

Destination Azahar

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Chapter 29 - Taking Charge

Colonel Dean Gotti was shaking his head as he looked over the strategy proposed by Commander McGregor. "From what I've read about encounters with Sa'arm units on the ground, we won't win even if we win. They'll set off some kind of planet-killing device."

"After they have become established," McGregor admitted, "they'll take steps to prevent a disease from infecting other gestalts by attempting to cleanse the planet before being overrun. But we don't know how they react to persistent resistance from the day they land. They may opt for bombardment, but their pattern is to bring more and more resources to bear whenever resistance is encountered. If we can keep them from nesting and reproducing, then they may not be in a position to annihilate a planet. But they might muck it up with nukes."

Gotti nodded and commented, "I've no objection to your training schedule and objectives, but I don't have near enough men to mount an invasion or even try to repel one. I trust that more manpower is going to become available before we get into live-fire exercises?"

"I believe we can be assured of that." McGregor said with confidence. "You may have to put up with some companies of marines the first few times," McGregor added with a smile. "But we should have our pick of recruits when the thousand-pod ships begin making regular drops out here. We might get some support from other colonies once the word gets out about what we intend to do."

Gotti remained quiet while McGregor gathered his thoughts and added, "We know that the Sa'arm use surface structures, but they tend to burrow into the crust of a planet, and not just for mining, but also to secure living quarters and military equipment from attack. We haven't yet located where they live. Their residences appear to be even more secure than their combat materièl."

Gotti turned back to review the list of training exercises, "That's why you want such an emphasis on close quarter training. We'll need to fight them where they live if we're going to dislodge them from a planet."

McGregor nodded, "Exactly. We need to find a way to meet them on our terms in their territory."

Admiral Grayson was taking an active interest in the training objectives McGregor had proposed. His own combat experience was fleet air operations. Having flown the homely A-6 Intruder in combat before being promoted out of the cockpit he was a believer in air power and close air support.

"I realize that Commander McGregor is focusing on close combat underground where air power will be of little benefit, but I want contingencies for the marines to secure the surface. The buggers may not remain underground to fight fair with the militia.

"I realize that the militia forces can be retrieved without control of the surface, but that would mean their mission has failed. They can't win without eliminating all opposition."

Colonel Bryant nodded, "We've been training with *Veracruz* to establish a beachhead with Panthers supported by Warthogs."

Grayson nodded, "I've seen your reports: classic tactics, very effective. What I'd like to see you develop are ambush tactics that will draw out the maximum number of units that the Warthogs can turn into asparagus *purée*."

Bryant chuckled. "Colorfully put, Admiral. I'll get right on it."

"We need to find someone who can guarantee that we have air supremacy," Grayson mumbled, mostly to himself. Bryant just nodded his agreement not sure that Grayson meant for him to hear his remark.

Grayson stood and walked Bryant to the door. "Having an evacuation plan is prudent, Colonel. But you're going to have to look me in the eye and tell me that your marines have no hope of success before using it."

"Aye-aye, sir"

When Bryant was gone Grayson's aide looked up from his desk. "That was cruel, Admiral. A marine will *never* admit defeat."

"I know. It was a bit like twisting the knife, wasn't it."

Major Amanda Cooper and Major David Stoner were on the bridge of the newly completed *Kilo* transport ship *Othello*. Stoner had everything except the jump engines powered up. Cooper was just an observer even though she was an incredibly interested party. Stoner was in command of the vessel until he turned it over to Cooper.

Stoner asked the tugs to bring the ship clear of the manufacturing facility. Once he had more than a kilometer of space between it and anything around, Stoner asked for

minimum thrust from the engines. There was a slight groan as slack was taken out of bulkheads and braces, but there was no sense of acceleration or motion by the occupants. The inertial dampeners were doing their job very well.

Stoner did some basic maneuvering at minimum thrust while the shipyard crew monitored stresses. When everyone was happy, the process was repeated at one-quarter speed and half speed, which was all they were going to attempt for this initial trial. There wasn't enough fuel onboard for sustained operations or high-speed sprints. The main fuel tanks were filled with water for stress and leak testing. Only the day tanks on the engines had fuel.

As they were returning to the shipyard slip the AI told them, "There were some environmental issues on some non-critical decks and leaks in three transfer lines caused by water instead of methane being in the lines during the half-speed turns. Modified couplings will correct the problem, although it would not have been an issue if methane had been in the lines instead of water."

"It looks very encouraging. A Darjee crew would never put a ship through the stressful tests you performed in this trial. They're much too conservative and wouldn't understand the need for evasive maneuvers," Cooper told Stoner with a smile. "I have every confidence that I'll be able to take her out next week."

"I'm going to ask Commander Kehoe to work with the ship's AI to deploy some of the atmospheric drones and check all of the transporters. Will that interfere with anything that you have planned for the next couple of days?"

"We're going to be testing the primary, secondary, and tertiary power distribution and control networks," Stoner replied. "I'll make sure that the AI coordinates with him. I don't want him to be transporting Marines and have the transporter power cut midstream."

"No, I would imagine that could be very bad," Cooper agreed as the two headed for the transporter that would take them to Barcino.

Major Cooper arrived at home in time to have dinner with her concubines Reggie and Patricia. The two concubines had been practicing some of the things they had learned the night they had stayed aboard *Sir Galahad* in Commander Williams' quarters, but had stopped in time to clean up before Cooper got home.

Reggie asked, "Do you really think you'll be able to ship out next week on a brand new colony ship?"

Amanda shrugged, "I'm quite pleased with the crew's performance in the simulators. Much will depend upon how closely the simulator matches reality. *Othello* is a massive ship. It's much larger than anything I've ever seen, much less been responsible for. *Othello* has 20 transporter rooms along with the associated dining halls, briefing rooms,

and medical bays for processing ten times as many immigrants as an *Aurora*-class transport.

"We took her out under her own power today, but it was just to a higher orbit and back. There are a few things that need to be fixed before I take her to Earth and back. They're mostly minor issues."

Reggie asked expectantly, "Will you be taking us with you when you ship out this time?"

Amanda shook her head, "No, I won't. As much as I'd like to have you along I need to focus on the job this trip. It's *Othello*'s maiden voyage and there's a lot for me to deal with.

"The plan is for *Othello* to grab the stragglers of the 504th at Demeter. We'll take their pods with us to Earth and back here to Azahar. The 84 pods required by the remaining Marines will hardly be enough to notice.

"This first load is for Azahar even though several well-heeled individuals are livid about being skipped in the rotation. The fact that no one had planned on *Othello* to even exist at this point in time is of little consolation to those whose projects are behind schedule due to a lack of manpower and ships."

Patricia asked, "How did you like handling such a large ship?"

"I didn't exactly handle her," Amanda replied with a shrug. "I was on the bridge, but Major Stoner was in command. I'm just an observer until the buyoff."

"So, when do you get to play with your new toy?" Reggie asked playfully.

"In about a week if we stay on schedule." A laughing Amanda said as she gave Reggie a playful slap on the arm. "I'll be gone for a little over three months, depending upon how long I get stuck in Earth orbit waiting for a full load. Smaller ships will have priority. The handful of operational *Kilo* ships are being used as space stations by remaining in orbit and not rotating out until another *Kilo* arrives to relieve them. Be ready to give me your best workout when I return."

Commander Stan Lee arrived with the crew that was assigned to *William Penn* barely a week before the ship was ready to deliver. The new ship was just emerging from the replicator and being taken to the fueling dock when *Asimov* arrived with a mix of transferring Marines, Fleet Auxiliary crews, green colonists, and the residential pod belonging to Commander Denise Williams.

Commander Williams was as pleased to see her family as they were to see her. They didn't wait for the disposition of the pod, but took the transporter as soon as the ship was

within range. Williams sent a thank-you note to Admiral Grayson to show her appreciation to him for keeping his word.

Commander Lee checked with Major Stoner before arranging for this habitat pod to be moved to the colony. "Major Stoner, I'm Commander Stan Lee." Lee introduced himself. When Stoner indicated a chair next to his desk Lee continued, "I've been assigned to take command of *William Penn*. From the specifications it seems to be an overweight colony transport with some adaptable fixtures for bulky external loads. It also has eight lighters and eight *Galileo* shuttles. What can I expect as far as handling characteristics?"

"Straight to business then, okay," Stoner said with a relaxed smile. "I don't really know. As you've noted, her dimensions are just a bit wider than an *Aurora*-class transport to give her room for more and larger hangars, but she's considerably heavier than an *Aurora*. She has a triple arrangement of thrusters, but typical compensators. The extra thrust can only be employed when the ship has exceeded the gross mass of an *Aurora*. She should handle very much like an *Aurora*."

Lee nodded his understanding and agreement. "It looked like I could get into trouble if I tried to use full power with empty cargo mounts."

Stoner laughed at the understatement, "You and everyone aboard will be big-time dead if the center thruster isn't disabled by the AI until after the primary thrusters are at full power without stressing the inertial dampeners. She's really no faster than an *Aurora* even though she could be. The extra power is to be able to keep up with an *Aurora* at her maximum gross weight."

"What about the extra equipment?" Lee asked. "My crew and I only have experience with *Aurora*-class transports. I only have two crewmen qualified as small-craft pilots and too small of a staff to make more available. Is my crew expected to operate all of the shuttles and lighters?"

"I don't think so. We need to speak with Commanders Williams or Nguyen about that." Stoner glanced at the clock. "You must have come straight here as soon as the transporter on the *Asimov* was available. Did you want to keep your family and your crew's families together in our fair city, or give yourselves a bit of space from each other when in port?"

"I'd like my bridge crew to be nearby, but the others might appreciate a bit of space from us when they're off duty." Lee responded. "Why do you ask?"

"Pleasure before business," Stoner said with a smile. He stood and came around his desk. With a wave of his hand he indicated that Lee should join him. At his office door he spoke to his clerk. "Thomas, can you break away for a bit and escort Commander Lee to the welcome center and ask Miss Sasha to locate his bridge crew in Major Cooper's

courtyard and the rest of his crew on level three in a courtyard that can accommodate all of them?"

"No problem, sir," Corporal Thomas replied. "Right this way, Commander."

Stoner had looked over the records of Lee and his crew as soon as Lee requested an appointment. He was certain that Major Cooper would enjoy her new neighbors when all of them were in port at the same time.

Even though there was plenty of fuel at Azahar, Major Cooper took *Othello* out with Stoner as an observer and used the jump engines to move across Azaharat to Ammit and then back after filling the massive ship's fuel cells. There were a thousand unoccupied pods on the ship for ballast as well as for the colonists they were going to retrieve on their maiden mission. Running with full fuel tanks and no pods could be hazardous even for such a large and heavy vessel.

While at Ammit, Cooper spoke with the captain of *Valdez*, and she was pleased to hear that automated vessels controlled from the orbiting tank farm were starting to collect and process the atmospheric gasses. *Valdez* would be free to make interstellar trips as soon as the next automated unit was deployed.

Cooper was elated and in a mood to celebrate when she returned to her quarters after such a successful shakedown. She would have one more night on Azahar before loading the supplies and stores required to accommodate 1,000 volunteers and their families. She had been planet-bound far too long.

She greeted her new neighbors who were grilling beef, mutton, and poultry over hot coals in the courtyard's huge stone barbecue pit. The pit was far from a hole in the ground, but it maintained its low-tech origins except for the silent hood of stainless steel that sucked in the abundant smoke and fumes generated by the process and sent them to the colony's recycler.

Commander Lee waved at Cooper with a fork in his hand, "Major Cooper, I presume. Would you and your family care to join us? Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes."

Cooper was taken totally off guard and was predisposed to decline the offer, but the fragrance of the fire and the food that it was cooking assaulted her senses. When a lovely pair of ladies emerged from one of the new residences carrying bowls of steamed vegetables Cooper had a change of heart. "Give me five minutes to get out of this uniform and wash up."

She disappeared through her doorway and called out. "Is anyone else hungry? We've been invited outside to a picnic by our new neighbors."

Reggie and Patricia appeared from the media room. Patricia commented, "I didn't even know we had new neighbors. Who are they?"

Amanda tossed her blouse to Reggie and was struggling out of her slacks as she tried to walk. "Let's get into some casual clothes and find out, shall we?"

Reggie put away the discarded clothing and laid out the items Amanda asked for as she quickly freshened up and applied her casual war paint. Reggie attended her knowing that he could get ready much quicker than either Patricia or Amanda.

The three of them cautiously approached the rowdy crowd gathering around the impromptu buffet. Commander Lee stepped forward to ensure they didn't lose their nerve and disappear back into their pod. "That was a lot faster than most ladies take. Introduce me to your companions, please. No kids?"

"Not yet," Amanda said with confidence. "This is Patti. She'll be having our first in, what, about seven months?"

"Closer to six months, I think," Reggie corrected her.

"And the man with the excellent memory is Reggie," Amanda introduced her male concubine. "You know, it's typically the established residents who welcome the new residents. We had no idea we were getting new neighbors. What can we do to help?"

Stan waved off her offer. It took awhile for him to introduce his crew and their families, but he managed before the food got cold. Stan took Amanda aside after things settled down. "I understand you'll be taking that big mother of a ship in orbit on her maiden voyage. Have you spent much time on colony ships?"

Amanda nodded. "I've logged a few years. Most of the last year has been without the benefit of Darjee assistance."

Stan snorted, "Yeah, I know what you mean. This new ship will be the first one I've commanded without them standing over my shoulder. I'm a bit nervous... mostly because it's a new type of ship that may not handle the same as the simulators predict."

Amanda shrugged, wondering if she should put her two cents worth into the hat. "You might consider taking Commander Williams along with you. She's the principal designer."

"Won't she be needed at the shipyard?" Stan was thoughtful as he considered his options.

"I don't think they'll be building many new ship types here in the next few months." Amanda predicted. "There are two more *Penn*-class transports in the pipeline. It might do the young designer good to have some practical experience aboard one of the ships she's saddled us poor, unsuspecting captains with."

Amanda surveyed the happy crowd and spotted Reggie and Patti who appeared to be enjoying the chance for social interaction that didn't involve either black ties or nudity. She hesitated for a moment before speaking. "I'll be leaving Azahar in the morning. *Othello* will be loading Marines at Demeter and heading to Earth on her maiden voyage. Do you think your crew would mind asking their families to watch after mine? None of us have experience with babies, and...."

"I'm afraid it will be hard to keep them from butting into your business," Stan said with a laugh. "New mothers are our hobby."

Amanda blushed a bit for not noticing sooner. Many of the women were nursing babies from newborn to a year old without older kids demanding attention from them. There was a broad mix of experienced and inexperienced caregivers in the swirling crowd.

Othello left without much in the way of a sendoff party. Stoner, Nguyen, and McKinsey presented Cooper and her crew with *bon voyage* gifts and well wishes before they debarked with the last of the dockworkers.

Captain Cooper had a full crew, but an otherwise empty ship. There was not a single Darjee or Marine aboard the spacious craft. It was a bit strange for her to command so much empty space. It made the ship feel that much larger. The passageways and compartments echoed their emptiness.

It was a relief when Poseidon appeared in the forward view screen. Cooper was beginning to get an understanding of how McKinsey had felt after being left on an entire planet with only a few other living beings. While McKinsey shared responsibility with Nguyen, Cooper held the reins of command all alone and was answerable to no one else aboard this huge spacecraft.

It took several hours for the tugs and lighters to rearrange the pods to accommodate the 84 she was taking on. These pods were for the Marine families and would be located in the positions most accessible from the Marine quarters in the bridge section.

As soon as his men were billeted Commander Porter reported to Captain Cooper, "Captain John Porter reporting aboard as senior Marine officer."

Cooper gave Porter an amused smile as she returned his salute, "Welcome aboard, Commander. I look forward to a smooth run. We had a few bolts come loose on the way from Azahar, but my own maintenance team has tightened them up. We should be ready to set a course for Earth as soon as we have your families settled aboard."

Porter hissed, "Sorry, ma'am. We haven't been using the new combined rank designation around here."

"Not to worry, Mr. Porter," Cooper was genuinely reassuring. "It's not on my list of pet peeves. Tell me about your history with pickups. Have you sufficient numbers of experienced leaders to make use of all twenty of our transporter and processing facilities?"

"Not at this time, Captain," A frowning Porter admitted. "But, I've put together a training cadre that should have 20 two-man teams ready for duty by the time we enter orbit around Earth."

"Thank you, Commander," Cooper responded honestly. "I have an excellent bullshit filter and you just made a lot of points with me for not trying. I'll expect a conservative appraisal of your capability in ten days. We can plan a pickup strategy from there. Don't hesitate to call on me or any member of my crew if you believe we can be of any assistance.

"The mission of this ship is to get the maximum number of humans out of the Sa'arm's path in the minimum amount of time. Returning to Azahar will only handicap us because of the distances. I hope to make up for that by supporting fast and efficient extractions. I'll also want to boost our speed once everyone aboard has been through medical."

Porter blinked at this small woman's candor and focus. "My men and I will not be an impediment, Captain. I hail from Texas and have been a Marine a lot longer than humans have been working with the Darjee. That combination makes it almost impossible for me to shovel bullshit, other than occasionally teasing greenhorns. I excel at that, ma'am. I've read your record, Captain. You haven't been a greenhorn for a long time. However, you look young enough to pass for one. No offense intended."

Cooper allowed herself to laugh, "None taken, Commander. I'm sure you weren't trying to use your Texas charm to hit on me. Yes, I allowed the nanites to make me look as young as I feel. Each of us has a lot that needs our attention before we can leave for Earth. I look forward to working with and being entertained by you, Mr. Porter."

As soon as *William Penn* was towed to the shipyard dock to take on a minimum load of fuel the yard crew went over the specialized transport vessel from the most forward protruding sensor on the bow to the trailing edge of the center thruster. It had the new-ship smell that these men and women were accustomed to working around. Everything checked out a hundred percent except for the ship's AI. It was new and uneducated.

Valdez was hardly a sage veteran of space voyages having only used its jump engines to cross Azaharat between Ammit and Azahar, but it would be the chase ship for *William Penn* as she went through a more rigorous curriculum of shakedown cruises than most new vessels. She was, after all, the first of a new class of transport ships.

Captain Lee spent most of his waking hours with Williams, Stoner, or one of the many specialists who were examining the structures and systems of the modest-sized pod carrier. Billy was a bit testy when Lee first started working with the new AI, but as Billy's language skills improved and he developed a more effective search tree for human idiosyncrasies his attitude began to improve.

"I know you have perfect recall of the simulator sessions, Billy," Lee was doing his best to not become condescending or pedantic with his young ship. He began to wonder if Cooper had similar problems with *Othello*. "What I'm asking you to do is to compare our actual shakedown maneuvers with those of the simulator to see how closely they match."

"Why wouldn't they match?" Billy asked in a confused tone.

"Because the simulator is based on a mathematical model of this ship that may or may not be accurate. We humans often make little mistakes when doing tedious calculations," Lee explained and was interrupted when he took a breath.

"But the calculations were done by an AI," Billy countered, "And we don't make mistakes."

Billy made a noise in Commander Lee's implant that was somewhat equivalent to an exasperated sigh. "The station AI suggests that I put this issue in the category of humoring humans. It will be my pleasure to keep a log of actual performance and compare it to the simulator results."

"Thank you, Billy. It'll make me feel *so* much better." Lee suppressed his laughter, but not his smile. He wasn't sure if he felt or actually heard Billy mumbling to himself.

Major Stoner stepped onto the bridge of *William Penn* with an entourage of technicians. He nodded at Lee and asked the technicians to let him know when they were ready. Stoner waited a bit when all but one of the technicians had indicated that they were ready. "Mr. Collins?"

"What's that?" The distracted technician looked up. "Oh, sorry sir, I have a good connection and am ready to proceed."

"Thank you," Stoner said with a bit of mirth. "I was beginning to think that the rest of us should break for lunch while you got ready to monitor energy consumption."

Stoner turned to Lee, "How about you, Mr. Lee? Are you ready to help us find out how Billy behaves with basic maneuvering?"

"Absolutely!" Lee responded. "I was under the impression that I would just be an observer and planed to do my best to stay out of the way. Is there a task that I can help with?"

Stoner nodded. "Yes. You can advise me if it looks like I might cause damage to us or anyone around us."

Commander Milford turned to Stoner, "All stations report ready, Major."

"Thank you, Commander," Stoner acknowledged Milford. "Secure the gangways."

"Gangways secured," Milford announced when the lights he was watching turned from red to green.

Stoner then ordered, "Release all mooring lines."

The gravitational and magnetic fields that held the ship in position were deactivated. Several tugs shadowed *William Penn's* every move. They would use gravity and antigravity grapnels in the event there was a malfunction of one of *William Penn's* systems and not allow the ship to get far enough out of the lane to hit anything.

Stoner stepped through the procedure for backing the ship from the dock and continued to only use maneuvering thrusters to move away from the bustling activity of the shipyard. When they were clear of the docks, he executed a number of procedures that would be required to safely dock the ship in a busy port.

Both of the transporter rooms were exercised successfully, first with cargo, then with people. Stoner called for a lunch break while they analyzed the data collected so far.

Billy was dismayed that there were numerous differences between the actual performance of individual thrusters and the ideal performance used by the simulator. The good news was that all of the measured stresses and oscillations matched the predictions with only small and acceptable deviations. Again, Billy was disappointed, but was beginning to understand more about the differences between simulation and reality. A sticky actuator could be thrown at a crew in the simulator, but the minor binding experienced by several of the new parts that were not yet broken in were expected by the crew. Only Billy viewed them as a matter of concern, and it wasn't long before he also accepted the variances as nominal.

In less than two weeks Lee was ready to take *Penn* on a real mission. Not only was he able to get Williams to ride along, but he also got Nguyen and his family to oversee the initial setup of the new colony and its production facilities.

Lesla Crews was busy with her and Jake's new baby, Gerardo, but not busy enough. Her ten-year-old, Franklin, and six-year-old, Samantha, required more supervision than she expected, but she had plenty of help from her concubines Rhonda, Cassie, and Donna. Space travel wasn't particularly novel to a pair of kids who had grown up long after space adventure movies and television series had become worn-out reruns. Franklin was also

becoming invincible, making no challenge too dangerous. But even with the energy needed to keep Franklin out of trouble she didn't feel challenged and was becoming restless.

Her thirteen-year-old daughter, Sara, was far too close to being fourteen. Sara had been trying to get rid of her hymen for months. It would have been long gone if she could have caught a rigid male in a moment of weakness. Lesa was coming to accept the probability that the father of Gerardo would likely be the father of Sara's first baby.

Sara started crawling all over Jake months before they had left Earth. The close quarters of the transport ship had made the two-month trip a bit stressful for both Lesa and Jake. She expected to have hell to pay when Sara succeeded in getting laid. Lesa had no reservations about casual sex being a part of life among the stars. She just wanted her daughter to have a chance at enjoying childhood before she became a mother.

Lesa looked forward to being part of the effort to defend Earth from the Sa'arm. She was working out daily, but was not yet ready to go on extended exercises with her dad and his professional associates. However, part of their mission to defend Earth would be the construction of underwater facilities for both refuge and strike bases.

She had sat bolt upright in bed one night when it occurred to her that mining and manufacturing could also be part of their underwater activities. At the time they were killed her late husband and his partners were on the verge of breaking ground, so to speak, on an underwater mining venture near the Azores on Earth, and they didn't have the benefit of Darjee technology.

She visited Martha at lunch the next day and discussed her epiphany. Martha recommended that she seek out Tuan Nguyen. Constance McKinsey was a capable engineer, but was becoming more of an administrator than an innovator.

Tuan looked up as a strikingly beautiful figure was silhouetted in the door of his office. He asked the apparition, "How... how may I be of service this morning?"

He blushed when the woman laughed and remarked, "I'm well serviced, but thank you for the offer. I'm Lesa Crews and want to talk with you about becoming your apprentice. I need to learn all about engineering and construction using Darjee replicators, and I'm told that you're the best man for the task."

Tuan blushed a bit. "I don't know about that, but I seem to get along with the AIs that do the actual work. What kind of manufacturing or engineering experience do you have?"

"None to speak of," Lesa admitted and cocked her head in thought, "I'll be returning to Earth with a group that will do all we can to eject the Sa'arm that get through Earth's defenses and manage to land. We'll need to build housing, military bases of various types, and supply depots. Most of these will be underwater structures to reduce the probability of detection by the Sa'arm. We might also need mining and manufacturing

operations for resupply. I doubt we will be able to depend on support from off-planet resources."

"That sounds like a tall order," Tuan observed, "Especially for someone with no real experience."

"I'm a quick study," Lesa replied with conviction.

"We're currently loading *William Penn* with the equipment needed to start a settlement on Dargo. It's a newly discovered planet that's only five weeks away and not at the top of anyone's colonization list. I'm sure there'll be room for you to ride along," Tuan offered.

"Technically I'm restricted to Azaharat, but I might be able to get permission for an off-world training exercise if I have a reliable escort." For the first time since entering the room Lesa looked uncertain. "My daughter turns fourteen next week, and I really don't want to deal with that on a ship, but I want to be around for the results."

Tuan laughed in appreciation. "I recently endured that rite of passage with my fourteen-year-old daughter. I know exactly how you feel. There'll be some space trials with various loads before we ship out. I doubt that they'll be completed in less than ten days. The first of the two factory-grade replicators that we'll be taking to Dargo has just been ordered, and it takes a week for one of them to be built. "Will I do as your escort?" Tuan asked with a wry smile.

Commander Ian McGregor was concerned when Lesa presented the outline of her proposed training mission to Dargo. "You're still on pregnancy leave, Crews. Are you sure you don't want to remain free to bond with your family?"

"Any more bonding is likely going to drive one of us postal," Lesa quipped. "I think I can stand to be separated from Jake and our menagerie for a few months. I'll be allowed to take Gerardo with me in addition to one of my concubines, probably Rhonda and her baby unless my prospects with Tuan are dismal. I think I'll actually have a better shot at bonding with Gerardo if we get away from the circus for a while."

Ian laughed, "I can't see your prospects with anyone sporting functional testicles being dismal!"

Lesa gave Ian a sultry look, "You haven't given me a tumble."

Ian felt the petard penetrate and sink home, "I... we... that is..."

Lesa laughed and let Ian off the hook, "Relax. I don't think it's appropriate for individuals in the same chain of command to become intimate. I'm sure that you'd be

more than willing if you didn't agree. I just hope that Tuan doesn't see a student-teacher relationship belonging in the same category."

A blushing Ian sighed and simply said, "Thank you."