

Destination Azahar

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UNIVERSE: The Swarm Cycle

Chapter 22 - Refugees from the Front

Commander Kehoe called Corporal Miller into his office at company headquarters shortly after approving her request to delay her pregnancy leave for three months. Miller was surprised to see Lieutenant Clark in the office with Kehoe and began to worry that she had pushed the young ensign just a bit too far and was about to get an ass-chewing.

"Miller," Kehoe spoke in a very professional, down-to-business tone. "I see that you've put in a request to accompany Second Platoon's cruise to Earth. We can't have you going to Earth in that uniform. Ensign, if you will do the honors."

"You're out of uniform Sergeant. The paperwork I have here says you should be wearing these." Clark smiled as he handed Miller sleeve patches with sergeant's chevrons. "Congratulations for surviving long enough to get these. From what I've read of your record they should have been awarded some time ago, posthumously."

"I've been away on business, sir." Miller smiled as she accepted the patches.

"You have indeed, Sergeant," Commander Kehoe agreed. "That's why these orders are retroactive for three months, which is as far back as I'm allowed to go. You've been out of uniform for some time, but I take responsibility for that. I, too, have been occupied with business. Congratulations on a well deserved promotion," Kehoe added as he handed her a copy of the official paperwork for her records.

"Thanks you, sirs. Thank you very much." Miller acknowledged.

"I understand that we'll be picking up three of Sergeant Carson's squads at Demeter along with Commander McGregor. I'll see you aboard *Asimov* tomorrow, Sergeant." Clark added, "You have less than 24 hours to pack for a 90-day deployment. I suggest you get yourself organized!"

With her dismissal, Miller smartly left Kehoe's office in a very professional manner, but a loud "Yahoo!" could be heard as she exited the outer office eliciting chuckles from the two officers.

"Forgive me, Commander," Clark said as he checked his PDA. "I promised Lieutenant Wallace that I'd attend young Bobby's birthday party and I have just enough time to get

there. I think having the party before Bobby is CAP tested is a bit pessimistic, but there would be little to celebrate if he doesn't get a score of six-point-five."

"Of course," Kehoe said as he returned the salute and allowed Clark to retreat.

Marvin stopped by his pod to collect Rebecca and the kids who had been invited to the birthday party. He was waiting for his crew to get together and catch up with him when Tuan and Kim walked by.

Tuan teased Kim as they made their way past Marvin, "Would you like to give Bobby a nice blowjob for his birthday?"

"Sure, Pop!" she answered with a caveat, "If we can go upstairs to his room... alone!" She added the last when she caught the sparkle in her dad's eyes and knew what his counteroffer would be.

Marvin followed Tuan into Wallace's pod. After greeting everyone in the family room, Tuan remarked to Marvin, "I understand that you'll be leaving for Earth to get our governor. What do you think she'll change when she gets here?"

Marvin Clark was puzzled, "She? I don't know who the governor is. Who was saying that the governor is a woman?"

"Oh, really," Tuan didn't think much got past Ensign Clark, but this clearly had him puzzled. Before the two men returned their attention to the party in progress Tuan remarked, "Captain Cooper used the pronoun 'she' when referring to the governor. It may be her way to use the feminine form, but I assumed that you'd know and didn't interrupt her."

"I truly don't know," Marvin assured Tuan. "It couldn't be Lesa. She doesn't have a qualifying CAP score, which is bogus in itself. It might be Janet. She has an eight something CAP, but I think she's too much of a nerd to be a good governor. It might be one of the Boston bunch. I didn't have much contact with any of them. I'm truly stumped."

"Maybe we can corner Captain Cooper a bit later," Tuan suggested before he and Marvin turned their attention to their host and the birthday boy.

Bobby was a bit hesitant as the cake was being cut. "Thank you all for celebrating with me before I head to medical for my CAP test. I would like things to remain as much like they are as possible until Kim and Roni have also been evaluated. I don't plan to volunteer until then even if I can."

Mark looked at his concubine's son in a new light. It was uncharacteristic of any young man his to put his life on hold. "If you want to learn how Kim and Roni score before making a life-changing decision, then you certainly have my support and blessing."

The celebrants that didn't have duty continued to party and waited for his return when Bobby left for his appointment. The celebration really picked up when he walked in sporting a CAP ID emblazoned with a 6.9 average score. Kim and Roni almost choked him to death as they congratulated him with hugs and kisses. Kim almost consented to a public blowjob.

Wallace's pregnant concubine, Janet, was showing more than just a little, but she had taken a shine to Bobby. Wallace allowed her to relieve the young man of his virginity that evening. Annita was both relieved and a bit jealous that Janet was going to spend the night with her son. The jealousy she felt both surprised and disturbed the young mother.

Bobby was not the least bit put off by Janet's belly. He was pleased and honored that she was to be his first. He smiled at his mother before he ushered Janet up to his room. He was a little ashamed of himself for wishing that he was following his mother instead of Janet. Even though the term 'motherfucker' was never a compliment, wasn't it the dream of many a young man?

The platoon barely had time to get their families settled in before returning to *Asimov* for the trip to Earth via Demeter. Captain Cooper asked that four new pods be moved to her ship and configured as barracks to keep from crowding the platoon into the sparse Marine quarters on her colony transport. The marine quarters of an *Aurora*-class were not intended for much more than a squad.

Captain Cooper didn't envy the crew of the strange looking assault ship in the newly completed repair bay. They would be delivering pods to a planet deep inside Sa'arm-controlled space. She didn't expect to get back in time to see Bronson, Wallace, and their concubines before they left on such a perilous mission. Wallace wouldn't be coming back even if all went well. She smiled as she remembered the send-off she had gotten from them last night.

The crew had *Asimov* powered up, and Captain Cooper eased away from the bustling activity of the station before all of her passengers were loaded. There was plenty of time for the marines to transport aboard as the ship boosted out of orbit and made its way to the outbound jump zone for the Poseidon system.

A very large crowd had assembled in the central tunnel junction. The concubines and dependents of Second Platoon accounted for the bulk of the crowd, but the Wallace, Clark, Nguyen, and McKinsey families were also represented as the platoon prepared to board *Asimov*.

"I didn't get a chance to speak with Captain Cooper about the governor before she disappeared," Marvin told Tuan. "I'll send you a note when I find out."

Tuan acknowledged the remark with a nod of his head.

Commander Kehoe and Colonel Bryant arrived just as Clark was assembling the platoon for boarding.

"This should be a milk run, Lieutenant," Bryant remarked. "This pickup has been in the works for three months and appears to be well organized."

Clark smiled, "Sir, a group of very resourceful people have been planning this pickup for at least nine months. I'm very pleased that the Confederacy is finally catching up with them."

"*Ensign* Clark was one of their key organizers on Earth before stumbling into a pickup," Kehoe informed Bryant who shrugged off the correction. "He's being allowed to participate in the extraction of his co-conspirators because of his familiarity with the individuals involved and their plans. We're expecting him to retrieve over two hundred leading developers of advanced weapons."

Clark's eyebrows made it halfway to his hairline before he spoke, "Lesa and her misfits must've been very busy while I've been playing soldier. I'm amazed that they could maintain security with such a large crowd participating in the pickup. Now I understand why the entire platoon is being sent."

Marvin Clark smiled like a mischievous boy as he said goodbye and kissed Millie and his three pregnant concubines. Rebecca had only been pregnant for a week. Marvin knew it was his, but had left Rebecca to wonder who the father really was. It could well be her son's. She was ashamed of herself for becoming such a willing slut. Between Marvin and Sasha, she could be manipulated into initiating some very outrageous sex. By her old standard of behavior what she did was sick, but now she wasn't so sure it was even deviant, much less depraved.

Clark lined up the platoon in the corridor opposite the transporter and did an impromptu review as they crossed to the narrower tunnel that gave access to the transporter room. Both Bryant and Kehoe returned Clark's salute as they crossed the center of the large intersection chamber. At the far side the platoon broke into single file as they entered the short passage that led to the transporter room.

Clark accompanied First and Second Squad to the forward transporter room. Budzinski and Miller went aft with Third and Fourth Squad. Sergeant Budzinski called Clark to verify that everyone was aboard and secured for FTL. Clark, Budzinski and the four squad leaders were to occupy the marine quarters in the bridge area of the ship during the short two-week jump to Demeter.

Asimov had hardly been in hyperspace for six hours when a voice broke the stillness in the Barcino CIC that followed the alarm announcing a ship exiting hyperspace. "Good

day, Azahar Control. This is *Will-o-Wisp* requesting approach vectors and orbit clearance."

The young lieutenant manning the CIC released the breath that he hadn't realized he was holding as he silenced the alarm. He found his voice and replied, "*Will-o-Wisp*, you are cleared for a standard approach and orbit a kilometer outside the orbit of our station. It's several hours after supper here, by the way."

"It'll take us a few hours to get into orbit. We'll get down to business after breakfast, then. I don't see *Asimov* and was hoping to catch up with her. How far behind her are we?"

"She left about six hours ago. I'll notify Commander McKinsey of your arrival. We should be able to begin offloading your passengers shortly after breakfast and have you on your way about a day behind *Asimov*."

"Thank you, Azahar." the captain of *Will-o-Wisp* replied; then added, "It's not critical that we catch up. Some of my crew would like to meet with Captain Cooper. It sounds like we'll get to *Demeter* just before she leaves."

Both Nguyen and McKinsey were notified of *Will-o-Wisp's* arrival. After a quick pajama-clad conference call to Nguyen, McKinsey sent an invitation to Major David Stoner and Commander Roger Milford aboard the arriving ship to join Nguyen and her in her quarters for breakfast in order to expedite the pod transfer from *Will-o-Wisp* and get the ship on her way to *Demeter* as soon as possible.

"Actually, there are ten empty pod mounts on *Will-o-Wisp*," Stoner replied in answer to Nguyen's question during breakfast of how they managed to have 98 pods. "*The 'Wisp* is a unique configuration that's primarily used to transfer up to 108 pods between colonies."

"Interesting," McKinsey remarked before testing the command issues she expected with this bunch. The new arrivals were Fleet Auxiliary personnel who specialized in the construction, modification, and repair of Faster-Than-Light spacecraft. "I understand you're being transferred to Azahar to help us improve our shipyard facilities. Since there are 98 Fleet Auxiliary officers and ratings on the roster we received, and you have ten empty pod mounts on a ship that can accommodate 108 pods, I believe I'm safe in assuming that you haven't brought any tools or materials with you. What resources do you require from us, Major?"

Stoner blinked in confusion, "We're here to help you build ships. What kind of ships are you building?"

"Nothing at the moment," a surprised Nguyen supplied. "But, we do need something that can collect methane from the local gas giant and return the loaded pods to Azahar. Do

you have replicator patterns for something that simple? Our AI isn't very creative or flexible about design changes."

Milford laughed and remarked, "I have yet to meet an AI that was either flexible or creative. We've been totally occupied with producing weapons and repairing battle damage for almost a year, but we do remember how to build spaceships. Our templates are for FTL spacecraft, but it shouldn't be a challenge to remove the FTL drive."

"It will be nice for a change to only clean up a little blood from where an electrician nicked himself with a cutter," Stoner replied with a harsh undertone in his voice; then he returned to the present and asked, "Are you sure you wouldn't want the FTL to shorten the trip when the two planets are on opposite sides of the sun?"

Nguyen shrugged, "Not if it adds a significant amount of time to building the ship. We need to start building our fuel reserves faster than the facilities located on the surface of Azahar can manage."

"What size containers did you have in mind?" Stoner asked.

"We're using standard pods to store the methane, but they weigh too much for any ship's pod mounts. Pods loaded with liquid methane have a gross mass in excess of 800 metric tons. That's about 16 times the typical weight of a pod. Most ships can accommodate a hundred ton pod or two, but not ones with a mass of 800 tons," Nguyen advised. "If we reduce the diameter to around three meters, then it would only hold about 75 tons and could be framed to fit a standard pod mount."

Stoner was stroking his chin with his thumb and forefinger, "Your big replicators can knock out a *K'treel*-class in eight weeks; maybe six if you eliminate the armament and jump engines. They're about useless for anything other than scouts, but I'll bet they can collect and process methane with the best of them."

"Cool," Nguyen remarked. "But I didn't think they could enter an atmosphere with pods attached."

Milford chimed in with, "Not with standard pods if they're going to land, but with nine small cylinders and staying in the thin upper atmosphere they shouldn't have a problem. Without jump engines to weigh her down a *K'treel* should be able to climb out even with a full load."

"That should also enable the ship to make the trip between Azahar and Ammit faster as well," Nguyen mused.

Stoner shrugged, "Would you really want to tie up that level of resource just hauling nine cylinders of methane back to Azahar?" When Nguyen gave him a puzzled look, Stoner added, "You could use something like a *Stagecoach* freighter to make the run between Ammit and Azahar and keep the collector ship on station. Nine cylinders are barely

enough to fuel an *Aurora* colony transport, and you'll need a lot of fuel when the shipyard starts turning out scores of ships every month and not being interrupted to clean up after an overeager admiral who got his command shot to hell." The bitterness in his voice was clear to the most insensitive of listeners.

"That makes sense," Nguyen agreed tentatively. He really didn't want to ask what had the Major so angry. "There are heavy metals on the smallest moon around Ammit. If we set up a mining operation that transports refined metals to a station orbiting Ammit, then a freighter could bring more than just fuel back to Azahar. I like this plan! Let's do it!"

McKinsey had sat quietly while the three men were spiraling deeper into technical subjects and startled them when she asked, "Shouldn't we figure out where these guys are going to live and let them move in *before* we put them to work?"

Nguyen was a little sheepish until Stoner and Milford laughed. Stoner spoke for the group when he said, "You're right. What are the residential options?"

McKinsey brought up a map of Triton showing the newcomers the primary sites before zooming in on Barcino. "We have a larger residential area currently being populated by marines in this area to the northwest and have begun excavation for a neighborhood for navy families to the northeast."

Stoner's face displayed a sour expression like he had just bitten into a green apple. "We're Fleet Auxiliary, not Navy. How about if we occupy this branch to the southeast of the central hub? We could branch out from these terminating courtyards with other tunnels for additional housing rather than making it a dead-end neighborhood, or maybe just extend the central tunnel on out a bit farther."

"That would make for a long hike to the transporter for people in those residential avenues," McKinsey remarked.

"The exercise will do them good," Milford quipped. "Besides, we can put a hub and nexus out beyond that area when it starts getting crowded."

"Most of our excavation effort has been directed at the Marine neighborhood because of the big influx into that area." Nguyen pointed out. "We may have delivered all of the pods from *Asimov* to the surface, but it'll be a couple of days before all of them are ready for occupancy. There are close to 65 temporary housing units available in this third of the central region and we can also install transporter nodes in 48 pods to allow access to them after they have landed, but we only have enough lighter capacity to deliver 24 occupied pods per day."

"Our pods can land themselves," Milford pointed out.

"I'm sure they can," McKinsey agreed, "but not safely. Our AI doesn't recommend self-landings of occupied pods, perhaps because of our higher than standard gravity and the

unpredictable high altitude turbulence that taxes a pod's built-in systems, but the sudden and severe surface winds can even make landings with a lighter a bit dicey. Bringing down an underpowered pod to a pinpoint landing can be impossible without the added boost that a lighter provides."

"Several of my people are qualified lighter pilots," Stoner noted. "Perhaps they can help your teams if more lighters are available."

"There are twelve lighters in use as tugs that can be diverted this afternoon," the AI supplied. "I believe you have that many qualified crews on *Will-o-Wisp*."

"That's enough to get half of your people down even without our crews helping," McKinsey stated the obvious, eliciting smiles for the other three. "Our crews can get started as soon as you indentify where each pod is to be delivered."

The first six locations were quickly identified and Nguyen got on the radio with Nancy, Judith, and Celeste. By the time the group had picked sites for all 98 pods, the first three were burrowing in and another three were in transit. By lunch the families that would occupy temporary residences for the night had transported to Barcino and their pods were making their own way to the underground moorings.

The last of the occupied pods were delivered shortly after dinner and *Will-o-Wisp* didn't delay boosting out of orbit for the Demeter jump zone. *Will-o-Wisp* was intent on catching up with *Asimov*.

"Major Stoner, Commander Milford," Nguyen all but shouted a cheerful greeting to the new arrivals as they entered the CIC on their second morning on Azahar. "Welcome to Madhouse Central! You're just in time to see how crazy it gets around here."

"Good morning, Gentlemen," McKinsey greeted everyone as she arrived with a cup of coffee in her hand. Turning to Stoner she added, "I trust you and you colleagues have settled your families in your new homes and are ready pitch in. Has Commander Nguyen — excuse me for interrupting, Tuan — shown you what facilities are available?"

"Not yet," Nguyen answered before Stoner could respond. "I was just about to tell them that we have a factory and 37 industrial replicators becoming available today. I believe we were talking about building a jump-less *K'treel*, but our esteemed artificial friends are balking at the variation claiming that a standard *K'treel* configuration can accomplish our mission and will take no longer to build since we have a proven replicator pattern for them."

Stoner laughed, "They do like to stick with tradition don't they, Mr. Nguyen!"

"So it would seem," Nguyen replied with a big smile. "We've had four replicators building shipboard AI units ever since we learned that PAM guidance systems can't handle roundtrips to Ammit to collect methane. The AI appears to be the longest lead-time component for small ships, followed at a distance by the engines. The first four AI modules should be available by the end of the week."

"Excellent!" Stoner exclaimed. "We should be able to exceed the estimate I gave you yesterday. Your industrial replicators should be able to build a thruster and inertial compensator package in a few weeks. If you'll point *Commander* Milford... calling him that is going to take some conscious effort for a while. Anyway, point him at a console and he should be able to set up the factory to begin the frame while the smaller replicators build the big ticket items. I'm going to assume that Mr. Tradition is going to insist on the classic armament as well?"

Nguyen laughed, "Sure, why not?"

"I was looking over the specifications of *Stagecoach*-class freighters and see that they use a smaller-than-standard pod," McKinsey observed. "How will the cargo be transferred from *K'treel*, which uses standard mounts, to *Stagecoach*, which doesn't?"

Stoner shrugged, "The pods can be dynamically resized, or we can equip *K'treel* with an adapter. I'll get Brooks working on a prototype adapter that can be scanned by a replicator for mass production."

"Sounds like a job for Celeste," Nguyen quipped. "If Mr. Brooks can work with a feisty, redheaded concubine, then it may not be necessary for him to fabricate a prototype."

To Stoner's wrinkled brow Nguyen added, "Welcome to Azahar, where the weird is normal."

Brooks and several others were given workspace in one of the brainstorming rooms and told to play nice with the redhead.

The companionway rings and pod mounts were completed on *Sir Galahad* by the factory unit very quickly after the artificial gravity generators were reinstalled. The 20-tube missile bay took ten days. After some discussion it was decided to rebuild the CIC in the space below the shuttle and lighter bays.

Bronson found specifications for a laser mount that fit in a standard pod, but it required a second pod for its fire control and targeting support equipment. A pair of mounts of this design had been successfully used to defend the outpost known as Ishtar that was inside Sa'arm-controlled space. The exposed gunner was required to wear full battle armor, but the person manning the support pod was not even required to wear environmental protection.

Captain Collins didn't like the proposal. First there was the exposed gunner. The exposed gun turrets were about the only weak point on the *Goddess*-class ships. Second was the use of a laser. Sure, they had more range, but didn't have the punch of a comparable size plasma cannon or heavy particle-beam projector.

Major Bronson finally capitulated and specified 130mm plasma cannon mounts on the starboard, dorsal, and port decks of the structure between the forward and aft pod rings. The pods were shifted slightly to the corners and rotated a bit to insure the feeling of down matched the floors and walls. "Down" was always toward the gravity generators along the spine of the ship. This arrangement made space for the external framework of the weapon's accelerator to be secured along the axis of the ship for FTL jumps and docking maneuvers without blocking a lighter's access to the center pair of pods. However, nothing could be done about the turrets blocking aft visibility from the bridge making some close maneuvers impossible from the bridge. Sensors and cameras were added to the weapons deck and aft engineering section to mitigate the blind spots created by the protruding turrets.

The only place to locate a power cell large enough to run all three gun turrets was in the marine barracks forward of the bridge. This reduced the marine complement to nothing more than two light recon platoons. But, *Sir Galahad* was fast becoming a recon ship anyway. Additional troops and equipment could be carried in pods if needed. Stripped of pods, she could easily outrun the nimble *Castle*-class escorts.

Six weeks after *Asimov* had left for Demeter the modifications to *Sir Galahad* were complete, except for the gun turrets. It was going to be another week before the heavy guns would be ready.

Six industrial replicators in Barcino had filled nine orbiting pods with liquid methane and vented almost that same mass of ozone into the atmosphere. The 890 tons of liquid methane that each pod held was much too heavy for a lighter to carry into orbit. It took more than a hundred trips to ferry downsized pods filled with methane from the surface to the nine orbiting storage tanks. Smaller containers could have been sent to the station via transporter stream, but it gave the lighters something to do on their return trips after dropping habitat pods. This was more than enough methane to replace the fuel drained from *Sir Galahad*.

It took a week to install and interface the completed turrets in the prepared wells in the weapons belt between the two bands of pods. They loaded five of the 20 missile tubes with the available Mark Six missiles. It took an industrial replicator almost a week to fabricate one of the complicated weapons. Most of the time was spent isolating and/or creating the isotopes needed for the fission and fusion stages of the warheads.

The first trip that *Sir Galahad* made was to Ammit, the gas giant in the Azaharat system. The twelve-day trip out to the wide orbit of the fifth planet was uneventful. The smallest of Ammit's moons, Aheam, didn't have much gravity. The AI and fusion reactor module

was released along with seven industrial replicators. Each of the eight pods made its own way to the surface of the small, dense moon. It would be a few days before the replicators expanded to full size and mining operations could begin.

Sir Galahad then rendezvoused with the *K'treel*-class *Valdez*. *Valdez* had been harvesting methane and ammonia from the giant for a week and had six of her nine cylinders filled.

After exchanging cylinders with *Valdez*, *Sir Galahad* deployed a scoop, slowed her speed to an orbit just below the edge of the thin upper atmosphere, and began collecting and compressing methane. Her fuel tanks were filled within a few days and she began transferring methane to the ten skinny tanker pods attached to the ship.

Sir Galahad was back in orbit above the gas giant when *Valdez* completed loading her nine cylinders with ammonia and methane. The *Diamond T*, a *Stagecoach*-class freighter, had arrived with ten empty tanks. *Valdez* released the tanks from the adapters and exchanged her full tanks for empties. One tank was left orbiting and the *Diamond T* loaded eight full tanks and headed back to Azahar. She would beat *Sir Galahad* to Azahar by several days.

Sir Galahad left two lighters in orbit with the free-floating pod and also took her leave of *Valdez*. The Aheam and *Valdez* AIs would use the lighters to bring newly built tanker pods as well as new container pods loaded with refined metals to the orbital rendezvous point as well as exchange empty and loaded pods on the freighters. There were ten loaded tanker pods ready and waiting when the next *Stagecoach* arrived.