

Destination Azahar

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UNIVERSE: The Swarm Cycle

Chapter 37 - Live Fire Training

A Sa'arm scout had been tracked by a probe as it explored the uninhabited planet Darkford. The headquarters analysts expected a small hive ship to reach the planet within a window of six to eighteen months from the time the scout left the system. Only thirty percent of the planet's surface was water, but that was still enough water to hide both North and South America in more than one of its oceans.

Daniel Boone and *Sir Galahad* waited at the rendezvous point, which was about half a light-year away until *Valdez* returned from a flyby of Darkford. Captain Harris reported, "There's no sign of activity anywhere in the system. I believe it's safe to proceed." The smaller and faster ship had scouted the Darkfordat system to insure that the Sa'arm had not arrived sooner than expected.

"Thanks for the update, we're heading in," the Captain Collins responded. All three ships engaged their FTL drives and moved into Darkfordat. In addition to being on the list of planets that would soon get the interest of a Sa'arm hive ship, it was also only a few light-years away from Truman, placing reinforcements and supplies within easy reach.

Commanders Rawlings and Diego were aboard *Valdez* and had made detailed maps of some areas of the land masses during earlier scouting missions. Their surveys identified several faults that ran into oceans. Lesa sent some probes into the more promising of the geological features and was soon getting results from the little robotic prospectors.

In the meantime *Sir Galahad* ferried dozens of surface craft down to the planet that started mapping the ocean floor looking for continental shelves, underwater plateaus, or stable mountain ranges that were covered by no more than fifty meters of water.

When a couple of extinct underwater volcanoes were found about 75 kilometers apart and no closer than 400 kilometers from the nearest significant body of dry land, *Daniel Boone* moved into position above the pair of drowned mountains and prepared to drop the pods she carried.

From a synchronous orbit it would take a full eight-hour shift for the eight lighters to ferry 60 industrial-class replicator pods to the planet below. The 48 pods that would provide the housing and environmental support for the human core of the small outpost were left to make their own way down without the benefit of lighters, except for the AI pod which a lighter gently delivered to the surface of the ocean.

It took three days for all of the habitat pods to be linked with a network of passages. After the last of the cylindrical corridors was pumped dry, the colonists had access to the residential pods from the transporter nexus in the command and information center.

Other pods in the small complex housed the arsenal, medical facility, gymnasium, and community mess hall. Transporter pads located in the foyers of the CIC, the medical facility and the central pod of the manufacturing cluster were the only way on or off the planet for the time being.

Two days later the 60 replicators, which were located 75 kilometers from the habitat pods, began accepting material from the twelve mining complexes scattered about the ocean floor. They would soon be building additional habitat pods and other critical facilities for the garrison that would be in place to repel the Sa'arm after they landed.

One of the replicator's first tasks was the construction of protective domes that would allow them to operate without shields. They also built connecting passages along the ocean floor that lead from the protective domes to a central pod containing transporter network pads.

Twenty families manned the underwater outpost. They would direct the construction of barracks, weapons, and assault craft and generally prepare the facility to house a brigade and its equipment in the coming months. Living and working underwater was not really that much different from conditions in other hostile environments.

Tuan and Lesa had not brought their entire families and had chosen to cohabitate in one of the residential pods. Celeste and Donna were brought along because they were the only women in the two families who weren't pregnant or nursing an infant. Celeste had valuable skills outside of the pod and was dragging the somewhat reluctant Donna around with her.

"I'm not smart enough to do the things you do," Donna complained.

"Nonsense," Celeste rebutted. "You've dealt with a stair-step horde of hellions for more than a decade. I doubt I have that kind of multitasking talent."

"This isn't much different than my pod on Azahar," Tuan remarked as he entered and looked around.

Lesla laughed, "No? Just take a look outside, Captain Nemo. It's a brave new world out there."

Celeste took Lesa and Tuan for a tour of the facility as soon as the first mini-sub came out of the replicators. "The domes not only provide protection for the replicators and a wet-well for launching amphibious craft, but they also camouflage the units' radiation

from heat right on through the visible spectrum. Even though they're in shallow water you can't easily see them until you're within twenty meters of one."

It was true. Tuan and Lesa knew where the units were, but could only see one or two of them at a time.

Celeste let the small craft settle onto a ledge on the slope of the submerged volcanic cone. "It's so peaceful and beautiful here," she observed. "I almost hope that the Sa'arm don't show up."

The three of them took in the beauty of the seascape in silence. Each of them had thoughts of sex flit through their heads, but none of the images took root right away.

On the way back Celeste observed, "You know what? I'm the last member of the household who hasn't gotten pregnant, and we've been out here for well over a year, closer to two."

"It's barely been ten weeks," Tuan countered with a smile and was backhanded in the solar plexus for his obtuse remark.

"Ow! You're so physical!" Tuan complained to Celeste. "I think Kim has been a bad influence on you."

Celeste just smirked in response.

Lesa mused, "Donna's little one is two. She's about due for another bun in her oven as well. Think you're up to the task or shall we tap into another sperm bank?"

Tuan got serious for a moment, "Do you really want me to be the father of more kids after what I did with our daughters?"

Lesa snickered, "I heard about that. Seems like you had about as many options as Takashi when the twins slipped into his bedroom the first time."

"I could have... should have said no," Tuan had not yet released his guilt for having sex with his own daughter, and thoroughly enjoying it. "The worst part is that I'll likely do it again."

"Good," Lesa remarked. "They need to have some quality time with a real man periodically. They really shouldn't stick to a diet of boys. So, can I help while you get Celeste and Donna preggers?"

"Do you really think that they'll need help?" Tuan was not completely out of his playful mood. "I figure Donna would know how since she's been successful six times as I recall. It's been a while since Celeste has handled a dick, though, it's been at least three days. You might need to show her how it's done."

Tuan and Lesa were knocked sideways a bit as Celeste hurriedly mated the small craft to the docking collar. She flipped several switches to complete the seal and shut down the submarine's systems. "I'll show you what I know about making babies, Mr. Wiseguy! Get him out of his clothes while I strip, Lesa."

"What about me?" Lesa asked with her bottom lip poked out.

"I guess you'll have to bat cleanup this time," Celeste suggested.

Tuan was laughing as Lesa tugged at his clothing until she sucked his semi-rigid tool into her talented mouth. In three strokes his glans was tickling her tonsils. In five strokes he was stone hard and stroking her throat well beyond her tonsils.

"I'm ready," Celeste said as she flipped the armrests up on Tuan's seat and proceeded to straddle his lap with her slender legs. Between the stimulation Lesa and Celeste were pouring into the task at hand it wasn't long before Celeste's womb had some little visitors.

Daniel Boone returned to Azahar after dropping the first load of pods. She came back to Darkford with *William Penn* and *Antoine Laumet*. The three ships carried the balance of the Home Guard Militia and their equipment. The brigade's pods were quickly dispersed among the prepared facilities. They began staging ordnance and equipment in bunkers all around the planet, including some that were in remote areas on dry land.

Colonel Dean Gotti remarked, "It's ridiculous when you look at it objectively. We have less than a thousand troops with the mission of defending an entire planet! Armies with hundreds of thousands of combatants have failed to defend a single city in past wars on Earth."

Lieutenant Colonel Lesa Crews smacked her father's arm. "We don't need no negative waves, daddy-o. None of those Neanderthals on Earth had our equipment or your fine leadership."

Gotti snorted, "Don't try psychology on me, Peanut. You're not too old for a spanking."

"Ooo, I *like* spankings!" Lesa responded

Dean looked at her from the corner of his eyes, "Then again, maybe you are."

Lesa changed the subject as she pointed out the obvious on the wall map. "We can't get equipment into this land-locked ocean with the underwater tugs. We're going to have to use lighters to transport anything that won't fit in a transporter stream. I'm setting up an industrial complex here." She pointed to a spot about forty kilometers from the far shore.

"We can't be certain that lighters will be able to get through once the Sa'arm hive establishes their defenses."

Gotti scowled, "Don't get pedantic with me, Colonel. You probably enjoy being spanked too much for that to be a threat, but I'll come up with something unpleasant. What's your recommendation?"

Crews smiled and considered challenging him, but thought better of it. She knew she should be more professional in front of the others. "Sorry. I'm used to dealing with less fortunate commanders. We should find a suitable spot away from shore and establish a manufacturing complex."

Gotti frowned, "Shouldn't we set up mining sites first?"

Crews stifled a smirk as well as her reflexive smart remark. Her answer sounded more respectful, "No, sir. The transporters can send the raw materials anywhere, but we can't use transporter pads to send replacement assault craft, or return the damaged craft to the depot here for repair."

"Of course," Gotti responded. "And thanks for not rubbing it in."

The preparations didn't reveal so much as a ripple in the water when the Sa'arm showed up a few months later. The plans had been made, the traps had been set, and the troops were deployed. Now all that they needed was contact with the enemy. This was one of the toughest parts of combat, trying to get some rest before engaging the enemy.

The Navy made a show of defending the system by destroying several of the hive ship's screening vessels in a fighting retreat, but they allowed the colonization ship and its defensive escort to penetrate the seemingly weak Confederacy defenses and land unmolested.

The communications technician looked up. "Mr. Gotti, er, Colonel, sir. The hive ship has landed. I've got the coordinates."

Lesa barely recognized the man as one of the mercenaries who had accompanied her dad to the big extraction from Earth so many months ago. He was even bigger now, and younger looking. Along with the others, she turned her attention to the map the tech projected onto the wall.

Someone in the small room remarked, "It looks like they landed as far as possible from any significant body of water. Do you think they know about us?"

"They don't like water," Gotti observed without directly addressing the nervous individual. "And, that particular range of mountains has a lot of resources. Their scout must have done a good job of exploring this planet. They knew where to go."

He turned to Lesa. "Well, Peanut, we have a long way to fly before reaching the nearest target. Let's get some scouts out there and start moving equipment in as close as we dare. Let me know when it's in place, and I'll make the call to the fleet."

"We have a cache about 50 klicks south. We kind of thought those mountains would interest them," Commander Nguyen advised. "We can send troops there by transporter as soon as you like. It'll take about two weeks to get a tunnel under their landing site."

Gotti smiled his appreciation. "Good work! Let's get some troops in place to prep the cache and start the tunnels. I want three tunnels that approach from any angle other than the direction of the cache."

An inert satellite in a low orbit suddenly broke apart a week after the tunnels were started from the cache. The Sa'arm ignored the small objects until they began exploding one at a time a few minutes after impact. The Sa'arm may be deaf, but they clearly had some means of detecting explosions. Gotti was concerned. If they could detect explosions, then they may also be able to detect the vibrations caused by the machines and equipment that were approaching them from underground.

The Sa'arm units that investigated the explosions found nothing but a bit of debris and some disturbed soil. They quickly lost interest and returned to what they had been doing.

The assault ships *Veracruz*, *Bon Secours* and *Guantanamo* were at a rally point near the Darkfordat system. They joined a fleet of 33 warships with Vice Admiral Benjamin Grayson himself in command from the CIC of *Sir Galahad*. The spacious CIC and updated communications array on *Sir Galahad* was superior to those on the capital ships.

Colonel Bryant was in command of the marines being held in reserve onboard *Veracruz*. The transporter rooms on both *Bon Secours* and *Guantanamo* were prepared to evacuate the militia if they could get within transporter range of Darkford. Medical personnel were also standing by to receive casualties. Everyone hoped that an evacuation would not be necessary.

The new missile cruiser *Raphael Semmes* was among the capital ships of the fleet. Among the crew of *Raphael Semmes* were Major Bronson and Commander Williams as the weapons and engineering officers respectively. The ship had a two-meter missile launcher and two 50-centimeter missile launchers along each flank. Each of the launchers was fed by automated magazines that were loaded with various propulsion and warhead combinations.

The smaller missiles were primarily for medium-range defense, but they could also be a major distraction to Sa'arm defensive gunners. The big launchers could throw conventional rockets for close-in combat or planetary bombardment. They could also target any ship within a system with FTL skipper missiles. *Raphael Semmes* didn't have to get very close to harass an enemy formation.

In the CIC of *Veracruz* Colonel Bryant examined the same set of maps that Colonel Gotti was reviewing in the underwater CIC on Darkford. The set on the assault ship was just a few minutes older due to being delivered by a supraluminal drone launched from the shadow of Darkford's largest moon.

"The Sa'arm hive hasn't made any noticeable progress with their underground excavations," Colonel Bryant remarked. "They seem to feel secure enough to make other preparations first."

"Yeah, like moving the heavy guns from the hive ship to the high ground around them. Those babies will make a flyover below a synchronous orbit very hazardous and a surface approach impossible," Commander Crews commented after examining some high-resolution images sent by narrow-beam transmission from another seemingly inert piece of debris in a low polar orbit around Darkford. "They're preparing to repel an attack from space or from the surface."

Commander Diego approached the rendering of the underground installations. "They appear to have bomb shelters under their ship that are linked to bunkers beneath most of the guns. I assume that the guns can be tucked away to safely weather a bombardment, then dragged back out when needed."

"Ah, yes," Gotti agreed as he, too, looked closely at the composite of surface and underground activity. "Clever buggers. They've obviously done this before. Recommendations?"

"Me and da guys are gett'n rather tired o' wait'n," one of the mercenaries near the door remarked. "I say we kick 'm in the teeth and be done with 'm!"

Gotti chuckled, "Any objections to this elegant plan?"

"Colonel Gotti seems to be eager to get on with it." Admiral Grayson smiled as he read the report from the militia commander. "We may be going home sooner than expected." Along with his revised plan and a request for the previously arranged diversionary attack, Gotti's message contained the detailed disposition of all Sa'arm vessels in the Darkfordat system.

"The militia reports that they have their three staging areas established about a kilometer from the bunkers below the landing site. They've brought in more boring machines to cut

tunnels under all of the targets at the same time as well as intercepting the connecting tunnels. It should take them about eight hours to reach their objectives." Colonel Bryant noted.

Admiral Grayson nodded and turned to the communications operator. "Signal the fleet that we jump off in six hours."

Grayson used the updated intelligence to adjust the assigned objectives of each ship in the fleet. The ships came out of hyperspace on top of the Sa'arm picket that was patrolling outside the gravity well. The weapons on Murphy's corvettes were unlimbered with practiced efficiency and the Sa'arm ship was soon under heavy fire.

Sir Galahad used the updated target coordinates and profiles from Colonel Gotti to launch all of her FTL missiles in a single salvo. The first indication that the Sa'arm ships orbiting Darkford had that something was amiss was when the first FTL missile exited hyperspace and started its high-speed sprint toward its target.

Eight of the 27 Sa'arm ships were destroyed or put out of commission in the initial salvo and another seven were damaged. As updated information reached *Raphael Semmes* she began launching a pair of FTL missiles every ten minutes as the fleet formed up at the jump exit point and headed toward Darkford at battle speed.

Semmes took five Sa'arm ships out of the fight in the two hours it took for the other capital ships to get within weapons range. The corvettes dodged and darted in unison, much like a school of fish. Only this was a school of piranha, not baitfish. The nimble corvettes took up a position on the opposite side of the planet from the hive ship and set ambushes for Sa'arm ships that were foolish enough to get curious.

The majority of the surviving Sa'arm ships headed out to intercept the massive carriers and encountered a swarm of Hornets. A few of the agile craft would dart ahead and launch missiles that exploded 50 kilometers ahead of the advancing force. The visible flash and EMP from the 100-kiloton warheads disrupted the Sa'arm's defensive weapons allowing the Hornets armed with ship-killing torpedoes to launch from point-blank range, pop flares, and break away.

The bright starbursts behind the torpedoes made them very challenging to target using light in the Sa'arm's visual spectrum. It wasn't long before the cruisers in the carrier groups closed on the crippled Sa'arm ships and reduced them to scrap metal.

Amphibious transports from underwater bases delivered three batteries of self-propelled howitzers 50 kilometers from the Sa'arm perimeter. The guns and their support vehicles rapidly closed to within 20 kilometers of the Sa'arm mountain stronghold. They would not be precisely on target with their first rounds without a GPS network, but this was primarily a diversionary force.

Each of the big guns in a howitzer battery fired three rounds at progressively lower trajectories that put all three of the ninety-one kilogram rounds on target at the same time. When the last round was fired, the battery packed up and bugged out to a new location under the assumption that the Sa'arm forces were alert and ready. Before the batteries fired salvos from a second location there were thousands of Sa'arm units headed at high speed toward the guns' original positions.

Vehicles equipped with anti-aircraft weapons flanked the batteries and kept the skies clear. The retreating batteries would stop periodically to shell the leading elements of the Sa'arm ground forces, but it was a losing battle. The Sa'arm continued to close the gap.

The Panthers from *Veracruz*, *Bon Secours* and *Guantanamo* had descended out of the range of ground defenses and fell in behind the A20 Super Warthogs and Panthers launched from bases along the continental shelf.

The Warthogs engaged the Sa'arm just as they were getting the retreating artillery in sight. Seventy-millimeter rockets took out the armored vehicles and ancient but deadly napalm splashing off the canyon walls took out everything that was left. Thousands of Sa'arm were caught in the open and annihilated.

The Warthogs that hadn't expended their ordinance approached the guns deployed around the grounded Sa'arm hive ship at low level using the rough terrain as cover. Their primary targets were the Sa'arm anti-aircraft and point defense batteries. The Panthers followed and lobbed their heavier weapons at the mountain peaks. The bunker-busting bombs took out the heavy guns that were targeting missiles from the approaching ships.

The Mark 6 reentry vehicles on the remaining missiles in *Raphael Semmes's* magazine were loaded with 3,500 kilograms of high explosives instead of the typical W53 fusion warheads. The steady stream of incoming warheads kept the Sa'arm defensive guns out of their bunkers and vulnerable to the attacking Panthers.

The Sa'arm appeared to recognize the weapons because both *Raphael Semmes* and *Sir Galahad* were targeted even before they got within range of the space-defense guns. All fire was diverted to the missiles as soon as they came into range. This gestalt must have gotten information from the gestalt on Sa'Triste to have such a fear of the black cones falling from the orbiting ships.

The tactic effectively neutralized the heavy defenses with only a few Warthogs falling prey to the Sa'arm anti-aircraft fire. The Sa'arm abandoned the surface when they saw the fiery streaks left by the ablative material as the first Mark 6 that circled the planet in a descending arc and reached the atmosphere above the hive ship. The warhead began slowing as it descended into the upper atmosphere. Only a few Sa'arm remained in the ship or on the surface to operate the pitifully inadequate weapons that remained functional in a last-ditch effort to stop the inevitable.

Heavy explosions began echoing through the wide canyon. A succession of big bombs began reaching the grounded hive ship several minutes after the Panthers neutralized the last of the space defenses. Each impact knocked big chunks off the undefended ship. Huge flaming pieces of the hive ship were sent skipping across the mountain meadow with each primary and secondary explosion. The point defense guns that remained on the hive ship would have decimated the fragile Panthers, but they weren't powerful enough to stop gravity from pulling the massive bombs to the ground.

The assault forces moved into position as the tunneling machines began closing in on the underground installations. The plan was to cut tunnels about 20 meters below the facilities, pack the tunnels with explosives, and leave with the clock ticking.

Reports began coming in from the troops in the tunnels. They were under attack! The acoustic mines flanking the militia discouraged and delayed the Sa'arm units that were independently tunneling toward the boring machines, but they weren't stopping them. The Sa'arm had no problem sacrificing units to defend the gestalt.

The tunnels that targeted the connections between the Sa'arm bunkers weren't being intercepted by Sa'arm units. They either didn't have sensors that were as effective as those in the shelters and rally points, or the Sa'arm considered their tunnels a low priority asset and didn't mount as vigorous a defense to protect them.

The assault teams that breeched the Sa'arm tunnels quickly placed shaped charges against the first blast door they encountered, retreated behind a shield wall, and detonated the explosives. The molten copper from the cone in the leading end of the shaped charge burned a fist-size hole through the heavy blast doors and incinerated everything on the far side.

It was taking 30 to 45 minutes to tunnel around the smoldering wreckage of the Sa'arm bunkers and staging areas to assault the next stronghold in the chain. Injecting carbon dioxide into the superheated space wasn't much faster. Only a few of the teams made it to the far side of a destroyed bunker before being attacked.

The troops remained well behind the tunneling machines to keep from being caught between the attacking Sa'arm and the machines. There was a transporter pad in the borer that was primarily there to dispose of the talus, but it could also be used as an emergency exit of last resort. The machines were equipped with enough explosives to reduce the transporter to slag if approached by the Sa'arm.

While some teams made it past one stronghold, none got past the second bunker in a chain before being attacked by Sa'arm units coming from an unknown source. Diego and Rawlings triggered a second drop of sensors from orbit. The new data didn't reveal any additional installations in a five-kilometer circle. The defending Sa'arm had to be coming from other bunkers, the hive ship, or elsewhere on the surface.

The Sa'arm that were foolishly sent after the retreating teams were eliminated by beehive rounds from shoulder-fired launchers followed by a hail of small arms fire as the humans counterattacked the confused Sa'arm. More Sa'arm followed the first in an unbroken pattern of fallback and counterattack.

With the Sa'arm successfully keeping the militia away from the last few bunkers, Gotti called for reinforcements. Colonel Bryant's battalion made a classic aerial assault. They, too, deployed tunneling machines to intercept the connections between the bunkers. The marines, supported by heavily armed Panthers and Warthogs, quickly took control of the surface.

The pressure of the Marines assaulting the breached hive ship reduced the numbers keeping the Militia busy, allowing their counterattacks to begin making headway. The Sa'arm seemed to be running out of units to throw at the humans. Success appeared to be within reach.

Anxiety levels escalated among the troops and their commanders. Would the Sa'arm trigger a doomsday device? Admiral Grayson ordered the nonessential marine personnel into the Panthers and the nonessential militia personnel into transporter links to *Bon Secours*.

The attacks on the last five strongholds were coordinated between the marines and the militia who were still in the fray and all five of the enemy locations were burned within seconds of each other. All that was left was mop-up operations to eliminate or capture stray Sa'arm units.