

# ***Destination Azahar***

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## ***Chapter 12 - Planning Ahead***

Kozlowski was surprised and elated when he contacted Dothan upon entering normal space near Haru. His orders had changed in the three weeks it took to get from Azahar to Haru. He was ordered to collect his original pods and begin mapping the Orion Spur.

Mission reports from an expedition deep into Sa'arm space were examined by Nic who advised Kozlowski to study them. These reports included detailed surveys for about a dozen planetary systems and observation data on several hundred other stars that probably had planets. Kozlowski was very excited by such a profound amount of unexpected data and called everyone to the CIC to share the treasure trove of celestial jewels.

It was a challenge for enough crew members to break away from studying and analyzing data that could only excite an astronomer, to safely park *Copernicus* into orbit and rendezvous with the station that was holding their pods. As soon as the pods were being shuffled by the dock workers to accommodate the radio telescope pods in their operational positions, Kozlowski asked his four officers to join him in the wardroom.

Ensign Johnson started speaking even before everyone was seated. "I've looked at the positions of the newly mapped stars and don't believe we should deviate from our original path through the Spur, but the data does impact the stars we want to concentrate on with our own observations."

"Thank you, Mr. Johnson," Kozlowski commented formally, but the effect was torpedoed by his laughter and follow-up, "It's good to know that navigation is your priority, since you *are* our navigator. I believe that the rest of us are as excited about these reports as you, but our first priority is to ensure we have all of the instruments and information we need to take advantage of the new data. Mr. Atanas?"

Atanas opened the discussion with, "Our telescope array is far superior to anything carried by the ships making these reports. However, they had some rather sophisticated instrumentation for detecting hyperspace anomalies and gravitational disturbances. We should consider adding these instruments to our kit before leaving. The ability to add black holes and rogue bodies to the new charts could be extremely valuable. We might also consider installing a machine shop next to the shuttle bay in the multi-purpose pod and pack several tons of raw materials below the machine shop and the shuttle bay in

case we need to manufacture new equipment or make major changes or repairs to the existing equipment."

Ensign Stayton added, "We could lay in additional stores and manufacture these instruments during the three-month jump to our first observation position. We wouldn't have to delay our departure waiting for these items to be built and installed."

"Are we in that much of a hurry, Mr. Stayton?" Kozlowski was again chuckling. His crew was reverting to excited teenagers getting ready for their first prom. "I'm as anxious to get out of reach as the rest of you before a stray admiral decides to give us another errand to run, but I'd like to be certain that we're prepared before we skip town."

"The additional instruments and base data from these reports will impact our original observation plan," Ensign Wallaby interjected. "We can use these observations and following visits to refine and calibrate our sightings. Being able to compare our observations with actual data from these planetary system surveys is a very exciting prospect."

When everyone had been given an opportunity to speak, Captain Kozlowski made specific assignments to each officer. He and Atanas had a good bit of work ahead of them as they rewrote the plan for each scheduled observation position.

While he was in as big a hurry to get started as anyone else aboard *Copernicus*, Captain Kozlowski opted to have the new instrumentation installed and calibrated by professionals. It only delayed their departure by two weeks and gave him greater confidence in the reliability of the instruments and the integrity of his ship. He balanced his concern about being diverted by another special project against the safety of his crew and success of their mission.

Rather than carrying a large supply of supraluminal drones, Ensign Stayton suggested that they only load a dozen. They could construct additional drones as they were used. They would need five times the twelve they would keep on hand for the five-year mission they were initiating. Kozlowski agreed, provided that they built one and tested it before leaving Haruat.

Kozlowski took up a bit more valuable space in the multi-purpose pod with two additional medical treatment capsules. They were going to be very far away and would be delivering several babies over the next five years. Ten of the dependents would reach their majority during the mission. They would need to have CAP tests administered before returning to a colony. The ship's AI, Nic, assured him that they had complete files and protocols on *Copernicus* for administering the tests. Even with the CAP tests administered on *Copernicus*, the new adults might or might not receive an opportunity to form independent family units aboard *Copernicus* before the ship returned to Haruat.

Captain Kozlowski asked his first officer to join him for a private meeting while the dock technicians were installing the new sensors and integrating them into the CIC displays.

"Alec, I've been thinking about the attachment Kim and Roni seemed to have made with Frank, and I'm a bit concerned."

"I'm sure it was only puppy love, Captain; nothing to worry about," Atanas assured his Captain. "They may not be happy about us not returning to Azahar before disappearing for five years, but they'll get over it."

Kozlowski shook his head. "I'm not concerned that Frank will be scarred by being separated from that pair of girls, but in less than two years Frank will be considered an adult. He'll be seventeen when we return from this mission and even without nanites accelerating his physical maturity, he'll be a testosterone bomb seeking a target."

Atanas' facial expression wilted as the reality of the situation penetrated his consciousness. "Oh shit!" Atanas exclaimed totally out of character.

"Oh shit, indeed," Kozlowski echoed while nodding. "There'll be ten new adults aboard our ship when we return. If we don't make some careful and flexible plans we could be forced to cut our mission short."

Kozlowski could see Atanas counting kids in his head and with his fingers and chuckled. "I've already made a list. The first to reach fourteen is my Frank 18 months from now, thank God. Eight months later we get Johnson's Margo followed in five months by her Leonardo. We start out boy-girl, but then the wheels come off. There's a 14-month gap before my Melanie reaches fourteen. She's followed rather quickly by your Jean and Wallaby's Pablo. There is another long gap before the next four girls reach fourteen: Celeste Wallaby, Sophia Johnson, and finally Maria and Janet Wallaby."

Atanas had been counting with his left and right hands and came up with, "Four boys and six girls, which won't be so bad unless Frank or two of the others score six-point-five or better."

There was a long silence before Atanas made a rhetorical observation, "Both McKinsey and Nguyen had families larger than ours, and Nguyen even cut down the space in his pod to make room for a machine shop and a medical bay. Do you think we can snag some supernumerary concubines with eleven and twelve year old kids?"

As usual Nic had been quietly listening to the exchange. When there was a long silence after the question was posed, Nic remarked, "The crew of *Copernicus* has an excellent record of assimilating into the Confederacy pattern of family groups and working well with others as demonstrated by the mission to locate Azahar. The casualties that have been experienced as the frequency of Confederacy contact with the Sa'arm has increased have released an excess number of concubines into the general pool. Having five untrained concubines will not strain the efficiency or effectiveness of the crew. Each sponsor aboard *Copernicus* is authorized to select a supernumerary from the Civil Service Pool before leaving Haru."

Both Atanas and Kozlowski sighed in relief until Atanas noted, "But wait! What about the increase in the number of sponsors? With more kids, we'll probably have more sponsors."

Captain Kozlowski had an answer for that issue. "The radio telescopes can be configured to only occupy the upper level of their pods. New sponsors with young concubines won't have kids, at least not for a while. I'll bet that the lower section of those six pods can be converted into starter apartments for any of our brood who qualify as sponsors."

With a solution in sight, Atanas and Kozlowski retired for the night.

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In the morning briefing aboard *Copernicus*, Kozlowski laid out the plan to the entire crew. "We all need to participate in the selection of the supernumerary concubines. Priority will be given to those with kids between nine and twelve, the more the better. But, we need to be absolutely certain that issues will not arise in the next five years. We will have no Civil Service presence and an incompatible concubine will face almost certain recycling. I ask that each of you thoroughly test the candidates, both physically and mentally, before bringing one back to the ship. Be sure to pay close attention to their children also. The behavior and attitudes of their children could be more important than those of the candidate, whom we have the option of recycling. A problem child can be a mission killer."

Kozlowski gave everyone a minute to absorb the information and, hopefully, appreciate the gravity of the task ahead. "All right then, let's get the kids to the multi-purpose area where there's room for them to have some freedom while being supervised. Lieutenant Atanas, I'd like you and your two ladies to make the first trip. Ensign Stayton, you'll accompany Mr. Atanas with Jeffery and Marta. I'd like all of you back by lunch, but don't be pushed by schedule. This mini-mission is far too critical. Ensign Wallaby and I will take our families down this afternoon."

With the youngsters under the capable supervision of Charlotte and Penelope, the first group went shopping for concubines. Kozlowski had alerted the Civil Service station through the AI network that they would be visiting the facility and included the basic parameters for the candidates they wished to interview. Tribune Washburn had hand-selected a score of women and a dozen men with children in the target age range.

The first thing that Atanas noticed was the absence of the children. It suddenly occurred to him that the kids getting along would be more important than the adults tolerating each other. The captain had made a point of evaluating the potential concubine's children; then had the crew's children left on board. He realized that they were going about this all wrong. But it was salvageable.