaninath, Leroy, and Aswani tried to console the crying Judith, but she was too distraught to respond. When it was clear that nothing could be done, they finally put her to bed.

"Something must be done," Aswani spoke quietly when she retired to her bedroom with Phaninath and Leroy after Judith had cried herself to sleep.

"What can we do?" Phaninath asked. "Our mistress has the right to kill us all and nothing can be done to her."

"Us, yes, but not the children or Tuan's family," Leroy spoke for the first time other than to answer a direct question.

A somewhat surprised Aswani kissed Leroy's cheek. "I am thinking that those lessons the AI is giving you are making you smarter as well as improving your diction. Perhaps I should follow your fine example. You are absolutely right. We must shield the children and our neighbors or serious trouble for our mistress will surely result."

"I would suggest that we sequester you with Leroy during his lessons, but I doubt the subject would remain language and diction for very long," Judith quipped. "Both of you can say 'Oh God! Oh yes!' very well."

Judith's attempt at humor failed miserably. The mood of the group was too gloomy for a little levity to dispel the worries shared by all of them.

When Constance didn't come down for breakfast the next morning, Judith took the six children next door to the pod that had been taken over by the Nguyen clan and asked Tuan to look after them for a while. Everyone was grateful that Constance had not rescinded their privilege to leave and enter the pod.

Tuan asked, "What happened to you last night that caused such a dark bruise on your face?"

Judith attempted to hide it with her hand. "Constance is under a lot of stress," was all she said by way of explanation before retreating back to her pod.

When the kids had been settled, Tuan asked Nancy to stay with them and joined his three older concubines in the kitchen. The kitchen is the traditional place for serious family discussions where Tuan grew up, and this was about as serious as it got.

Tuan started the session by asking, "AI, what can be done about domestic violence under Confederacy regulations?"

"Nothing," the AI responded promptly, "unless there are minor children involved. The Confederacy Code protects persons less than fourteen years of age from physical, mental, and sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is defined as any sexual contact with persons less than thirteen and anything other than consensual anal, oral and/or manual sex for persons who are thirteen."

When Tuan remained quiet with storm clouds forming on his brow, Beatrice asked, "AI, would the physical abuse of adults, especially violence directed at the biological parents of a child, be considered mental abuse under the Code when the violent act is witnessed by the child?"

The AI was not particularly helpful. "Unfortunately, this point is open to interpretation both for what is considered inappropriate violence and whether or not the child is being deliberately or carelessly traumatized."

"What could be done to me if I refuse her access to Aswani's offspring?" Tuan asked the AI as an idea was forming.

The AI advised him, "She could file kidnapping charges as their legal guardian. However, since you can demonstrate that you acted in good faith to protect her minor children who had sought refuge with you, it is unlikely that those charges would be pursued by the Court."

"What if I deny her access to her concubines?" Tuan continued his line of thought.

The AI advised Tuan, "That is a bit more serious. You would be liable for resulting damages and required to compensate her when the case is presented to the Court. Here again, though, damages would be mitigated by the fact that you were acting in good faith to protect her property."

Tuan smiled, "AI, would you be kind enough to invite Judith, Aswani, Phaninath, and Leroy to join me in my quarters for coffee and doughnuts?"

In a few moments the AI advised, "Judith has graciously declined, but the others have accepted your invitation. However, I believe Aswani and Leroy are about to resort to physical intervention in an effort to ensure that she accompanies them to your quarters."

In less than a minute, the four neighbors appeared at Tuan's door and were admitted. Again, everyone gathered in the spacious kitchen.

"AI," Tuan directed, "my guests and I would like a little peace and quiet. Please direct all incoming communication to my PDA."

"Acknowledged," the AI responded tonelessly.

"Very clever," Margret observed. "If they can't hear her, then they can't be charged with disobedience."

Aswani had assumed the role of protective mother and was the most coherent of the four refugees. "Is anyone knowing what can be done?"

"I'm working on it," Tuan assured her. "I just wish I knew what was going on in her head. She's always been so strait-laced and proper."

A voice from behind startled Tuan. "She's scared, Pop." Kim had slipped in quietly to retrieve a tray of juice from the replicator.

Judith was shaking her head, "She's never been afraid of anything."

"Exactly," Kim countered. "She's suddenly found something to be afraid of, but knows that a person in her position can't display fear, so she hides her fear by making everyone around her afraid."

Beatrice looked at the precocious thirteen-year-old. "When did you get a degree in psychology, Dr. Kim?"

Kim just shrugged. "It's typical of playground bully behavior. They mask their own fears and insecurities by instilling fear in everyone around them." Kim picked up the tray loaded with cups of various juices and stepped through the kitchen door.

"Wait!" Beatrice called to the retreating girl, "What can we do about it."

Kim assumed the pained expression that can only be achieved by a teenage girl, "You kick their ass or make them face their fear. Or, you kick their ass and then make them face their fear." With those words of wisdom she left a silent room.

Beatrice and Tuan couldn't hold it in and began laughing before Kim was out of earshot. Beatrice looked at Tuan. "Well, I guess we know who on this planet is elected to kick the bully's ass. Everyone else is a minor or a concubine. Although it did sound like Kim has

some experience helping bullies overcome their personal issues, one way or another. Maybe you should hide behind your daughter's skirt and send her in first."

Phaninath was clearly shocked that a concubine would say such things to a sponsor. Even Judith was a bit fearful for Beatrice until Tuan gave her a playful smack on the back of the head and told her, "Cheeky concubine! You'll get yours."

"Promises, promises," Beatrice chanted before sticking out her tongue to uproarious laughter and applause.

Tuan sighed, "No sense in putting this off. I'd best do this in private. If everyone will excuse me I'm off to do battle with the wicked witch of Barcino."

He considered making the call from the safety of his study, but decided to face the lioness in her den and made for the tunnel that connected the underground pods. When his door closed behind him he asked, "AI, please put me in contact with Constance McKinsey."

"Ensign McKinsey does not wish to be disturbed," the AI replied.

"Is she in distress or in need of assistance?"

"Ensign McKinsey does not wish to be disturbed," the AI repeated.

Tuan sighed, "Very well. Please let me know when she's available, or ask her to join me in the CIC. Advise me if she leaves her quarters. Also, let the people in my kitchen know that I'm unable to contact her at the moment, and that I'll be working in the Barcino CIC. Please do not allow Constance into my quarters, and don't allow anyone to leave without my permission."

"Orders accepted," was the only response from the AI.

Tuan was again looking at the production schedule. They would only have 77 pods in orbit when it was time to send the monthly report next week, but if they maintained the current schedule they would only be 27 short of having enough on hand for four *Aurora*-class colony ships when the following monthly report was due.

Adding two new industrial replicators a week had a rather large collection of the big replicators in operation on and around the planet. The point defense guns would need to be relocated to expand the Haru space station. The new replicators could be butted to the ends of the 13 cylinders that made the current figure-8 circles. Tuan had completed a schedule of changes to the station configuration with the AI and was contemplating lunch when the AI changed the subject.

The AI announced, "Ensign Nguyen, Ensign McKinsey is active and inquiring about her concubines. I have told her that they cannot be reached at the moment. She appears to be very distraught."

Tuan requested, "Please ask her to allow me into her quarters, or to meet me in the park. Tell her that her friends and loved ones are concerned about her."

"Ensign McKinsey does not wish to be disturbed," the AI replied.

"That response is getting old," Tuan mumbled as he headed to his quarters for lunch.

He updated everyone in his pod from the CIC before heading home for lunch. It only took a few words. "The only response I get is 'Ensign McKinsey does not wish to be disturbed.'"

Tuan did his best to comfort the refugees and asked Beatrice to preside over a light lunch. Kim continued to be in charge of the kids in the multimedia room. With a little help from Roni and a few interruptions to retrieve food from the replicator, the adults remained in a somber mood as they nibbled at the comfort foods Beatrice had selected from the kitchen replicator.

Tuan was complimentary of the seasoned fried chicken, mashed potatoes, biscuits, and corn on the cob. Even the flour- and grease-based brown gravy was perfect, but no one was comforted and most just picked at the fattening fare.

They began making contingency plans in case nothing changed before bedtime. Tuan would not be able to secure his old pod from Ensign McKinsey, so having anyone stay there was not viable, unless... "AI, what if the two pods were joined into a single residence?"

The AI qualified the previous opinion with, "If a private connection were made between the two it could be considered part and parcel of your domicile and secured from entry by anyone other than a superior officer with cause to invade your privacy. You have no superior officer in this planetary system at this time. Commander Kozlowski remains the commander of record for this outpost, and he failed to appoint either of you to act in his stead. Since you both have the same enlistment and commissioning date, neither of you can claim command without the consent of the other."

"How long will it take to connect the two pods?" Margret asked.

"Less than four hours if the two pods tunneled toward each other," the AI predicted.

Tuan leaned back, "Make it so, please."

"Command accepted," the AI replied.

Tuan was thoughtful for a moment, "AI, what happens if Constance and I disagree on an issue. So far we have agreed on everything, sometimes after discussion and compromise, but we have agreed. What happens if we cannot agree?"

The AI was clearly ready for this question, "In that event I would arbitrate a solution or take independent action unless a violent act is required. Not designating one of you as being in command was a serious oversight on Captain Kozlowski's part, but his talents have always been more scientist than fleet officer."

"I think Kozlowski assumed that Constance was in command because I have never challenged her authority," Tuan posited.

"Agreed," the AI responded.

With Margret's help Tuan completed the tasking of all of the industrial and machine shop replicators for the next week and drafted a monthly report, leaving out all mention of the problems in the McKinsey pod. Nancy and Celeste went up to the station, repositioned the completed habitat pods into clusters, and tethered them to the station with the others.

Everything in and around the colony was neat and tidy including the bureaucratic paperwork. Tuan gave Margret a big hug and chaste kiss, "Thanks for helping out. I hate paperwork. It might have been all right to let it slide for a day or two, but we don't need any more attention right now. If we need help with Constance's condition..." Tuan shook his head.

"Let's hang on to the hope that we can get through to her," Margret remarked. "It will take weeks for any kind of help to arrive from anywhere. We can't even establish a conference call way out here."

After dinner Tuan went back into the community hallway and again appealed to the AI, "Please inform Ensign McKinsey that her friends and loved ones are concerned about her."

"What friends and loved ones?" Tuan heard Constance's voice through his implant.

"Your neighbors, coworkers, and family," Tuan answered with his voice full of concern.

"I'm a monster. I have no friends or loved ones." The despair was clear in Constance's voice.

Tuan moved through the tunnel toward McKinsey's residences to be ready in case she allowed him into her quarters. "Constance, please let me in to speak with you, or join me outside your residence. Have you eaten?" Food was a typical social lubricant in the Deep South where Tuan was raised.

There was a bitter laugh, "How can you think about food at a time like this?"

Tuan decided to gamble on humor, "Well, the replicator in my kitchen is having a hard time keeping up and is putting me on short rations. I really need access to your opulent

kitchen. I can either feed you and nurse you back to health, or strangle you and feed you to the recycler. Do you have a preference?"

"The recycler sounds good. The opening to the one in my kitchen isn't big enough to accommodate my fat head. I've tried it. Come on in," As soon as Constance said that, the door opened and Tuan quickly stepped inside.

"Where are you?" Tuan asked.

"I'm right here." The voice registered in his ears, not his implant. Tuan looked up to see Constance descending the staircase wearing an open housecoat. She had always dressed conservatively and Tuan was shocked to see the huge pale globes on her chest and the lush brown pelt across her lower abdomen and between her legs.

Both her face and her hair were a wreck. She had red, swollen eyes from hours of crying. The tears had streaked her remaining makeup giving her the appearance of a melting corpse.

"My God, Constance!" Tuan was clearly shocked, "You look both awful and fantastic."

Constance was puzzled as she reached the bottom of the stairs and started walking toward Tuan. Then she looked down and blushed crimson as she quickly gathered the housecoat together and tied the belt that had come loose. "Sorry," she mumbled. "I didn't realize that I was flashing you."

"I would say that I've seen it all before, and recently, but I'd be lying," Tuan said as he took her arm and headed toward her kitchen. "I've never seen breasts that large and proud or a bush that thick and comfortable looking."

Constance slapped the hand that was gripping her arm without knocking it loose, "Fresh!" she exclaimed before blushing anew.

Tuan suggested, "How about a cup of tea with some honey?"

After a couple of sips of tea, Tuan broke the silence, "You've always impressed me as being a strong, conservative, and dependable person. My daughter is becoming quite the philosopher and she posited that something about our situation has either frightened you or undermined your self-confidence. The rest of us believed it was an unlikely situation, but she added that you don't know how to ask for help because you have no experience dealing with fear or uncertainty."

Constance remained silent and had not yet touched her tea, but something in her physical response told Tuan that his daughter was onto something. Tuan had always found power in humor and decided to take a chance.

"Kim suggested that I kick your ass, force you to name your fear, and make you face it. Do you need an ass kicking or will you tell me what's eating at your guts without forcing me to resort to violence? Please say no. I'm not certain that I can take you without Kim's help."

Constance voiced a strained laugh, but avoided eye contact. "I could probably use a good ass kicking. It would probably help me feel better about myself."

Tuan stood, pushed up his sleeves, and struck an eighteenth century boxer's stance. "Let's get to it then. My pod is packed with people who want to come home." His big smile gave lie to his taunt, but not his facts.

Constance was clearly amused by Tuan's antics, but she spoke without emotion, "We're all alone."

The statement hung in the air as Tuan waited for her to continue. When he didn't break the silence or even move to reclaim his seat she continued, "Six months ago we lived on a planet with billions of people. There were animals, trees, birds, bees, blue skies and green grass. And now we're on a barren rock in the backside of nowhere. There are only twenty-one life forms within a hundred light-years, and the two of us are responsible for the lives and well being of nineteen others. I've been in charge of many projects and large teams of developers, but I've never had this kind of power. I hold people's lives in my hands. I can't..." Constance lost her voice when she choked and began crying.

Tuan let her release for a minute; then asked, "Are you familiar with the supposition that absolute power corrupts absolutely?"

"Yes," Constance finally managed control of her voice. "I've thought of little else for the better part of twenty-four hours. I can't handle absolute power."

"We don't have absolute power," Tuan stated calmly and flatly.

"What do you mean? They were very clear in the rather shocking briefings on the colony transport that we have no accountability to the authorities for our treatment of our concubines." Constance was puzzled and becoming argumentative.

Tuan tried to make eye contact, but didn't wait for it before saying, "The Confederacy may not hold us accountable, but I, personally, am accountable to my grandmother. I know that if she doesn't approve of my behavior, I can expect an ass whipping sooner or later."

Constance was clearly incredulous, "But, you're a grown man and you're grandmother is millions of miles away. You'll probably never hear from her again, much less see her."

"Maybe," Tuan allowed. "But, I can't count on that. I grew up in a small town where everyone knew everyone's business, and no one kept their mouth shut. I learned the hard

way that I couldn't escape the grapevine news network even by driving 30 miles to Tupelo. Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean Nana won't find out about it and drag me off to the woodshed by my ear. She's a sweet little woman until she's challenged, and I quickly learned not to challenge her after my parents passed and I moved in with her."

Constance finally made eye contact. Tuan could see that he was onto something and continued, "My knowing that I'm accountable is based on past history and has allowed me to avoid the corruption that accompanies absolute power. If you can't feel accountable to someone in your life, or to your God, then you need to develop accountability to yourself. You need to look at yourself in the mirror every morning and say, 'I was a good person yesterday,' and if you can't say that, then find the person you behaved badly toward and make amends. You need to love yourself as much as others love you."

Constance was beginning to feel hope; then crashed. "Everyone *hates* me. I've been an evil bitch!"

Tuan again tried for humor, "You're probably right about the evil bitch, but I can demonstrate that you're wrong about everyone hating you. Some may be fearful of you at the moment, but that hasn't kept them from loving you and doing the best they could to help you.

"Let's get you cleaned up and presentable. You're a beautiful person, Connie, but right now you could scare the black paint off a hearse. I'm sure you'll feel better when you don't look like road-kill."

Constance actually let go and laughed; then sobered before saying, "How am I going to face everyone?"

Tuan stood and extended his hand. "By demonstrating your true strength of character. I know that you've made mistakes before and have handled them like the professional you are. Do the same with your private life that you would with your professional life. Admit your mistakes, apologize, and accept forgiveness. Your family wants to forgive you and return to a loving relationship. Let's go upstairs to your bath, and I'll wash your back."

Constance looked at Tuan from the corners of her eyes. "I'm sure you'd like that. Don't you get enough from the oversexed women you live with?" She stood and accepted the offered hand and looked squarely at Tuan. "If you help me straighten out the mess I've made, I'll owe you."

"My sex life has suffered considerably in the last 24 hours, and it's all your fault!" Tuan gave her his best country boy smile. "From what I saw on the stairs, I'll be happy to collect any time you're ready to deliver."

A blushing Constance turned away and led Tuan to her suite. He didn't join her in the bath. While waiting in the spacious sitting room Tuan contacted Aswani and Judith to let them know that there was hope.

"You have truly seen her?" Aswani asked. "How is she?"

"She's in the tub, Aswani, and I'm in her sitting room." Tuan felt tension in Aswani's voice. "I think it's safe for you and Judith to get something light for her to eat and bring it up here. But she might be overwhelmed if all of you come over all at once. Your kids will be fine at my place. I'm not sure she's ready to face Phaninath or Leroy. She hasn't eaten and has worried herself sick. I'm sure she's dehydrated from all the crying, so she doesn't need alcohol. She didn't touch the tea I made for her."

"I will send Judith over to help her in the bath and follow with something soothing for her to eat," Aswani responded. It was clearly more of a suggestion than a statement.

"That sounds perfect," Tuan assured her. "I believe she'll recover if this incident can be put to rest. The future will depend upon Constance's ability to forgive herself."

Judith didn't speak as she quickly crossed the well-appointed room. She didn't even close the door in her haste.

Tuan heard, "I'm so sorry, Jud! I'm all wet! Just hand me a towel."

"I don't care how wet you are," Judith responded. "I need a hug, right now!"

Tuan met Aswani on the staircase. She was burdened with a tray of fruit and what smelled like scrambled eggs under a plate cover. He let himself out and went home to reassure Phaninath and Leroy, and wait for the all-clear from Aswani, but he didn't expect it before morning.