

Destination Azahar

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CONTENT: noseX ScFi

UNIVERSE: The Swarm Cycle

Chapter 38 - After Action and Beyond

Commander Tuan Nguyen was livid for being classified as "nonessential personnel" and ordered to board *Bon Secours*. He tried to bully his way onto *Sir Galahad* to complain to Admiral Grayson in person, but the marines guarding the transporter had no sense of humor and no time for sad stories. Most importantly, they were bigger and better armed than Commander Nguyen.

Nguyen did manage to get in touch with Colonel Bryant when he returned to *Veracruz* as the final assault was being mounted on the last of the Sa'arm strongholds. Like Nguyen, Bryant had not been pleased when Admiral Grayson ordered him to evacuate before the last five occupied bunkers were assaulted. However, Grayson was not successful when he ordered Sergeant Budzinski off the planet.

Budzinski didn't come aboard *Veracruz* until after the last of the 29 marine and 87 militia bodies were recovered. Colonel Bryant called him on the carpet for not evacuating as ordered.

Budzinski attempted to explain, "I was cut off from the Panthers, sir."

"Miller got on a Panther," Bryant noted rather hotly.

"She's younger and more nimble, sir." Budzinski was clearly grasping.

"She was carrying Ensign Clark!" Bryant wasn't buying it.

"She's a *lot* younger and a *lot* more nimble, sir." Budzinski wasn't going to budge, "And quick, too. I dug in and kept the dickheads off her as she made her way to the Panther. I couldn't have done that as effectively had I tried to keep up with her. All three of us would've probably been killed, sir."

Bryant glared at Budzinski for a full minute before giving up. "Ah hell, I'm mostly pissed because I wasn't clever enough or devious enough to avoid being evacuated. Carry on, Sergeant!"

"Aye, sir!" Budzinski wasted no time exiting the small office.

Budzinski's next stop was to check on Clark. He had taken a Sa'arm energy blade in the back when he charged in and tackled a few too many Sa'arm units. The technique had worked several times, but when a Sa'arm gestalt finally learns a new trick it is immediately shared with all the other units. One of the Sa'arm had shifted its blade from the delicate center arm to one of its gripping arms giving it just enough reach to get around Clark's shield. It was a clumsy blow, but points aren't awarded for form and style in combat, just for results.

A medic had sealed the wound and re-inflated his partially collapsed lung before Sergeant Miller bodily carried him to a medevac Panther. She had to sit on him to keep him there, though. She wasn't pleased that Clark caused enough trouble to make it impossible for her to bail from the Panther and remain with Budzinski.

With the wounded clear, Budzinski and the rest of the platoon shifted their focus from suppressive covering fire to precision strikes at Sa'arm weaknesses. It's difficult to flank an opponent that has 360-degree vision from thousands of vantage points, but it can be done.

The remnants of the Sa'arm presence were erased, buried, or launched toward the sun. The plan was to leave no evidence for Sa'arm scouts to examine. Admiral Grayson wanted the disappearance of the colony to be a total mystery to the original gestalt. The hidden human facilities would be garrisoned by marines who would monitor the Sa'arm forces that arrived in the wake of the original hive ship.

The reaction of the parent gestalt when it discovered that their colony had been totally destroyed would help plan future assaults on Sa'arm colony worlds. The strategy was to slow down or redirect the Sa'arm advance and buy a little more time for the humans to evacuate more people from Earth or gather enough strength to defend it.

Admiral Grayson dispatched ships to establish forward observation posts nearer the Sa'arm colony's planet of origin. These posts would use probes to monitor scout traffic and record changes in the activity of the gestalt when scouts were allowed to return from the destroyed colony.

Upon their return to Azahar, Tuan and Lesa were set upon by their families. Kim and Sara cut classes for two days to help with the preparations and to attend the celebration that turned into a holiday for the whole planetary system.

"This is no reason to neglect your studies," Tuan had argued, but the wind was taken out of his sails when Governor Grayson sent everyone who could be spared home to be with their families. Most of the personnel who remained on duty were the people planning the festivities.

There was a bit of a damper on the festive mood when the bodies of the 128 of the 133 marine, militia, and fleet warriors who had fallen were offloaded from the assault ships for burial on Azahar. Five of the Hornet pilots were not found and presumed dead. Most had arranged the disposition of their property. Colonel Bryant was asked to explain why there were casualties in his command who hadn't recorded a will or otherwise arranged for the disposition of their concubines.

"I can't order them to make out a will," Bryant countered. "And I'm reluctant to bring attention to the implications of being a casualty. The troops need a positive attitude when going into combat."

"Have you any idea how traumatic it is for these 83 concubines and 197 children to lose their home as well as their sponsor?" Grayson asked rhetorically in a sharp tone. "Fortunately there is a shortage of concubines available to the high percentage of our youngsters who are doing extremely well on their CAP test."

"I have arranged for most of the families to remain in their original quarters for a few more days while Decurion Cohen sorts them out."

"The Decurion can use some help. How about assigning some of your soldiers to give him a hand," Grayson suggested. "Maybe they'll pass the word along to the ones who feel invincible."

Bryant wasn't keen on the idea, but agreed, "I'll direct my platoon leaders to council their troops and assign volunteers to help Cohen."

Tuan had been changed by his experience on Darkford. While he was far removed from the fighting and had only seen the casualties and the destruction firsthand after the Sa'arm had been subdued, he was in the CIC where he could see and hear most of the live action.

His family sensed the change, but it was Kim who first spoke of it. "Do you want to talk about it, Pop?"

Tuan's forehead wrinkled as he responded, "Talk about what?"

"Whatever it is that has taken the spring out of your step and the depth out of your smile."

After a protracted silence Tuan softly spoke, "I have nightmares. And they're all heading to Earth."

Kim embraced and comforted her father as he cried. When he recovered, she stood and pulled him to his feet before taking him home to the family he had chosen.

Tuan gathered his family in the kitchen after the little ones had been put to bed. "I'm not sure how to say this, so hear me out before responding. I've been working on a plan with Lesa Crews to return to Earth well ahead of the Sa'arm and establish underground and underwater outposts very much like the ones we just installed and successfully used on Darkford.

"The longer the replicators have to build habitats and weapons, the stronger the militia and marine units will be when it comes time to engage the Sa'arm on the ground. We're talking about heading back very soon.

"The thing is, we don't know how long we'll be there and it doesn't make sense to take you guys with us."

Nancy, Celeste, Margret, and even Beatrice strongly objected to being left behind when Tuan left for Earth. They all spoke at the same time and things were about to get out of hand when Beatrice shouted for everyone to be quiet.

The complaint she lodged elicited enthusiastic nods from the others. "It's bad enough to be left here for months at a time while you're off creating new colonies or kicking the Sa'arm off a planet. But it's just not right for you to be gone indefinitely."

"Returning to Earth defeats the whole purpose of being extracted as a concubine," Tuan argued.

Nancy had achieved a 6.5 average score on the test Tuan insisted she take on her birthday and could have assumed the role of sponsor, but she was determined to remain with Tuan. "You can't break up the family!" She objected to Tuan's suggestion that his concubines and dependents remain on Azahar. "We've got kids. You've got kids. We may survive without you around, but I want my kids to be raised by their father and me."

Nancy's argument seemed to prevail for not only the Tuan household, but for the Caulfield-Crews household as well. Tuan had been instrumental in resolving Lesa's relationship issues with Jake and didn't want to see them separated by so much time and distance. It made sense on some level for the families to remain together since this wasn't a temporary duty assignment. It was more of a permanent change of station.

Part of the issue was resolved when Lesa was not given permission to leave Azahar for Earth. She was to remain on Azahar to continue training with the Home Guard Militia. More live-fire exercises were being added to the training curriculum and Lesa was considered a key training instructor.

Tuan continued to lobby for an expeditionary force to return to Earth where they would begin developing underwater bases to harass the Sa'arm when they made landfall on Earth. He had no trouble enlisting volunteers for the mission and managed to get enough

approvals to appropriate the equipment and transportation needed to setup a base in the Atlantic Ocean.

Even though Lesa wasn't going to be part of the expedition, she provided Tuan with the documents needed to develop her holdings in the mining venture started by her late husband and his partners. Clark's concubine, Rebecca, was one of the surviving widows of the partnership. He signed over her interests without hesitation when Rebecca gave an emotional response to Tuan's query. "I really want these memories buried in my past. It's just a bonus if anything I have on Earth helps to delay the deaths of billions when the Sa'arm ships arrive. Take it all!"

The third interested party was Karen Philips. She still resided in Atlanta, but neither Rebecca nor Lesa expected her to object to the development of the mining rights. The two women were certain that Karen's cooperation could be guaranteed by netting her in a pickup.

Contacting her would be tricky and could not be done directly by Tuan or anyone in his advance party. Panic stricken mobs and terrorists could be more of a hazard to the operation than the Sa'arm. All communication would have to be done through the Civil Service agents on Earth.

The fact that the Confederacy was the custodian of two-thirds of the partnership by virtue of having power of attorney for both Lesa and Rebecca's interests in the venture put the ball firmly in the Civil Service's court. If royalty checks didn't satisfy Mrs. Philips, then arranging her extraction might provide enough incentive for her to give the Confederacy full executive power over the assets of the partnership.

Centurion Chalmers had been getting some rather unusual requests from Azahar, but a request for the release of mining rights in the middle of the Atlantic seemed strange, even by Azahar's standards.

It was international waters, but in an area claimed by Portugal. The mining rights were nothing more than an agreement to install and operate fixed equipment under the protection of the Portuguese government.

Chalmers considered having his secretary make the call, but had her bring him the telephone number and address of the woman he was to contact here in Atlanta. He picked up the handset, selected an outside line and dialed the number on the note.

On the fourth ring a female voice softly said, "Hello."

"Good morning. My name is Centurion Chalmers. I represent the Confederacy here in Atlanta. May I please speak with ~~Misses~~Mrs. Karen Philips?"

"This is she," the soft voice replied. Her confusion was easily recognized in her voice when she asked, "What is this about?"

"The Confederacy would like to move forward with developing the off-shore facility that your husband and his partners had started before the unfortunate accident. I'm sorry for your loss. Would you consider turning your interest in the venture over to the Confederacy? I'm sure we can make it worth your while."

There was a short pause as Karen processed what she was hearing. She had considered the assets of the partnership to be worthless, but maybe... "The only thing of interest that the Confederacy could offer me is the safety of my children."

"I'm confident that something can be arranged. Would you care to join me tomorrow evening and attend a small reception following the official opening of a new apartment building near Underground Atlanta? I would be pleased to introduce you to some likeminded people."

"All right. What time should I be there and what should I wear?"

"I'll pick you up at your residence at seven. The event is semiformal."

"My sitter is here and says she's available," Karen said somewhat hesitantly.

"Excellent! Until tomorrow, then," Chalmers said as he hung up.

He was looking at photographs of Karen Philips on his monitor and thought, *"It might be time for me to consider emigrating myself."*

Lesa had mixed feelings about not being allowed to return to Earth with Tuan. She was going to miss him and was working on a plan for a proper sendoff when the AI interrupted her.

"There is a visitor at the entrance with a delivery for Gloria," the AI advised.

The man at the door was accompanied by a rather large dog that became instantly alert and began sniffing the air as soon as the door opened. "Forgive me for arriving unannounced. I'm Commander Larry Miller and this is—."

"Bernie?" Gloria asked from across the foyer.

The dog gave a deafening bark and lunged toward Gloria. She dropped to her knees and reached for the big St. Bernard with outstretched arms. Miller dropped the leash to avoid having his shoulder dislocated.

Bernie misjudged the slick floor. He didn't put the brakes on soon enough and bowled the laughing woman onto her back as he licked and nuzzled her. Her open knees and slender thighs gave Miller and Crews a lewd view of her plush beaver.

The bark had summoned everyone who was home. All but one of the kids came rushing over to where Gloria and Bernie were rolling around on the floor and joined the melee.

Traci's two year old screamed and tried to climb Traci's bare legs.

"Stop that!" Traci scolded the youngster. "What's wrong with you? It's just a dog."

Bernie was instantly on his feet, shedding kids like water off a duck's back. He gave Traci a threatening growl as he approached her.

Miller drew his stinger and aimed at Bernie. "Kids are going to be a problem. Bernie doesn't allow them to be disciplined in any way, and he's big enough to make his opinion the only one that matters."

Gloria ignored Miller as she scrambled to her feet. In a loud, commanding voice she shouted, "Bernie! No!" Bernie's ears and tail immediately drooped. He turned his head to look at her with classic hangdog body language. She snapped her fingers and pointed at her feet. "We don't growl at family!" Bernie crawled to her and lay at her feet with his jaw on the floor. He didn't maintain eye contact until Gloria relaxed her arms and let her fists drop away from her hips.

"Well, I'm impressed," Miller said almost reverently. "The last time Bernie acted like that it took sedatives and three animal control officers to get him off the father's chest. It seems that a hollow-core door isn't strong enough to contain him when he gets protective of kids.

"The man insisted that Bernie was a dangerous animal that should be destroyed, but only his pride was injured. Bernie hasn't responded to attack training and his marine handler also requested that he be replaced because he isn't aggressive enough.

"I think Bernie has been depressed ever since he was separated from what is clearly his person. The only time he's not downright lethargic is around kids. Some dogs only recognize one master. In this case I believe it's clearly this lovely vision."

"What is he doing here?" Lesa asked.

"Colonel Gotti thought that dogs might have reduced the number of casualties at Darkford and put in a request for patrol dogs. I'm the veterinarian who's been taking care of the pets left in Centurion Chalmers' care. Only a few are suitable for Gotti's purposes, but I managed to bring most of them with me anyway."

"How can I ever thank you?" Gloria asked.

"I'm just happy to be able to spread a little joy and hope out here among the stars. Since you seem to be in total control of Bernie, I'll take my leave."

The Nguyen and McKinsey families were sitting at the table in the McKinsey's spacious dining room. The room was unusually quiet as everyone finished eating.

Constance broke the somber silence. "It seems like a dream from a lifetime ago that some of us here were the only life within scores of light-years. Now? Now there are tens of thousands of people who call Azahar home. Even our small families have grown.

"I have fond memories of when it was just us, and will miss all of you when you're gone."

"This is going to be difficult," Beatrice remarked quietly. "We have been closer than most blood relatives. I'll miss everyone, but cling to the certainty that we'll see each other again. The Sa'arm *will* be beaten back."

She looked around the room. "I'm not sure where I'll call home in the coming years. Earth seems so long ago and far away. I've known more happiness in the short time I've lived here than in all the years I spent on Earth."

"But, you will all be in such danger on Earth," Phaninath observed. "Why go back?"

Tuan nodded his head. "I'm beginning to think that it's a bad idea."

"It's a great idea!" Beatrice said insistently. "While I'm not thrilled to be taking my kids back into the danger zone, it's no longer suicidal to be there with someone like you. What lesson will I be teaching my kids if we hide on Azahar when we can make a difference by returning?"

"Oh, my!" Constance interjected. "Keep talking like that and we'll all be motivated to return."

The laughter at her remark was short-lived and strained.

Tuan looked at Kim. "I got a message that your brother has declined to volunteer for Confederacy service. He has aligned himself with a group of students at Mississippi State who refuse to leave despite having sponsor-grade CAP scores.

"They are also refusing military service because they believe that national defense is too narrow a scope. They are striving to create a network of likeminded students around the world."

"Are you going to contact Tan?" Kim asked.

Tuan distorted his face and tilted his head. He was clearly conflicted. "I don't see how I can safely do that. Our presence must be kept from the general population and almost all of the politicians. If he let it slip to his buddies...", Tuan shrugged as his voice dropped away.

"How can your son or his friends reveal your presence to the Sa'arm?" Constance asked.

Tuan smiled. "It's the old bomb shelter dilemma. Those without shelters will mob those who have them. Just try to imagine how many boats will converge on us when the first Sa'arm ship arrives if anyone knows where we are."

"Oh," Constance remarked quietly as her face took on a sour expression.

The rest of the evening was occupied with conjecture about who should get pregnant by whom before the Nguyens left Azahar.

Tuan turned to Kim. "You should pick yourself a couple of—."

Kim chopped him off at the knees. "Don't go there, Pop—!"

"But—."

Kim held up a cautionary finger. "I've got enough to deal with without keeping track of dependents. I don't want to have this conversation again!"

Giggles and stifled snickers could be heard from all quarters.

Tuan smiled. "I'm sure you'll be fine with your choices. I'm just not ready to admit that you can get along without me.

"Even with my concern about you put aside I still have mixed feelings about returning to Earth, but I'm convinced that doing so could make the difference between the survival and destruction of our home planet."

The heavy colony transport *Antoine Laumet* arrived at the inbound jump zone from Azahar as *Aeolus* was leaving Earth with another load of immigrants bound for Dargo, one of the newly established industrial colonies. The two ship's exchanged recognition messages and personal greetings until *Aeolus* engaged her FTL drive and left. The best wishes of Captain Zothos were forwarded to everyone aboard *Antoine Laumet* as they tried to relax for the long night ahead of them. In a few hours they would be hustling to prepare their ship for the planned drops.

The transport used its sub-light engines to hold a position well outside the atmosphere above the North Atlantic east of Bermuda. It was moving too slow to be orbiting and had to use the engines to remain aloft. It would gain a bit of altitude and then cut the engines to freefall while launching lighters and releasing pods. The pod-laden lighters entered the atmosphere well below orbital velocity, but the shields compressed and heated the air ahead of the vehicles as they descended at hypersonic velocities.

For a little over four hours the crews aboard vessels in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean were treated to an unusual meteor shower that was accompanied by faint sonic booms. More than a hundred bright objects streaked through the sky before splashing into the Atlantic. Anyone who had caught sight of the first one and kept count would have seen exactly 108 meteors make their way across the night sky.

Curiously to the carrier group tracking the unusual trajectories, they all splashed into the Atlantic Ocean within ten kilometers of each other west-southwest of Angra do Heroísmo, Azores, near a newly erected offshore drilling platform that was anchored to a submerged peak 240 meters below the waves. The carrier group was ordered to remain clear and not investigate the phenomena. A few people knew that 21 Confederacy families had just returned to Earth.