

Destination Azahar

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UNIVERSE: The Swarm Cycle

Chapter 21 - Pickup Preparations

The next morning found a different group of marines touring the underground facility with Margret and Nancy. Margret was taking notes as those who had been in Sa'arm tunnels pointed out details that could be improved upon for a more accurate facility.

Master Gunnery Sergeant Raymond Budzinski, Corporal Cynthia Miller, Corporal Walter Fitzgerald, and Lance Corporal James Thiele of Second Platoon and Sergeant Ronald Carson, who had been in Second Platoon before taking over Third Platoon, were breaking for lunch during their review of the interior structure plans. Carson, Fitzgerald, and Thiele had probably seen more of the interior than any of the other survivors.

Margret continued taking notes and asking questions of the three as Nancy broke out the chow box and began distributing the goodies. She barely interrupted the four as she handed them their lunches. Miller and Budzinski didn't pay much attention to her, either.

Miller pouted as she complained to Budzinski, "I've been granted pregnancy leave, but can't get anyone to make a baby in me. I'm feeling very rejected."

"I'm shipping back out in two days," Budzinski countered.

"How long do you think it takes to knock someone up?" Miller giggled. "I'm holding off ovulation in the hope that I can get laid in the next week. Can I count on seeing you tonight? I can stop by med bay and get an egg or two rolling. I won't take up much of your time, I promise." Miller rolled her bottom lip out in a little-girl pout. "You can bring Lieutenant Clark to break us up, or that cute blonde you snatched from the nursing home in Texas." Miller batted her eyes as she continued pouting.

"Damn," Budzinski muttered, "I warned Clark, but I guess I'm not smart enough to take my own advice. Okay, but I get a say in the little bastard's future."

"You can come up and see us any time you like," Miller vamped with a Mae West gesture and tone as the rest of the group wrapped up their discussions and laughed at the pair's antics.

Budzinski made one last attempt to evade. "Say, why don't you come with? We'll be heading to Earth for a really big braintrust pickup. The whole platoon will be taking

Asimov back to Demeter to rendezvous with *Zephyrus*. It'll be fun! Even Lieutenant Clark and Captain McGregor will be tagging along. Come on! If you're really good — belay that! — If you really behave yourself, then I'm all yours during the return trip after the geeks get through their orientation briefings and upgrades."

"What! Cancel my leave?" Miller feigned shock at such a suggestion.

"Not cancel," Budzinski pleaded, "Just delay it for three months."

Budzinski could tell that Miller was sold on the idea of participating in the pickup, but was scheming something as they continued the site survey with their lovely escorts.

Commander Kehoe joined Ensign Clark in the colony CIC shortly after breakfast to see how the pod deployments were progressing and to wangle a dinner invitation from Ensign McKinsey for Colonel Bryant and himself.

"Neither Tuan nor I are very good urban planners," Constance pled her case for not being better prepared to receive the marine training staff and their families on the planet. "It would be good to have someone around with those skills, but the general purpose replicators in each residence make most consumer commerce and their associated traffic patterns obsolete. It would take someone who can create an urban plan that matches the new rules, not something replicated from the past."

"Whoever it is, we need them sooner rather than later!" Tuan added.

Clark was a bit hesitant to make an offer. "My concubine, Sasha, was studying urban development and traffic management. I don't know that she can help, but she has little else to do while I'm off on pickup duty."

"Sounds like the right person at the right time to me," McKinsey said with relief. "Thank you."

Tuan looked up from reading a message on his display. "It looks like we can expect *Will-o-Wisp* to arrive any day with ninety-eight experienced shipwrights and their families. They're being relocated from Frikat."

"Is that going to be a problem?" Kehoe asked with some concern in his voice.

"Not really," Tuan replied. "I think we're about to get the needs of arriving transport ships identified. What can we do for you today, Commander?"

Kehoe took advantage of the opening. "I was hoping you could suggest an appropriate location for Colonel Bryant's pod."

"I've been working on that," Nguyen spoke up as he directed everyone's attention to the holographic display of Barcino. "We're adding conference and brainstorming rooms as antechambers to the Communications and Information Center. We have a number of parallel projects being developed that require the coordination of resources. Each design and construction team needs space to work on their individual tasks and access to the other teams to coordinate shared resources."

McKinsey added, "Key decision-makers need to be available. Communicating through the AI is enough for most cases, but some require information that cannot be adequately conveyed to private quarters. Quarters for those in command positions need to be near the CIC or at least near a transporter nexus."

Kehoe was a bit puzzled. "Wouldn't defensive operations need to be on the station and at Camp Timmons?"

"Not necessarily," Nguyen replied. "There's a lot more going on than combat command and control, Captain. The situations we're presently experiencing involve allocating industrial resources and transportation for arriving immigrants, be they from Earth or from other colonies." The wording of Kehoe's question finally penetrated Nguyen's concentration, "Camp Timmons?"

"It's the name we're giving to what you've been referring to as the anthill," Kehoe responded with a friendly smile. Nguyen nodded and filed the information away for later reference.

"Military operations in the vicinity will likely require interaction between marine and naval units," Clark volunteered. "It could be advantageous if their combat information centers were convenient to each other."

"Perhaps we can get insight from Colonel Bryant, and Captains Collins and Cooper later today?" McKinsey asked somewhat rhetorically.

McKinsey looked at Nguyen who shook his head and said, "We're going to be occupied with getting the pods down from *Asimov* and preparing for the 98 more arriving on *Will-o-Wisp*. By the way, what kind of ship carries 98 pods? Could that be a typo?"

"How about I ask Phaninath to prepare a Luau buffet in my quarters this evening?" McKinsey suggested. She smiled when she added, "We could discuss neighborhood planning over drinks with little umbrellas."

Nguyen was clearly confused, "He can do that?"

McKinsey laughed. "Phaninath has many skills. He's a versatile international chef. Aswani does most of the traditional Indian cooking, but with Phaninath we can choose from a wide variety of cuisines. Perhaps we can get our botanists and the captains of the two ships to join us as well. Shall we say 1900 hours?"

Both Budzinski and Miller's pods were to be dropped that afternoon. Second Platoon had priority due to their being sent back to Demeter on *Asimov* to rendezvous with ships scheduled for Earth extractions. Clark and Wallace insisted that Budzinski and Miller bring their families down for lunch.

Nguyen overheard the discussions and offered, "How about I get Bea to make us a big picnic basket loaded with fried chicken, baked ham, potato salad, boiled corn, and a fresh garden salad? We can take over one of the pavilions in the park."

Wallace sheepishly offered, "As long as we double the guard on the kids, I'm in."

Nguyen and Clark laughed. Miller smiled as she recalled the ruckus at the picnic shortly after her arrival on Azahar. Budzinski was clearly puzzled by the response, but didn't inquire. Nguyen caught his expression and explained, "My thirteen-year-old daughter almost impaled herself on Wallace's thirteen-year-old son. Three other thirteen-year-old girls were holding him down expecting their turn on the E-ride."

"The one sitting on his face was more than enough to keep him pinned," Wallace offered; then asked, "E-ride?"

"Anaheim, California," was all Nguyen said in explanation. "Look it up."

Budzinski started to laugh, but sobered quickly. "Holy shit! You would've been held responsible if they'd engaged in vaginal sex! My conks are pregnant and my daughter, Melody, just turned fourteen. I guess I would have heard about it if Denise hadn't kept her under control. That could've been a disaster, and I wasn't even aware it could happen."

"How can such a fearless warrior be such a dowdy old woman when it comes to sex?" Miller wondered aloud. She beat a hasty retreat when Budzinski glared at her and shook his fist.

Everyone's laughter was withheld until they were certain that the threatened violence was all in jest.

"Actually," Clark volunteered, "I was a bit worried when Julie Ann and Becca told me about Sheila and Shelly's near miss with Bobby. The Code references sex between adults and thirteen-year-olds. Kids will be kids and if something happens between a couple of curious thirteen-year-olds I don't think the Court would involve itself unless the activity was being supervised or instigated by an adult."

There were several thoughtful faces but no one disputed Clark's observation. It was clear that everyone hoped that he was right. Even if they employed chastity belts and shock collars there would eventually be an enterprising pair of thirteen-year-olds who got it on.

"Okay, we all meet at the pavilion in the park at noon," Nguyen remarked as the impromptu gathering began breaking up to deal with the morning's tasks at hand.

Nancy, Judith, and Celeste spent a busy morning transferring occupied pods from *Asimov* to the marine neighborhood in northwest Barcino. The excavations were giving the pods a head start, but it was still going to take a day or two before most of them were connected to the Barcino tunnels.

The lighter crews were planning to keep working through lunch thinking that they could get three more pods down, but Tuan convinced them to take a break and have lunch in the park. It was the right thing to do for safety if for no other reason.

When everyone had arrived at the pavilion, Budzinski introduced Elizabeth, who was not yet far enough along for her belly to show that she was pregnant, Denise and her kids, including the fourteen-year-old Melody, Melanie and her kids, and finally his newest concubine Teri whom he had acquired during his leave after the Sa"Triste mission and before the pickup at Starbucks that had netted Ensign Clark.

Melody had not been tested on her birthday because Budzinski had asked her to wait. He hadn't come to grips with the possibility that he might be called upon to pop the cherry of a fourteen-year-old girl. Melody, on the other hand, was about ready to ride a broom handle.

There were no children in Miller's household, just the bodybuilding twins Rhonda and Roy who were solid and muscular. "Most people think I had the medical tubes shape these two," Miller remarked. "The truth is that they still look very much like they did the day I picked them up."

Melody gravitated to Jason and Angela even though they looked much older than the year that separated her from the pair. Budzinski watched Melody like a hawk, and Clark's attention was divided between Jason and his two thirteen-year-olds, Sheila and Shelly.

The inseparable Roni and Kim slipped off with Bobby, but an alert Mark Wallace flushed them back into the open before they could even get completely naked. He was backed up by a very relieved Ensign Nguyen who was very clear that Kim could engage in oral and manual exercises, but only with adult supervision to insure that her hormones didn't engage her biological autopilot and cause her to violate the restrictions against penetration. Kim wasn't ready to perform in public, so the trio returned to the pavilion to eat their lunches instead of each other.

Clark and Wallace all but insisted that Budzinski and Miller not stay in the temporary quarters. There was a bit of a bottleneck for dropping pods from *Asimov*. Rather than take the risk of Melody and Jason getting together, Clark reluctantly offered refuge to

Miller and her pair of concubines in his quarters. It would not have been a violation for Melody to jump Jason's bones, but it was clear that Budzinski would not have approved.

"Is Melody continuing her education?" Clark asked Budzinski when there was a lull in the conversation.

"There aren't any schools around that I know of," Budzinski replied.

Clark pointed out Donna. "Don't you remember that knockout blonde over there? She's the school teacher that Jason took from his high school back on Earth. She's been teaching a mix of high school kids in my pod ever since we were picked up."

"Does Ensign Nguyen know about that?" Wallace asked. "I'm sure he'd be interested in getting Kim back in school."

Clark shrugged, "I don't know. I'll be sure to mention it the next time I see him."

Budzinski reluctantly agreed to accept Wallace's hospitality. There was the risk of Melody and Bobby getting it on, but Budzinski and Wallace's concubines could help restrain the under-aged Bobby. It still promised to be an interesting couple of days as the sponsors planned their strategies for riding herd on raging hormones.

The elite crowd began converging on the McKinsey quarters promptly at 1900 hours. Aswani wasn't nude when she admitted the guests, but the skimpy outfit she wore was closer to an incitement to riot than a sop to propriety. Everyone was escorted into the parlor where Leroy was serving drinks from a well equipped bar. Of course, the replicator that was part of the wet bar made most of the carefully arranged contents of the shelving decorative if not downright ostentatious.

Nguyen's minors joined McKinsey's in "the dungeon" as they liked to call the media rooms, playrooms, and bedrooms on the basement floor of the McKinsey residence until it was time to eat, since they felt they would be in the way of the reception on the main floor. The two household's younger concubines, Judith and Nancy, accompanied the kids leaving Constance's professional trio of Aswani, Phaninath and Leroy free to concentrate on their mistress's guests. Tuan's Beatrice, Margret, and Celeste did their best to be helpful.

No amount of coaxing on Aswani or Phaninath's part was able to persuade Roni to play the piano before, during, or after dinner. She was actually much better than her self-image of her skill. Both parents knew that her anxieties would have her freeze or play clumsily, so they didn't force her.

"Good evening, Colonel Bryant," McKinsey greeted her guest. "I'm your hostess this evening, Ensign Constance McKinsey. Commander Kehoe has told me so much about

you. I'm honored that you accepted my invitation for an informal evening away from the rigors of duty."

Bryant glanced at Kehoe while shaking McKinsey's offered hand. "Thank you for inviting us." He then introduced his household to his host before adding, "I do want to get your advice about where I should locate my family in the lovely colony you've been creating."

McKinsey laughed. "There's no escape from some discussions of business even when we relax, is there Colonel? I'll be pleased to show you what Tuan and I have come up with a bit later. Perhaps after we dine? In the meantime, please excuse me while I greet my other guests."

Bryant nodded, "Of course."

"Captain Collins, I trust all is to your satisfaction regarding your ship?" McKinsey greeted Collins and his first officer, Major Margret Howell.

Collins smiled, "Very well so far. Major Bronson is doing a fine job, even if she is a bit conservative."

McKinsey was a bit puzzled when she turned to address Howell. "It's good to see you again Commander. Things must be going well, indeed, for both of you to be available."

"Thank you, it's great to get away for a bit. I got used to being called Major on the year-long mission into Sa'arm space. Commodore Achord insisted that we use the combined rank designations. The Confederacy move to unify the ranks between Marine and Navy personnel is causing more confusion than it's dispelling," Howell complained. "You have a beautiful home. I don't recall ever being invited to such elegant surroundings."

McKinsey blushed a bit. "I had a brief journey into megalomania and this residence is a remnant that I haven't reversed. I may keep it as it is. It has its uses when there are so many distinguished visitors such as you and Captain Collins in Barcino. Please feel free to ask Leroy for anything you'd like from the bar. Dinner should be ready in twenty minutes or so."

McKinsey walked toward the entrance where Captain Cooper had just arrived. "Good evening, Captain. I'm so pleased that you were able to attend, and disappointed that your First Officer could not also attend. How is the enigmatic Ensign Murphy holding up to our slow pace of getting your ship divested of the habitat pods you brought us?"

Cooper smiled, "They're both doing rather well, but there's too much activity in the area for me to relax the bridge watch. I regret that I wasn't able to grant them leave to attend this evening. We're making a concentrated effort to take over all aspects of our ship's operation in a bid to operate colony transport ships without Darjee watchdogs. It would only take one mishap to destroy the trust that we have garnered with them to date."

"Very understandable, Captain," McKinsey reassured the Cooper. "We're expecting some experienced shipyard personnel any day. I trust they can help us organize things in orbit to keep it from being so hazardous up there."

McKinsey motioned for Avalareddy and Brown to come closer, "I believe you know our distinguished botanists, Captain. They've been doing some exciting things with the two pods they rendezvoused with after transferring from your ship at Haru."

"Hello again, Captain," Brown said enthusiastically. "Naveen and I really appreciate the advice and help you gave us so many months ago. The facilities under construction here are a botanist's dreams come true."

Cooper smiled and remarked, "I can assume, then, that your botanical specimens survived the journey?"

"Oh yes," Avalareddy enthused. "Dr. Brown's collection is being propagated, but in an artificial environment. We have not yet developed a strain that can tolerate the high concentration of carbon dioxide in Azahar's atmosphere. We really need something more primitive to convert large quantities of carbon dioxide to oxygen."

"I've followed some of your recent work, mostly because I would love to have a bit of greenery in my own residence," Cooper admitted. "What was it that I read about a bacterium that converts carbon dioxide to oxygen?"

"There are very primitive bacteria that can still be found in some remote bays in Australia that tolerate a very high concentration of carbon dioxide," Brown replied. "There's a Paleozoic botanist who's been studying stromatolites in fossil records and has located a viable colony in Shark's Bay. It would be fascinating to learn if they could survive on this planet."

"That does sound like an interesting experiment," Cooper replied. "Tell you what: If you can introduce me to Lieutenant Wallace and Lieutenant Commander Bronson, I'll see what I can do about collecting your botanist and his pets. I may even throw in a marine biologist. Who knows what he can do with the oceans on this exotic world. I'll bet that a marine biologist can come up with something for the man-made lake that's being formed with the excess water from your pumping stations without even looking at a book."

Brown was confused, "Do you mean Major Bronson, the weapons officer of *Sir Galahad*?"

Cooper was puzzled for a moment; then made the connection, "That's right. *Sir Galahad* is using the combined rank structure proposed by a few of the combined headquarters organizations. That's going to be a short-term disaster, but will eventually reduce confusion."

"There's a man-made lake?" Avalareddy asked after being distracted by Cooper's response to Brown's question.

Nguyen inserted himself into the conversation. "Hello again, Captain Cooper. It's good to see you enjoying yourself." He turned to Avalareddy, "Yes, there's a small lake to the northwest. Most of the water drains out of the valley and back to the ocean about fifty kilometers northwest of the pumping station."

Avalareddy was clearly interested, "And this water, does it have a low carbon dioxide content?"

"I guess so. It will have only what it absorbs from the atmosphere after it leaves the pipe," Nguyen clarified. "It's saturated with oxygen, and I've thought about damming the canyon to make a larger lake that might accommodate fish, but there's nothing on the planet for fish, or anything else for that matter, to eat. Did I hear you say something about a marine biologist, Captain?"

Cooper's eyes sparkled, "I was trying to negotiate an introduction to Major Bronson and Lieutenant Wallace of *Sir Galahad* and offered to pick up a couple of specialists in exchange."

"I've been helping Lieutenant Wallace put together a list of equipment and personnel that he might need for his outpost." Nguyen explained before adding, "I'll be happy to mention it to him. I assume your interest is social; otherwise, you would have made contact through the AI."

Cooper blushed just a bit, "Yes, I've heard some stories about him and... Major Bronson that are becoming legends and wanted to determine for myself whether they are fact or fiction."

McKinsey directed everyone to the dining room when Aswani signaled that all of her guests had arrived and the buffet was ready.

When everyone was seated with loaded plates Captain Cooper stood and proposed a toast. "It is not often that we in the colonies get to enjoy such elegant surroundings. Would everyone please join me in thanking our gracious hostess? To Commander Constance McKinsey." Cooper smiled at the confused faces before continuing. "Oh my, did my dyslexia just show itself?" She nodded to her steward and was handed a small parcel before moving toward the head of the table. "Mister Nguyen, would you also join us, please? This concerns you as well. Please forgive me for delaying everyone's dinner. This will only take a minute, I promise!"

Cooper turned to face the table. "As you know, Admirals never make mistakes. Admiral Pirelli has asked me to correct an oversight in the service records of these two volunteers. It seems that their civilian experience and rare skills were not taken into account when they were offered commissions in the Fleet Auxiliary. I was ordered to convey his

respects and present promotions to Commanders McKinsey and Nguyen. Congratulations to you both." Cooper handed signed promotion orders and rank insignia of commander to the two stunned officers.

Before she returned to her seat Cooper added, "I'm sure you're aware that I'll be taking Ensign Clark's platoon to Demeter with me where they'll transfer to *Zephyrus*, *Chronos*, and *Aurora*. I'll be returning with more of the 504th while Clark's platoon continues on to Earth to collect the new Governor and her party. She, too, will undoubtedly be impressed with what you've accomplished."