

# ***Destination Azahar***

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UNIVERSE: The Swarm Cycle

## ***Chapter 36 - Homecoming Plans***

Admiral Grayson was not pleased with the direction that the conference at Truman had taken. There was too much effort directed at who was to blame and what they should have done from Monday morning quarterbacks.

He did manage some productive meetings with Admiral Gunn and his staff, though. The upshot was a list of ships that would be made available for the exercise that included two carrier groups and a squadron of corvettes.

Commodore Murphy had demonstrated what twelve Castle-class corvettes could accomplish when acting as a unit. The small vessels were no longer considered useless against Sa'arm warships. McClusky was considering a variant of Murphy's tactics for the carrier's attack craft. After reviewing the results of his squadron's engagements at Tulakat she approached Grayson.

"Admiral, I would like to interview pilots who are familiar with the capabilities of the attack craft. Are there any in the vicinity?"

"What are you thinking?"

"Notice how Murphy's squadron used missiles against the Sa'arm ships. They didn't use them as weapons; they used them as a smoke screen to get their shipboard weapons into range without taking effective fire from the Sa'arm ships. I believe a flight of A-28 Hornets could do the same thing with even less risk."

"We can always ask," Grayson replied with a smile.

"By the way, Commander. Thank you for not indulging in your legendary off-duty activities during this trip."

"What makes you think I didn't?" McClusky responded with a mischievous smile. "I get away with things because I'm discreet. There was a self-indulgent supply sergeant who had picked two male concubines during her extraction. She wasn't selfish, though, and could be talked into sharing her specialists."

"Specialists?"

"Yes. They were a skilled team. The backdoor man—"

Grayson held up a hand to stop her. "That's more information than I needed. Thank you very much."

McClusky chuckled at Grayson's sour expression. "Don't knock it..." She burst out laughing when his sour expression turned to glaring distress.

She spent most of the return trip working on attack tactics based on the performance parameters she had received from pilots who had rotated to Truman for R&R. The rest of the staff worked on how to get the carriers into striking range with minimum risk. The corvettes would be a combination of a wild card and an ace in the hole.

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Lesa and Jake were presiding over the typical chaos at supper. With fourteen companions and thirty-one dependents it was almost certain that meals were done in shifts even in their roomy double-pod residence. Getting that much hot food out of the replicator would be a challenge for most residential pods, but they had given up a bit of space in order to get a residential replicator with a bit more horsepower. The breakfast nook and dining room looked more like mess halls on an *Aurora*-class starship than that of a residential facility.

Sara, Takashi, Roberta, Rhonda's twins, and Donna's oldest had all moved out. While Lesa and Jake were entitled to keep the four girls who didn't get a CAP score that qualified them as sponsors, none of the males in the group could get past the concept of them being children. Takashi was eager to do the deed for all who allowed it. They need not ask, just refrain from discouraging his advances. Takashi had moved out with the twins shortly after the girls turned fourteen.

None of the girls wanted to remain virgin and wait to be tested again when they were fifteen. In fact, the twins had jumped into Takashi's bed in the early morning hours on their birthday for special birthday gifts from the horny boy. The three of them were roused from bloody bed linen when they failed to show up for breakfast. Rhonda was furious with her kids until Lesa shyly explained that the girls had gotten her permission.

Like Bobby Wallace, Takashi Masanori (he had elected to use his birth name) decided to enter the Marines rather than continue his education. His parents were livid, but since he was considered an adult by the Confederacy there was nothing they could do. They were somewhat relieved that his marine training commander hadn't allowed him to drop out of high school. Ito and Reiko clung to the hope that he would come to his senses and enter the officer's training school before it was too late.

There was a quiet moment as the crowd dispersed to various early evening activities leaving only a few of the younger adults at the table with the older crowd to indulge in coffee and cakes. The adults were welcoming Lesa home from her long mission aboard

*William Penn.* She was surprised to have survived the excitement of the children when they discovered that she was at home shortly after they themselves got home from school.

"How are things at work?" Leslie broke the short silence with a question directed at Jake.

"It's coming along, but slowly." Jake replied. "About every tenth jump is totally wild and puts the missile completely out of range of the intended target. It's baffling. The random jump goes way beyond what the fuel should have allowed. The missiles wouldn't have enough fuel to get back on target even if their tanks were full. The only useful purpose it can serve from its outlying position is to hang out where it is and hope that a target wanders into range."

"That doesn't sound too bad, except the intended target gets away," Leslie noted.

"Can't you send two or three missiles after the same target?" Traci asked somewhat hesitantly. Technical talk wasn't her forte.

Jake nodded, "Yes, but the rest of the missiles that are attacking the same target would be confused or wasted if a previous missile destroys the target. They would continue their attack if there was enough of the target left to be recognized, or would be left to self-destruct when they couldn't find their target."

"Are the missiles smart enough to have a second or third choice?" Traci asked innocently.

Jake sat back and smiled at Traci, "Yes, they can be programmed with alternate targets or select the nearest target if their primary target isn't recognized or has already been neutralized. Good thinking, Traci! These are very good questions. The tricky part is programming in parameters to recognize when a Sa'arm ship has been neutralized."

The young mother beamed for being praised about something other than her sexual skills, which were somewhat hampered by her nursing baby. She had slipped up and gotten pregnant before the pickup that had hooked her up with Jake. She had been worried that no one would want a girl who was stupid enough to get pregnant by some loser at a party she didn't even remember leaving. Jake had been sweet from the moment they met and didn't seem to be concerned that she was carrying someone else's baby.

Jake had paced the med-bay floor like a typical father when Traci delivered her daughter even though he was neither the father nor her official sponsor. But from the way he and Lesa shared a residence one would be hard pressed to identify sponsor from concubine, much less who was the property of whom.

Jake turned to Lesa, "How about *your* projects, Lesa? Have you solved the puzzle of quick entry and exit of divers and vehicles?"

"Not entirely," Lesa responded somewhat distractedly. "I'm thinking we can do something on the order of the Sa'arm staging areas. You know, have long corridors with airlocks that allow scores of vehicles to be staged and exit as a group."

Saika frowned and asked, "Why not attach the vehicles to the underwater complex with gangways like the ones that are attached to docked ships? That way people and equipment can move through the gangway and the vehicles stay in the water ready to go."

Lesa blinked, "Of course! The assault craft don't have to be inside the station to be armed, fueled, and loaded. That can be done with gangways and umbilical connections! Excuse me, everyone." Lesa bounded out of the dining room and headed for her study.

Saika cocked her head in confusion, and Leslie quipped, "Would anyone else care for a helping of epiphany? There's plenty to go around."

Lesa made a call to Tuan before going to bed and asked, "I hate to bother you guys this late, but Saika just pointed out to me that the assault craft don't have to be inside the complex. They can be docked to it. The replicators building them would still do better if everything was dry, but a simple airlock or wet room can give them access to the open ocean as they roll out of the replicator. They would only need to be dry-docked for overhauls and some repairs. Robotic arms can attach the external ordinance."

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Lesa was very excited the next morning when Margret completed the drawings while she and Tuan kibitzed. The results were a modest manufacturing facility that could function at depths down to 500 meters, mining replicators that could operate down to 3,000 meters, and reinforced habitats that could also withstand water pressure at 3,000 meters. However, any habitats located more than seventy meters below the surface would require specialized equipment for anyone to work outside.

Tuan cautioned, "Amphibious assault craft were tested on Tulak. The craft were not attacked by the Sa'arm until they were airborne. Steps will be needed to ensure that the Sa'arm never suspect us of having underwater facilities."

Tuan was getting a bit worked up with all the hugs and jumping up and down Lesa was doing in her thin dress. It was clear that she wasn't wearing any support garments beneath the clingy material.

She managed to garner his wandering attention when she suddenly came out with, "You know... I have the mineral rights to several hundred square miles of ocean southwest of the Azores. My late husband was in a partnership that was about to launch an underwater mining operation, but the project was abandoned when he and his partners died. The project was abandoned, but the rights and leases passed to the partners' widows."

Tuan was confused and remarked, "That's a bit of a left turn."

"Sorry," Lesa said with a nostalgic smile, "If we can't locate underwater deposits for testing our equipment on the volcanic side of the rift here, then I know *exactly* where accessible deposits of gold, silver, chromium, copper and iron can be found in the Atlantic Ocean on Earth."

Tuan broke into a smile, "If we keep everything underwater, then who's to know we're even there? We might attract the attention of anti-submarine sensors, but I doubt they'll know that we're using Darjee technology unless they send down an ROV to take pictures."

"I have the mining rights." Lesa noted, "We can always have some surface ships and anchored platforms hanging about. We can claim that proprietary equipment is being used and no trespassing is tolerated."

"With my father's contacts and the resources I left on Earth I'm sure I can get enough typical exploration equipment to cover the nature of the operation. I'll bet some of the Texans can put us in contact with someone who leases offshore drilling platforms. One or two of those could easily be anchored in the relative shallows." Lesa gave Tuan and Margret a twisted smile. "I may be returning to Earth sooner than Commander McGregor expected."

"Let's get some industrial replicators delivered to the deepwater cove supplying the northern pumping station and start building an underwater habitat along the fault off the coast," Tuan suggested. "With all the mineral deposits we found in the mountains to the north it shouldn't take long to turn something up along the underwater fault."

"Why along the fault?" Margret asked.

Tuan ceded the floor to Lesa, "The heat from the molten core of a planet tends to concentrate mineral deposits by leaching them from various sources with superheated water and depositing them in places where the water cools below the saturation point of the dissolved minerals."

Tuan sat through the explanation with a puzzled expression. When Lesa finished he said, "Wait a minute! Won't a drilling platform or anchored ships attract Sa'arm attention?"

"What?" Lesa responded with a giggle. "Do you think it'll be the only platform in the Atlantic? How many ships do you think are bobbing about on that pond night and day? It won't take the Sa'arm very long to realize that their biggest pests are comfortable in the water."

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Tuan was seeing even less of Kim now that she was attending the academy than when she was deployed as a midshipman. His house was far from empty, but seemed somehow

quieter without her sharp wit and pained expressions. He was very concerned that she might change from pursuing a position in the Fleet Auxiliary and opt for a combat assignment in the Confederacy Navy like her new best friend Sara Crews.

"Doesn't it concern you that Sara wants to mix it up with the Sa'arm from the bridge of a warship?" Tuan asked Lesa when they were having a quiet lunch in a garden park near the CIC complex.

"I don't worry about her getting into anything she can't get out of if she's on her own. It's some dipshit admiral bucking for glory that might get her killed," Lesa responded. "But, I have enough faith in her genes that she won't blindly do as she's told when something serious is at stake. I worry more about her being court-martialed than killed by the Sa'arm."

Tuan smiled knowingly and nodded, "I think I know why our children have become such good friends. If you're not concerned about your daughter, then what has you so down lately?"

Lesa gave Tuan a curious look and checked to see who might be listening before she spoke, "Jake and I are drifting apart. He's totally consumed with his work and other commitments. We get together every couple of weeks, but even then I don't really get his full attention."

"Have you spoken with him about this?" Tuan inquired. "Letting things fester is never good for a relationship."

Lesa shook her head and quietly sighed, "I never really thought that he and I would be together forever, and I don't want to distract him from what he's working on. His work really is important. But I might bring it to his attention for the benefit of his other companions."

Tuan took her hand, "That sounds a bit fatalistic coming from you. You haven't given up on anything or anyone since I've known you. You're always bright, cheery, and nauseatingly optimistic. How could someone as sweet as you ever feel down?"

"You don't know me all that well," Lesa said quietly.

"I believe I *know* both you and your daughter quite well," Tuan countered with a sly smile. He even wiggled his eyebrows.

Lesa giggled briefly; then looked at Tuan with a sad smile, "Sara's father and his partners didn't just die; they were murdered. I arranged the deaths of most of those who were responsible. It was actually rather easy for me. You see, I wasn't much older than Sara when I made my first kill as an assassin."

Tuan was stunned into silence. He even stopped breathing as he tried to wrap his brain around what Lesa had just told him. He finally blinked and took a breath, "No. That joke is in very poor taste, Lesa."

Lesa looked him squarely in the eyes, "It's no joke, Tuan. The ship that broke apart and pulled them to the bottom of the Atlantic was covertly provided by a competitor who had falsified the inspection records. I've never killed for money, but I have killed for personal and political reasons. Jake knows that I have a dark past, but he never inquired and I never volunteered any details. I've never told anyone, not even my father whom I trust completely. I'm not sure why I'm telling you. Like I said, I knew that Jake and I wouldn't be together forever, but you and I..." Lesa couldn't maintain eye contact and looked down.

Tuan sat back, but kept a tight grip on Lesa's hand. "I've never seen you serious about anything except learning how to build facilities and weapons with replicators. You're really serious about a possible long-term relationship, aren't you?"

Lesa just nodded.

"I never dreamed..." Tuan was clearly unprepared for this development. "Give me some time to process all of this, okay?" Lesa looked a bit sad until Tuan pressed in close and kissed her tenderly. "I'm in shock and shouldn't say anything more right now. No one should be talking about relationships when they're in shock. Can we please come back to this when I can focus?"

Lesa laughed, "Sure. That sounds like the responsible thing to do, and you *are* Mister Responsible."

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Kim as a bit surprised when her dad showed up at the dormitory suite she shared with Sara. "What's up, Pop? You look a bit distracted."

Tuan nodded, but remained silent when she admitted him. She had just emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel that was too narrow for modesty.

"Why do you bother with a towel that doesn't cover your... self?" Tuan asked as he tried not to stare at the shapely butt and legs that were retreating toward the bathroom.

Kim turned and opened the towel, "To keep these from catching a cold. See how they get all wrinkled at the tips when they get cold?" She quickly stepped into the bathroom and closed the door before her dad could find something to throw at her, but he didn't even try. She was a bit confused by her father's lack of response to her outrageous display. Something really was distracting him.

Tuan was shocked by the way the Darjee medical magic had transformed his little girl into a woman. A woman who looked so much like her mother that Tuan knew he could not deny her anything she wanted. That very thought had him frozen in his tracks.

Sara's concubine Arliss emerged from one of the suite's bedrooms, "Oh, hello Commander Nguyen. I thought I heard someone come in." He looked around, "I was sure that Kim was in here. Shall I find her for you?"

"She ducked back into the bathroom after letting me in," Tuan replied.

When Kim emerged from the bath again she was only wearing a towel around her head. "Arliss, be a dear and get me a robe. Pop seems a bit uncomfortable with me only wearing a towel."

"It wouldn't be so bad if it covered something more than your hair," Tuan countered. "I feel like I've emerged from a time machine. A few short weeks ago I had a fourteen-year-old high-school student as a daughter. Now I have an eighteen-year-old college freshman. I've missed some of the most interesting parts of your growing up."

"Did you forget my birthday, Pop? I'm fifteen in here," Kim put her hands on her heart, but that just emphasized the soft cones they displaced. "I only look eighteen out here to get taken seriously on the job and to keep men from freaking out when I seduce them." Kim did a slow turn that showed off her trim figure.

"Yes, that's one of the major things I'm adjusting to," Tuan admitted. "Your transition from innocent child to experienced seductress was far too quick for me to be comfortable with. I know that you're well, safe and happy, but I still worry."

Kim stepped close and steadied Tuan's head with her hand on one cheek while she kissed the other. She was close enough for him to feel the heat from her naked body. He gripped her wrist and kissed her hand as he stepped back to maintain his personal space when she moved to kiss him on the lips.

"Are you afraid of me, Pop? I'm not trying to seduce you." Kim felt a little rejected and mumbled, "Not *yet*, anyway."

Arliss emerged with a colorful silk robe and helped Kim don it. The soft fabric clung to her nipples and every other protrusion, but it was enough to allow Tuan to breathe somewhat normally.

"I know, sweetheart," Tuan forced a lecherous smile. "But you no longer look like my little girl to me, and I don't trust myself to remain detached from my libido. You look incredibly hot!"

Kim actually blushed, "Okay, Pop. That's a bit much and a little scary. I may need more than this flimsy robe to protect my virtue." Kim made a theatrical production of trying to



hide in her robe. "But you didn't come here to complain about me growing up too fast. Did you?"

Kim gestured to the couch with her hand and asked Arliss, "Can you excuse us for a bit, Arliss?"

Tuan and Kim sat on the couch facing each other. Kim was careful to not flash a beaver shot at her dad. He appeared reluctant to speak but started talking before he made eye contact. "Lesla Crews is lobbying to begin building bunkers, habitats and weapons in an underwater complex on Earth, and..." Tuan locked eyes with his daughter, "and she wants me to go with her. It might be a one-way trip for us."

"You're not leaving right away are you, lover?" Sara burst in from the room that Arliss had disappeared into. "I'm sorry to have been eavesdropping. I thought Kim might be acting out one of her favorite fantasies and wanted to catch her in the act. I didn't know you were talking about something so serious." Sara was on the verge of tears, "Mom had hinted about this when I saw her last night, but you make it sound like she's about to head out tomorrow!"

"Sara!" Kim shouted then looked to see how her father was reacting to what Sara revealed. Should she try to deny her envy of Sara for having had sex with her father, or should she try bluffing her way out? She didn't realize that her full-body blush made the latter impossible.

"No, it'll be several months before everything's ready," Tuan assured Sara, who had crawled into his lap and pressed herself tightly against him for comfort. This is the way one would expect a fifteen-year-old to react to shocking news, and wasn't that much out of character for an eighteen-year-old, either.

Kim was starting to breathe thinking that her father hadn't noticed the other part of Sara's exclamation until Tuan looked at her and asked, "What fantasy?"

This put Kim's blush machine at full throttle and stole her ability to articulate coherent sounds.

"Every time I tell her tales about what a fantastic lover you are she has Arliss ride her hard, or does her best to wear out her favorite dildo. She really likes it when I relate the details of how you took on my mother and me at the same time and fucked us both into molten puddles," Sara explained while Kim tried to hide in the collar of her short robe. The unfortunate side effect was that she actually did bare her beaver to Sara and her father.

Tuan was also blushing and trying to get Sara to stop talking, but as innocent as Sara tried to appear, both Tuan and Kim knew that she was trying to instigate a tryst. All doubt was removed when Sara tried to slide Tuan's hand onto her breast as she nibbled his earlobe.

He pulled away from both her mouth and her breast. "Please, not right now," he asked in a soft voice.

"What? Don't try to tell me that Kim and I aren't turning you on! I'm sitting on the evidence!" To prove her point Sara squirmed in Tuan's lap until she felt his meat swell even more against her butt cheek. "Tell me that the sight and smell of that tight little clam doesn't give you a boner," Sara pointed to Kim's bare crotch with her chin.

Kim looked down and gasped as she quickly covered her furry quim. "Sorry, Pop. I didn't know I'd pulled my robe open."

"Not a problem, but Miss Squirmy Buns needs to find another seat," Tuan dumped Sara onto the couch between Kim and himself.

Sara crossed her arms under her breasts, "Spoilsport! I never get to have any fun!"

Both Kim and Arliss choked on laughter, but Arliss at least tried to hide his mirth. Sara gave him the evil eye. "You'll get yours, my pretty."

Being reasonably sure that Sara was teasing, Arliss chuckled openly.

"This is all a lot of fun," Tuan admitted, "But I really need to ask Kim what I should do."

Kim's mouth dropped open, "You're here to ask *me* for advice!"

Tuan squinted a bit in confusion. "It's not the first time, although I'll admit this is a bit more serious for us than any other occasion that I've asked for your opinion."

"I'm a bit scared, Pop," Kim began. "I've never been all that far away from you, and I don't like the way it feels when I think about you being somewhere else, but it's bound to happen when I get assigned to a ship. If you're here, I might not see you for years, but if you're on Earth, then I'll be stopping there several times a year if they let me crew a colony transport like I want."

Sara added, "And when the Sa'arm show up she'll streak in to rescue you with me right on her ass keeping the Dickheads out of her way. It'll be fine, really." After a few seconds pause she added, "Can we all fuck now?"

"You goof!" Kim complained, but her expression changed as she thought about it, "Actually, that's not a bad idea." She gave her dad a mischievous look, "Can we fuck now?"

Tuan let his head drop back onto the back of the couch. "We're in deep shit, Arliss."

"What you mean *we*, paleface?" Arliss replied as he helped Kim out of her robe as she and Sara closed in on her helpless father.

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"There's just no way that a single lighter can safely deliver even half of a factory-class replicator to the surface," Nancy remarked as she tried to soothe the kicking baby in her belly with her hands. "You'll need a dozen of them just the deal with the mass, and there's not a good way to secure that many to the load and keep the stresses properly distributed. We've often used parachutes to help bring the industrial units down, and they still hit pretty hard even with the shielding built into the pod. The factory-class components aren't in a pod. They're meant to be deployed in orbit."

"But, we're going into water," Lesa countered. "That should lessen the damage to something that the industrial units can deal with while doing the setup. It'll still get one into operation faster than the months it'll take to build one from scratch with industrial units."

Celeste waded in with her two cents. "Considering the hostile operating environment we may be ahead of the curve by dropping sixty industrial replicators instead of two factories. They can't build large items quite as fast, but they actually have a slight advantage in overall manufacturing capacity. They can deploy their shields and be in operation in three to five days. It'll take a couple of months just to build domes over the factory units. Before they can even start contributing anything to the effort the industrial units could have built one from scratch!"

"And look at what you'll likely be building," Nancy pointed out. "Amphibious assault craft, close support aircraft, artillery pieces, tunneling machines, bombs, rockets, and small arms. Nothing that's too big to fit through an industrial unit."

Lesa scowled for a bit, but finally held both hands up. "You're probably right. I'm in bigger-is-better mode, but I guess that can be taken to an extreme. "