

Destination Azahar

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UNIVERSE: The Swarm Cycle

Chapter 35 - Building on Success

Colonel Gotti was surprised by the swelling ranks of the Home Guard Militia. Shortly after his units began training with Commanders Kehoe, Porter, Rawlings and Diego at Camp Timmons, Governor Grayson declared that concubines with scores of six point zero and higher could volunteer for militia service. They would be granted sponsor privileges after six month's service and retain them for as long as they remained in the militia on Azahar. The qualified concubine volunteers would be required to participate in the authorized combat training exercises off-world and would be subject to being included when the Home Guard Militia was sent to Earth to confront the Sa'arm on the ground.

This was considered by almost everyone to be a suicide mission, but there were scores of qualified concubines who had seen the newsreels of the carnage wrought by the Swarm on anyone and everyone who had gotten in their path. Even though it was against the odds, almost everyone who qualified volunteered.

The influx of new sponsors from the concubine ranks generated a significant shortage of concubines. The projected success of the education and training available to preteen dependents led to the conclusion that their initial CAP scores would be well above the median of the general population on Earth. This would further reduce the pool of concubines.

The brothel at Barcino had never been fully staffed, but it was soon left with only the total losers who had managed to get picked up at an extraction and later rejected. There wasn't much Decurion Cohen could do to keep some of them from being recycled.

The young decurion had objected to any concubine being recycled until one of the more violent women used a nail file to kill three other residents in the Civil Service quarters before she was subdued. One of the dead was a child. The AI had repeatedly warned Cohen that the woman was unstable and dangerous, but he refused to accept the need to dispose of her. The deaths haunted his conscience, especially that of the innocent young girl.

A way was needed to extract more concubines than the typical ratio of concubines-to-volunteers without picking many who wouldn't be able to adjust. He really didn't want to set up any concubine for failure and have them condemned to the recyclers. While he was no longer blind to the need, it still sickened him to approve a recycling authorization

whenever it was necessary. The need for additional concubines was a problem that he continued working on in the background. If approached correctly, he theorized, the AI might be convinced to allow an increase in the number of unattached concubine-grade evacuees on each ship leaving Earth for one or more of the colony worlds.

The success rate of stray concubine pickups by experienced marines was much higher than that of raw volunteers. Decurion Cohen began to hatch a plan. If the AI would let selected marines pick a few extras during a pickup and break them in on the return trip, then the general shortage could be rectified if the marines themselves didn't become too attached to the new pool of candidates.

There was a precedent for spares being extracted, but the problem would be the 48-hour rule. It might be necessary for an officer of the Civil Service to have a pod on the ship to house the unclaimed baggage, so to speak, but a pod configured as a barracks could house dozens of concubines who had numerous children under fourteen. It just might work!

In the meantime he sent requests through his chain of command asking for excess concubines to be sent his way.

Sergeant Miller continued to delay her pregnancy leave. Budzinski had been both confused and relieved when she opted to not get pregnant during the cruise that had netted the oil geologists from Texas. She didn't want to be benched when the first attempt to dislodge the Sa'arm from a planet was launched.

"Come on, Ray," she pouted. "Just because I don't want to get pregnant now doesn't mean we can't practice."

She had talked Budzinski into setting up their pods next door to each other and was pressing for a merger of their households.

"Why do we need a private connection between our pods? It could actually be a problem for the kids."

She counted with, "Which ones? Rhonda isn't going to molest Doug or Mathew before they turn thirteen. Besides, who is going to give Doug female anatomy 101 on his birthday? That little sexpot you enamored while on leave in Texas only has eyes for you. Beth is busy with her baby. That leaves the pregnant Denise or his mother."

"Rhonda is also pregnant." Budzinski pointed out.

"Not noticeably. Thanks for that, by the way. She and Doug are already good friends, in an older sister kind of way. And who better to teach a young man about sex than an experienced older sister?"

"Melody..." Budzinski started to say.

Miller interrupted him. "...has been crawling the walls since her fifteenth birthday, Ray. She's doing well in school, but would do so much better if not distracted by raging hormones. You really need to tap her yourself or allow her to spend the night with Roy. He's as good with young girls as Rhonda is with young boys.

"Here's a thought. Get Roy, Rhonda and Melody to show Doug how it's supposed to be done. Then he can practice on both Rhonda and Melody until he gets it right. Roy can backstop him to keep the two from becoming frustrated if oral sex isn't enough."

"I'll think about it." He gave Miller a threatening look when she tried to keep pressing.

No one had a clue that *Sir Galahad* was inbound until she announced her presence after entering normal space. Captain Collins was amused. "I guess you guys aren't as omnipotent as your legend suggests."

Collins' remark confused the marine lieutenant staffing the CIC, but it got a chuckle from Tuan and Constance when they were alerted that their first space dock customer had returned. Governor Grayson assumed there was some unrecorded history between Azahar and *Sir Galahad*. Her interpretation of the captain's tone was that he was teasing, and his remark wasn't intended to belittle anyone. She made a note to herself to get nose at her next dinner party.

Major Stoner had things well organized in the space around Azahar, and it was now perfectly safe for Collins leave only a port watch on the bridge of his ship. He and his senior officers insisted on an evening meal in the colony's original park.

"This place is aging incredibly well," Collins complimented McKinsey. "I especially like the foliage you've added. It looks more like a penthouse garden than a public playground."

"Thank you, kind sir," McKinsey responded. "But the true magician is George Alexiou. He's very protective of all the greenery. I worry about what he'll do if he catches someone picking the flowers." McKinsey didn't laugh convincingly, suggesting that she really wasn't sure about how George would react.

"It really is a pleasant surprise to see you again, Captain." McKinsey said sincerely. "As much as I'd like to think that you came all this way just to see us and our garden projects, I believe you'd need just a bit more motivation to visit the backwoods of the diaspora. What *really* brings you our way?"

"I'd haul garbage to the dump in my own quarters for the chance to spend a few hours here," Collins replied just as sincerely. "A day in the peace, beauty, and tranquility of this place can renew a crew better than a week anywhere else. But, as you suspected, the higher-ups sent me here for their own reasons."

Collins chuckled, "I have Fleet Auxiliary instructors aboard *Sir Galahad* who are here to establish a training facility. It seems that you guys are going to be launching ships faster than the existing facilities can train crews to man them. You should have already gotten the official notification weeks ago."

"That may have gone to the Governor's office, or to some bureaucrat who thinks they're in charge of such things. Constance and I are pretty much the hired help around here these days," Tuan said with a clear coating of sarcasm.

Constance countered, "That's not entirely true. It's mostly true, but not entirely."

Her frivolity renewed Collins' chuckling, "I also received orders to move my base of operations here and replace half of my missiles with the skipper things that the eggheads around here seem to have gotten to work."

"Skipper things?" Tuan was clearly clueless.

"Don't mind him," Constance said lightly. "He's been on vacation for about four months. He and some hot babes took a long cruise to somewhere about halfway to Earth. He claims to have set up a colony that can turn around a *Kilo*-class transport every six weeks, but he'll say anything to get back into my pants after abandoning me like he did."

Collins' first officer, Major Margret Howell, almost choked on the mouthful of food she was chewing. When she realized that she had gotten everyone's attention, she turned an even darker shade of red.

Constance leveled her gaze on Margret, "Yes, I'm visiting boy's town again, and it's all Tuan's fault. He's just so damned good!"

"It doesn't sound like we can be much help for either of your projects, Joseph, other than smoothing the way for your passengers to get settled in. And providing them with whatever they need in the way of facilities," Constance remarked to Collins, who raised an eyebrow at her familiarity, but remained silent. "Will you be able to hang around as long as you did last the time you were here?"

"I believe *Valdez* is chauffeuring a few geologists around the neighborhood, giving them a chance to practice their craft on several worlds," Collins stated.

"Yes," Tuan nodded in support. "They're applying their seismic surveying skills on a number of potential colony worlds to both locate natural resources and refine their imaging technique."

"When they return, and I'm happy with the new missiles, I'll be taking the geologists and their equipment to a world that's in the path of the Sa'arm, perhaps one where they've already landed." Collins was very grave as he continued, "Once they've made contact with the Dickheads and mapped their warrens, I'm to pull them out and send in marines."

Constance asked, "But until then you'll be in the general vicinity of Azahar and available for social activities, won't you?"

"Careful, Captain," Tuan advised. "You seem to have reawakened the predator in Constance. She hasn't had much to sharpen her claws on since we started mass-producing colony transport ships. We haven't been called upon to do anything new or different in weeks."

The play of expressions that ran across Collins' features in response to her innuendoes told McKinsey that he could probably be had, if she played him right. She tried to be subtle by explaining, "We haven't had much experience with warships around here. The closest we've built is a *Tarawa*-class, which does have a few guns on it. No one has figured a way to put the big guns I built last year to good use. Maybe you're the one who can show me how a big gun should be used."

Collins smiled. It would seem that he *had* been paying attention... and was interested. "Maybe we can address several of those issues this evening. The rest of the pods on *Sir Galahad* have my family and the families of my crew. I've been thinking a lot about those big turrets that you have floating around here. Maybe we can find a shuttle after dinner and take a closer look at the platform they're mounted on. I understand that the test firing hasn't gone well. Would you care to join me in my quarters aboard *Sir Galahad*? Shall we say 1900?"

McKinsey smiled, "That sounds wonderful. I don't think I've ever been in a captain's quarters before. I hope you won't mind giving me the grand tour. *Sir Galahad* has been the star of my favorite fantasies for a long time."

Nguyen remained passive. It was all he could do to keep from rolling his eyes. "I think I remember seeing something about some new type of missile that was being built. If you'll excuse me I'll go see what I can find out."

Admiral Grayson's request for a fleet of capital ships to neutralize the Sa'arm ships in the target system after the hive ship landed was being reviewed by Admiral Gunn. He ordered Grayson and his staff to Truman for an in-depth briefing on the fleet action against the Sa'arm at Wolf367.

Grayson interpreted the order to mean those members of his staff who would plan and direct ship-to-ship combat. He saw no reason to include Colonels Gotti or Bryant. He

included Commander McClusky to evaluate the performance of the Presidential-class carriers and their attack craft. He hadn't been impressed by their effectiveness, but he hoped McClusky might have some suggestions.

Rather than accepting Gunn's offer of diverting a corvette to Azahar, Grayson asked Captain Harris of *Valdez* to take him and his staff to Truman. They could configure one of *Valdez's* pods as a CIC and use the transit time to replay those records of the battle that had been salvaged.

Much to Captain Collins' dismay, Grayson also asked Major Bronson to accompany him to the conference at Truman.

"Well, Colonel, I need someone who's been up-close and personal with Sa'arm warships. That would be you, your first officer, or Major Bronson. I believe that Commander Williams is capable of engineering the minor changes that are needed for you to test the FTL missiles. If you prefer, I could take Major Howell, or perhaps she and Major Bronson can conduct the tests with *Sir Galahad* while you and I are away."

"Major Bronson has a gift for using Sa'arm tactics against them. She's an excellent choice for your staff, sir."

"Thank you, Colonel," Grayson replied with a twisted smile.

Captain Harris made his ready room available while the admiral's pod was being configured to match the CIC of *Sir Galahad*. "My crew and I are inexperienced when it comes to combat and fleet operations, Admiral. It is an honor to have you aboard. Please call on us when you need anything; otherwise, we'll do our best to stay out of the way of you and your staff."

"Thank you, Captain. To my knowledge we will not be discussing anything classified or sensitive, other than unguarded criticism of others that could be embarrassing. You and your crew are welcome to observe if you can be discrete about what to tell others about our discussions."

His opening remark after getting under way aboard *Valdez* was, "I forgot to mention that I would be using *Sir Galahad* as my flagship when I spoke with Captain Collins. Someone needs to remind me to do so as soon as we get back to Azahar."

Everyone turned to Bronson when she was the only one to laugh. "Sorry. Are you serious, Admiral? Shouldn't you be aboard a capital ship, sir?"

Grayson cocked his head. "I believe that *Sir Galahad's* CIC was improved using the lessons learned when she was Commodore Achord's flagship. Her capacity for pods will make it easy to implement last minute changes that wouldn't be so easy on a typical warship.

"Since we're talking about *Sir Galahad*, what's your opinion of the FTL missile tests that are scheduled during our absence, Major?"

Major Bronson was clearly skeptical when she remarked, "It just might work if the onboard computer could get a fix after each jump and jump again before the weapon is compromised by the enemy or runs out of fuel. The time-to-target is totally random making coordinated attacks impossible. The two-hundred kiloton warhead produces a lethal burst of x-rays that'll fry friend and foe alike if it detonates near a toe-to-toe firefight. It needs an autonomous onboard computer that's smart, but not AI smart."

As soon as the CIC replica was ready, Admiral Grayson and his staff began studying the order of battle at Wolf367 looking for ways the outcome could have been different.

After three days of review, Grayson asked, "Does anyone understand either side's battle plan? Am I the only one who believes the fleet entered Wolf367 with nothing more than confidence that they had the upper hand? They seem to be totally unprepared for any kind of resistance. Clearly they should have at least agreed on a formation and evasive maneuvers that kept them from getting into each other's way.

"Amateurs," Grayson remarked sadly as he shook his head.

When no one ventured an opinion, Grayson announced, "Let's not get into second guessing who made poor choices. I don't want to participate in a board of inquiry. Let's clear our minds of the Wolf367 results and concentrate on the resources that were available.

"Sending ships into hostile water without reconnaissance is too reckless for my taste. What are the available reconnaissance options?"

The focus of Grayson's staff became how the Confederacy ships could have been more effectively utilized. Once a strategy for committing forces was developed, they began working on tactics and objectives for each of the classes of ships that comprised the fleet that entered Wolf367.

Grayson still considered the carriers to be white elephants, but McClusky studied the capabilities of the fighter and attack craft that were available. She had some private discussions with Bronson regarding the Sa'arm mindset and capabilities and began formulating an attack sequence that just might get the small, single-seat craft close enough to launch their weapons without resorting to a suicidal attack *en masse*.

After her return from Dargo, Commander Williams had recommended modifications to the *William Penn*-class of ships. The modifications would be applied first to *Antoine Laumet*, which was still under construction. *Penn* and *Boone* would be retrofitted on their next return to Azahar. The changes wouldn't be applied to the *Penn* immediately

even though she was in port. The modification was extensive enough to require space trials and the current configuration was acceptable. The biggest change was moving some of the fuel tanks into the core of the ship's spine for better weight distribution when running empty. Unlike most freighters, these ships would typically return to an industrial port completely stripped of pods.

Captain Lee would continue to load a few new pods from the colony his ship had established onto the forward mounts as ballast. The condition at issue should have shown up in the initial space trials. Somehow it was overlooked by everyone, including Billy, the ship's inexperienced AI. The quirks and instability had been written off as stiffness in the new equipment.

Williams took an intense interest in the missile tests being conducted with *Sir Galahad's* large launch tubes. She had been toying with the idea of a missile frigate, but the existing missiles were too limited to be deployed in typical engagements. They were fine when a ship was jumped at close range after emerging from hyperspace, or when the Sa'arm are taken by surprise like they were in the running firefight that Commodore Achord had with the Sa'arm at Sa'Triste. Even there the Sa'arm became wary and began giving the limited-range weapons a wide berth.

She knew that a weapon that could use FTL propulsion just might be the ticket for a frigate that could do tremendous damage to an opposing fleet from a standoff position. The unpredictable characteristics of FTL in a strong gravity well made the weapon a targeting nightmare for orbital engagements, though.

The theory was that the FTL would get the weapon into the path of the enemy ship where a sub-light engine would take over and, like the final sprinter in a relay race, quickly close the gap and get the warhead within lethal range.

Williams insinuated herself into every discussion she could attend that addressed the new weapon. The fact that she had worked on the changes to *Sir Galahad's* missile bays with Major Bronson helped open the door for her to observe, if not participate. She was the best choice they had pending Bronson's return from Truman. Colonel Collins made sure she was becoming an expert on missile warfare.

Andreas Stavros was one of the specialists who had arrived from Earth a few weeks before on the maiden voyage of *Aeolus*, the first and only *Aurora*-class ship built at Azahar. He and several of his team were government contractors who had developed the guidance and targeting systems of several classes of autonomous cruise missiles and smart bombs for the Pentagon. "Even though the Sa'arm have copied Confederacy ships, their vessels appear to have external equipment that give them unique visual and radar return characteristics making them identifiable from almost any angle. The chemical signature of their engine exhaust is also distinctly different from that of Confederacy vessels.

"The trick is for the missile's guidance system to make a quick spherical scan, looking in all directions when it emerges from hyperspace, and reacquire its *specific* target, not just the closest one. Even waiting for a radar return could be a lethal delay. It will need enough associative memory to hold parameters for all of the vessels in the vicinity, not just that of its target. It will then need to decide which engine to engage. It might also sit seemingly dormant if the target is closing on its current position."

Williams worked closely with the guidance geeks and within days they had modified the programming of a stock guidance package from Earth that had a lot of versatility and previously unused features. They turned it into something that looked good, at least on paper. In the simulator it looked really good. Range safety packages were installed in the test missiles and the warheads were replaced with flash bombs that didn't even damage the missile, much less the target drone.

Several target drones were fitted with emitters that were programmed into the missiles' IFF systems as belonging to Sa'arm ships. When the drones and missiles were loaded and ready, *Sir Galahad* headed out to the test range beyond Azahar's moons.

The tests and refinements to the weapon were expected to take the better part of six months.

Commander McKinsey decided to use the free time she was experiencing to her advantage. Production scheduling was becoming a boring routine. The predictable nature of building habitat pods, industrial replicators, factory replicator kit components, *Kilo*-class transports, and the occasional specialty ship meant there was very little to take up her time in the planning sessions anymore. Major Stoner and his shipyard personnel pretty much kept the shipyard running like a well-oiled machine and that was the bulk of the scheduling variations.

Constance and Margret spent a lot of their time toying with architectural styles and features. They had done a classic Roman bath in one of the parks and placed facades copied from a number of classic periods in various other corners of the two townships.

Columns were a lot of fun to work with. They could be freestanding pedestals for sculptures, or a garden feature in their own right. They could be used in arbors and the entrances of ostentatious office complexes or research libraries.

A more serious item was the slow progress being made with organic terraforming. They began diverting industrial replicators to speed the expansion of the massive dome complex that hosted the marginally successful cornfields. They sent scores of the industrial class units to Barcino and began building specialized factory-class replicators along the coast. These big units converted a hundred tons of carbon dioxide and water into oxygen and various hydrocarbons every hour. Most of the byproducts were sent to

the agricultural complex where they were used to convert the weathered rock, clay and sand deposits into some semblance of soil.

The sky was becoming streaked with the black contrails of discarded carbon mixed into the vapor discharged from the high-flying sailplanes. These fragile machines didn't have enough lift to stockpile the carbon. Constance reprogrammed them to produce a simple granular starch. She then sifted their flight paths over the ocean where the starch would fall into the water, but the ozone would still drift over the island of Triton. The sooty carbon dust collecting in parts of Triton made some areas look like an abandoned coal town was upwind.

Fortunately the updrafts produced by the additional heat of the darkened areas drew more clouds into the vicinity. It didn't take long before this process had washed the powdery carbon into low-lying areas if not out to sea.

The free time also meant that Constance could be available whenever Joseph wasn't needed on *Sir Galahad*. "I'm not trying to trap you, Joseph. That would be silly out here," Constance said as she lay next to the pensive starship captain. "I need to get pregnant. I've put in for pregnancy leave and could get Phaninath or Leroy to do the deed. Phaninath has a proven history of making beautiful babies; don't you think? If I were a sneaky bitch, then I'd already be pregnant by you and you'd never know the difference."

Joseph claimed, "I'd know when I saw the child."

"Only if you come back for a visit now and then," Constance rebutted.

Joseph rubbed his face with both hands. Fuzzy logic rarely won arguments with engineers or women, and Constance was both. "What would you see as my obligations and responsibilities?"

"None," Constance replied. "Or everything if you wanted my offspring as part of your household. I might insist that you wait until I adjusted before spiriting the little rug rat off-world, though."

"Like that would ever be possible," Joseph laughingly replied. "Okay," he relented. "When do I start?"

"You already have," Constance said with a smirk. "All I have to do is tell the AI to let the little wrigglers reach my egg."

"I don't think those blanks will do you a lot of good. Let me give you a fresh batch with live warheads," Joseph said with a smile as he rolled back on top of her. "Shall I nail Judith and Aswani while I'm open for business?"

"Don't be crude," Constance admonished before the air was driven from her body by the assault on her senses.