

# **Pathways Through the Dark Sky**

## **Part 1**

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While this story is set in our contemporary world, all  
characters, places and events are fictional.

## Synopsis

The stars hold no promises—only threats.

When alien warships appear in the skies above Earth, humanity discovers it is not alone in the galaxy—and not welcome. The Volgran Empire has crushed countless civilisations, and now their gaze falls on a fractured planet barely ready to defend itself.

Out of the chaos rises an uneasy alliance of nations bound by desperation. Across fifteen chapters that span continents and star systems, Earth's defenders uncover the truth of a hostile galaxy: an empire built on conquest, worlds scarred by ancient wars, and survivors who carry stories of betrayal written in fire.

From tense negotiations to first battles fought among the stars, *Pathways Through the Dark Sky* charts humanity's earliest steps into interstellar conflict. Commanders, scientists, spies, and civilians must confront not only the alien threat but the darker question—what will Earth become in order to survive?

## Chapter 1

**Day 0 — 12 September 2029, 15:54 UTC**

“Esteemed Captain, I bring forlorn news!”

Captain Fla Trenan hauled the young Vol gran crewman to his feet and snarled

“Cut out the flowery bullshit. Get off the floor, you mewling frek, and report.”

The runner staggered upright, clearly rattled. Though taller than his captain, he shrank before the piercing gaze, standing amidst the low beams of the *Silver Claw*’s bridge.

“Sir, Master Shipwright Kera reports hull damage—especially near Airlock Two. We’ve lost airtight integrity. The alien weapons—”

“I know how effective the aliens are,” Trenan cut in. “What about Senior Fireman Reena? The status of the infantry assault?”

Runner Malacca hesitated, his jaw working without sound.

“Speak, boy! Report!”

Malacca straightened, his voice tight.

“Sir, Reena was killed during the invasion. The attack failed. All members have been annihilated or captured. The surviving crew have managed to repel entry attempts into the ship.”

“I see,” Trenan muttered. “Repelled—for now.”

He paused, calculating. The old warrior’s brow furrowed in thought. Then, decisively:

“Steerer, ring the bells. We’re leaving.”

He turned back to Malact.

“You have one minute. Warn as many of the crew as you can. Tell them to repel boarders if they must—but be aboard or be left behind. When you return, I have another task for you.”

The ship shuddered violently—another alien strike, sounding like thunder. Even the massive broadside cannons of the flagship *Emperor’s Grace* couldn’t shake a hull like that. Time was running out.

“Urkel, can you take us up—toward the Sun? The compass can’t be trusted without calibration,” Trenan barked.

“Aye, sir. Awaiting your order,” the helmsman replied, hands already dancing across the controls.

Malact returned moments later, breathless.

“Ship secured as best we could, sir! We’re ready to depart.”

“Good work, boy. Get to the upper observation dome. Keep your eyes sharp for those cursed flyers.”

Trenan turned to the steerer.

“Take us up. Stay below five thousand rels—we still need to breathe.”

Despite its battered exterior, the *Silver Claw* lifted smoothly, guided by its humming anti-gravity drive. Below, Mexico City shrank away, the chaos and flame of battle fading into the distance. Soon, only the glinting Gulf of Mexico filled the broad glass window.

Captain Trenan allowed himself a moment to think—a sliver of calm in the storm. The ship was damaged, the crew shaken. He would have to find a way to get them home.

But the aliens on this damnable planet weren’t going to let them go easily. Not that he would, if the positions were reversed.

“Captain!” Malact shouted from above. “Two more flyers—coming fast!”

The fear in his voice was unmistakable.

“Gun decks!” Trenan bellowed into one of the brass speaking tubes. “This is the Captain. Double powder canister, on my command! You’ll only get one shot—don’t skell it!”

He turned back to Urkell.

“Slow us down a little. Then put them alongside... Let’s see what they’re made of.”

The seemingly lumbering longship twisted smoothly to port, revealing a sleekness foreign observers would never expect. Beneath its ornate wooden exterior, the *Silver Claw* was still a warship of the Volgran Empire.

Trenan narrowed his eyes as the aircraft closed in.

Then he gave the order—an ancient command, reborn in a new kind of war.

“Fire!”

## Chapter 2

**Day 0 — 12 September 2029, 16:17 UTC**

*Above the Gulf of Mexico → British Virgin Islands Airspace*

Smoke trailed from the wounded alien craft as it lurched across the Caribbean sky—its hull scorched and venting sparks. It had erupted from Mexico City twenty minutes earlier, breaking through the thick haze of debris and anti-air fire, climbing like a wounded bird in retreat. Satellite tracking labelled it *Unidentified Airborne Object – MEX03*. To the Americans, it was *Target Echo*. To the British, it was *Bandit Blue*.

The thing—whatever it was—moved unlike any known aircraft. At subsonic speeds but with no visible propulsion, it zigzagged through clouds, gravity seemingly irrelevant to its path. Its outer hull, though battered, was engraved with unfamiliar symbols and banners.

“Whiskey-Three-Zero to AWACS *Freedom One*. Target Echo has entered Caribbean NORAD Sector Four Charlie. I am weapons free—repeat, weapons free.”

High above, two F-22 Raptors of the 94th Fighter Squadron closed in, contrails gleaming under the morning sun.

“Roger that, Whiskey-Three-Zero. Engage at will.”

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### **HMS *Dauntless***

*Royal Navy Daring-class Destroyer*

*17 nautical miles north-west of Anegada, British Virgin Islands*

Lieutenant Commander Sarah Whitaker stood at the bridge window, binoculars raised, scanning the western sky. The deck vibrated with the low hum of active sonar and radar pings. The *Dauntless* was normally tasked with supporting British Overseas Territories and anti-smuggling patrols—no one expected her to be the closest British vessel to history.

Until now.

“Contact confirmed,” reported the radar operator. “Bearing two-five-five. Visual acquisition in one minute. Commander, it’s... it’s smoking.”

Over the horizon, a bizarre silhouette appeared—unlike anything the British had seen before.

“Get me Northwood Command. Now,” Whitaker snapped. “And raise the Americans.”

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### **USS *Arleigh Burke***

*US Navy Destroyer, DDG-51 Class*

*30 nautical miles south-south-west of the Dauntless*

“Captain, NORAD confirms a hostile bogey entering our AO. This is the one from Mexico City. F-22s are in pursuit—ETA sixty seconds.”

Captain Mark Reynolds of the *Burke* narrowed his eyes, arms crossed tightly.

“Any comms from it?”

“None. Zero emissions. It’s leaking some kind of vapour—maybe atmosphere venting.”

“That damn thing’s coming down,” Reynolds muttered. “Weapons online. If it makes a move, we finish it.”

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### ***Above Anegada — 16:23 UTC***

The two Raptors closed to within two kilometres to lock visual targeting. No countermeasures had been detected so far—but alien tech was still an enigma.

“Whiskey-Three-Zero to AWACS *Freedom One*! She’s going evasive—did you see that? She’s just made a ninety-degree turn. Hold on...”

The alien craft had indeed made an impossible manoeuvre—and was now alongside the two fighters. The next move left the already incredulous pilots even more stunned.

“Fire!”

Twenty black muzzles appeared along the side of the *Silver Claw* before spurting flame and smoke.

Training took over. Despite the shock, the F-22s dove and banked sharply. Twenty black objects streaked toward the evading jets—it was barely enough.

“We got one!” crowed Malact inside the alien ship. “One of them’s smoking—it’s pulling away! Skell you, you freks!” His joy was so great he nearly fell from his observation perch.

“Urkell, resume course. Best speed possible,” Captain Trenan ordered. He leaned into a brass tube embedded in the wooden wall. “Gun deck—well done, lads. Fine work.”

“Whiskey-Three-Zero to AWACS *Freedom One*—alien ship has fired on us. Some kind of shrapnel cannon. Whiskey-Three-One has engine damage and is disengaging. I’m assuming combat position. Weapons free—repeat, weapons free.”

“Roger that, Whiskey-Three-Zero. Take them down.”

An AMRAAM missile detached from the pursuing Raptor. The pilot delayed his second shot, hoping to predict the alien’s next swerve. The first missile missed by metres—dodged by another impossible twitch of the craft.

The second struck.

It slammed into the alien craft's rear section with a muted whump. The ship's aft cracked like ceramic, shedding panels and debris like dead leaves.

Trailing fire, the ship yawed violently to starboard, losing altitude rapidly.

"Splash one hit—she's going down. Repeat: she's going down. Impact projected east of Anegada."

The howl of rushing air filled the bridge of the *Silver Claw* as the alien ship plummeted earthward.

"Malact! Where did they hit us?" shouted the Captain over the shrieking wind.

"Port side, rear quarter—near the back!"

"Frek! That's near the Pulsen drive. How's she flying, Urkell?"

"Bad, sir—like a brick," replied the steerer, struggling with the controls. "We don't have long."

Captain Trenan placed a steadying hand on the helmsman's burly shoulder.

"You're the best I've got, Urkell. I have faith in you."

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#### **16:26 UTC — British Virgin Islands Exclusive Economic Zone**

The ship struck the sea with shocking speed but didn't shatter. Steam and seawater erupted in a vast plume as it skimmed the shallows, carving a gouge through the turquoise water before embedding itself into a sandbank between two uninhabited cays.

On the *Dauntless*, alarms blared.

"We have impact!" Whitaker barked. "All stations, red alert. Launch drones and prep the RIBs."

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#### **16:29 UTC — Coordinated Response**

"*Dauntless* to *Arleigh Burke*—alien craft is down on the British side of the line. We will investigate. Requesting non-interference."

Captain Reynolds tapped his headset.

"Negative, *Dauntless*. That thing engaged US airspace. Our fighters disabled it. That makes it ours."

"It came down in British territorial waters, Captain. Stand down." Whitaker's voice was steel.

There was a tense pause.

"Understood. You send one team ashore, Commander—we'll do the same. Let's keep this by the book."



Whitaker scowled but nodded to her XO.

“Launch team Bravo. Eyes only. No sudden moves.”

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### **16:47 UTC — Crash Site, Anegada Lagoon – British Virgin Islands**

The grounded alien vessel hissed and creaked like a dying leviathan. Steam curled from split seams in the hull, and the bridge was a chaos of shattered glass, splintered wood, and bodies sprawled where they had fallen.

“Frek... that could’ve been a softer landing, eh, Urkell?” the Captain rasped, coughing up a thread of dark, ruby blood.

Only a muffled groan answered from the bottom of the observation dome.

“Malact! You still in one piece, you lucky bastard? Check on him!”

“Aye, sir.” The young Runner picked his way across the debris-strewn deck.

Chief Helmsman Ley Ru Urkell had been the only son of a minor Volgran house. All hopes for wealth and honour had rested on his service; with his death here, his family name would vanish into the dowries of his sisters, leaving only a scattering of memories.

Malact returned, eyes shadowed. “I’m sorry, sir. He didn’t make it.”

The Captain bared his fangs, a sound half growl, half sigh. “Damn. He’d been with me a long time. Hell of a steerer. Got us out of plenty of scrapes.”

“Sir, we have to abandon the ship. There are aliens coming. We need to get you to safety.”

“Help, pup? No help comes for us here.” The Captain’s voice was iron under the pain. “They’ll slaughter us—as we would them. Duty’s all that’s left. Now... get me up.”

Malact hauled him to his feet. The Captain staggered, shoulders bowed but unbroken, and together they left the bridge for the last time.

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### **16:47 UTC — Crash Site, Anegada Lagoon – British Virgin Islands**

The grounded alien vessel hissed and creaked like a dying leviathan. Plumes of vapour rose from its fractured hull, and chunks of blackened timber floated in the shallows. A cluster of British sailors and American SEALs stood knee-deep in the lagoon water, weapons raised, eyes fixed on the two alien figures standing atop the sloped deck.

One was down on one knee, bleeding from a split in its carapace-like armour. The other—taller, bulkier—was armed with a short, curved blade made of some strange bronze-coloured metal. It didn’t wave the weapon threateningly but held it in front of itself with a trembling, defiant grip.

“Repeat—lower your weapons! Hands in the air!” barked Lieutenant Tom Hill, the Royal Navy boarding officer leading the British team.

The alien didn’t understand. It looked skyward again, shouted something guttural and rhythmic—“Kalimar vok tar Rex!”—as if invoking a command or name, then pointed at the Americans.

A US SEAL misinterpreted the gesture and shouted, “He’s going for something!”

A split second later, his suppressed Mk 18 barked twice. The second alien collapsed on the deck with a howl, shot through the shoulder.

“Cease fire! Cease fire! Goddammit!” Hill screamed.

Chaos erupted. The kneeling alien lunged toward the edge of the deck, pulling a crude sidearm from its belt. It fired once, the shot cracking open the air and narrowly missing one of the SEALs.

The lagoon lit up with gunfire, sparks and splinters dancing off the alien hull. One SEAL went down with a grunt, hit in the leg. The alien took three rounds and slumped over, twitching.

Before the situation could spiral further, a thud-thud-thud sound rolled across the lagoon—rotor blades slicing air.

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#### **16:52 UTC — Lagoon Crash Site**

Malact peered through a smashed porthole.

“Sir... our crew are trying to repel boarders.”

“How many left?” Trenan rasped.

“Two hands’ worth. Maybe we have a chance.”

The Captain gave a grim, wheezing laugh.

“Only for now. Hear that? Another of their infernal fliers.”

Malact’s grip tightened on his commander’s arm.

“Come on, sir. We need to get you away.”

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#### **16:53 UTC — Lagoon Crash Site**

The twin rotors of the Merlin HC4 kicked up plumes of spray as the helicopter hovered just long enough for its cargo to disembark. Two squads of Royal Marines fast-roped into the lagoon, splashing down waist-deep among the reeds and scorched vegetation. Steam still hissed from the smouldering wreck of the alien vessel, half-submerged in the shallow water.

The Marines moved with practised urgency. Fire team Alpha pushed forward in a V-formation, weapons raised, while Bravo flanked left, covering the blind side of the shattered hull. Helmet cams fed constant data back to HMS *Dauntless*, already relayed to Northwood HQ and Whitehall.

“Contact right! Movement near the hull!”

A ripple in the water. Something moved—then another. Two figures emerged from the jagged breach in the hull: hunched and pale. One clutched a crude tool or weapon but dropped it instantly as a laser dot danced across its chest. The second figure stumbled, collapsing face-first into the waves.

“Non-combatants,” said Captain Tarrant over the squad net. “Secure and extract for triage. Minimal force.”

Before they could approach, a third figure surged from the shadows behind the hull, larger—furred, armed with a short, curved weapon—screeching something guttural. It lunged at Corporal Dryden.

Dryden fired once. A suppressed three-round burst caught the attacker mid-chest, flinging it back into the water with a splash.

“Engagement! Hostile down!”

A brief but violent skirmish erupted. Two more armed aliens appeared from submerged wreckage, opening fire with handheld launchers that spat glowing projectiles. One slammed into the water beside Lance Corporal Fahey, erupting in a shock wave of heat and steam. Fahey dropped, screaming—his leg peppered with shrapnel.

Bravo team responded instantly. Two grenades arced toward the hull and detonated with a metallic thump. The resistance ended in seconds. Silence returned, save for the hiss of steam and the distant throb of the Merlin’s turbines.

“One wounded. Fahey’s hit. Applying tourniquet.”

“Copy. Secure the site. Check all heat sources. Drones up.”

On the far side of the wreck, the American SEAL team had begun advancing. Lieutenant Jason Cole approached the Marine perimeter, his face serious behind the rebreather mask.

“We have a right to inspect, Captain. This is a joint operation.”

Captain Tarrant regarded him with a slight smile.

“A joint operation, yes. Though I must say, your team’s ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ approach was rather... enthusiastic.”

Cole met his gaze steadily. “We had to act quickly. We couldn’t risk waiting around while our men were under fire.”

Tarrant nodded thoughtfully. “Understandable. Still, here in British waters, we like to exercise a bit more caution—less trigger-happy, more measured. Perhaps next time, a little patience might serve us both better.”

Cole allowed himself a faint smile. “Point taken.”

Tarrant returned the smile, his tone lightening.

“Good. Now, if you’d be so kind as to hold position while we proceed, we’ll keep things orderly. And hopefully, keep the shooting to a minimum.”

Cole gave a short salute. “Understood, Captain.”

The Royal Marines pressed on.

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“Airlock One, pup... only way out,” the Captain breathed, his voice a ragged whisper. “Three’s under... water.”

The air was thick with the stench of scorched wood and spilt oils. Malact’s grip tightened around the Captain’s arm, feeling the heavy slack in his muscles. Every step was slower than the last through the dim, flickering corridors, bulkheads groaning as the wounded ship settled lower into the lagoon.

Down the corridor, shadows moved.

The human soldiers advanced deeper into the wreck, rifles sweeping the dim spaces. Smoke hung in the stale air, and from side passages, more Volgran emerged—some limping, some dragging wounded, a few raising empty hands in surrender.

Corporal Dryden caught the movement at the far end and signalled to his fire team. Two Marines peeled off toward the beached end of the alien vessel.

Private Taft reached a sealed chamber—the curved door still intact, the controls unburned. An airlock, he guessed. He pulled it open and stepped through, rifle raised. The small chamber was silent. No resistance.

They moved into the next corridor. Ahead, in the shadows, a lone figure knelt beside the still form of a Volgrani, one clawed hand resting on the alien’s chest as if willing breath back into it.

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The survivors divided almost instinctively into two factions.

The first: furred, powerfully built, their bodies partially shielded by scorched armour plates. Most bore injuries—burns, broken limbs, cuts—but several retained an air of command and aggression. They glared at the humans with open hostility but did not resist once surrounded.

The second group: frail, pallid-skinned, dressed in identical grey wraps. They avoided eye contact, huddling together near a collapsed bulkhead, showing no sign of weapons or resistance. One pressed a hand to a youngling's chest, rocking gently as if to calm it.

"Prisoners segregated, sir," came the report. "Warriors here, non-combatants there. Triage team needed."

Tarrant nodded. "Do not mistreat the second group. They're not enemy combatants unless proven otherwise."

Above, drones buzzed in slow arcs over the wreckage. The Merlin's crew chief came over the secure channel:

"Northwood confirms visual broadcast. Fifty-plus bio-forms, majority contained. At least eight casualties, one KIA. Clean footage. Recommend additional containment squads and science support. Orders?"

Tarrant turned, boots crunching on a half-submerged piece of alien plating, and surveyed the chaos. His voice was cold and controlled.

"This crash site is secured by the British Armed Forces. All alien personnel are now prisoners under international maritime recovery protocols. Inform Northwood: we'll need MI13, medical evac, and a mobile holding facility. And tell the Home Secretary—" he paused, eyeing the huddled, terrified non-combatants, "—that we've found more than just soldiers."

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#### **17:12 UTC — Onboard HMS *Dauntless***

Lieutenant Commander Whitaker watched the feed from the crash site on the CIC screen. Her face was pale but composed. A medical corpsman behind her quietly reported that the aliens were en route via Merlin to a makeshift secure field station in Tortola.

"Has the Pentagon been informed?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. They're furious."

"Let them be," she replied calmly. "This isn't about politics. Not anymore. It's history now."

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#### **17:30 UTC — USS *Arleigh Burke*, CIC**

Captain Reynolds stood stiffly as the feed from the crash site cut out.

"Sir," his XO muttered, "we've lost primary drone access. They've geo-fenced the site. Brits locked it down tight."

"Of course they did," Reynolds said darkly. "Get Langley on the line. I want satellite coverage every thirty seconds. If they move so much as a screw, we'll know."

He turned to the ops officer.

“And find out if anyone in London wants to explain how we shoot the bastard down and they get to bag the bodies.”

## Chapter 3

**27 September 2029, 16:17 UTC**

HM Naval Base Clyde — or more informally, Faslane — was home to the UK's Vanguard nuclear fleet and, as such, was perhaps the most secure location in the country. It was also now home to Ship Beta, the alien craft having been transported somewhere far safer than the beaches of the British Virgin Islands.

With Ships Alpha and Gamma hidden from view, the British transport across the Atlantic had been a worldwide event — impossible to conceal. An emergency agreement with the French government ensured maximum protection, and a firmly demanded — and granted — exclusion zone allowed for the successful delivery of one of the three most precious artefacts the world had ever seen.

Faslane was already home to the fifty-three aliens who had arrived aboard. They had been moved within days of the initial crash for analysis, under the strictest security by British and French forces. The newcomers were quickly separated into two groups: the furred and aggressively violent Volgran, and the smaller, mixed group of terrified aliens — the latter soon identified as captives or servants.

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### **Interview Room 4, Faslane Security Wing**

The room was plain: white walls, a single steel table, two chairs. A muted security camera watched from the corner. On the table sat a digital recorder, an open notebook, and a jug of water.

Lieutenant Commander Sarah Whitaker of the Royal Navy leaned back in her chair, watching the alien across from her. It was small — no taller than a young teenager — with pale, almost translucent skin and a faint shimmer to its eyes. Thin metallic bands encircled its wrists — not restraints, but some kind of identification device the scientists were still debating.

A translator unit sat between them, linked to the language database being built by linguists from GCHQ and Oxford.

Whitaker's voice was calm, deliberate.

"Let's start simple. My name is Sarah Whitaker. I am an officer of the Royal Navy. We are not here to harm you. My ship rescued you. Do you understand me?"

There was a pause, then the translator emitted a voice — flat, mechanical, but recognisably English.

"Yes. Understand. Not harm."

"Good." She tapped her pen on the notebook. "You travelled here on that ship — the one we brought from across the sea. Can you tell me your name?"

A moment's hesitation. The alien's eyes flicked towards the security camera, then back to Whitaker.

"Name... not matter. We... property. Volgran name us. Not ours."

Whitaker leaned forward slightly, her tone softening.

"Here, you are not property. You are under our protection. If you want to choose your own name, you may."

The alien's expression was unreadable, but after a few seconds it said:

"Call me Rell."

"Rell." She wrote it down. "All right, Rell. I want to ask about your ship — where it came from, and why you were heading for our world."

The alien's gaze dropped to the table.

"Not my choice. We serve. We do not decide where ship go."

Whitaker nodded slowly. She'd expected as much. The real answers — the ones London wanted — would have to be coaxed out over days, not hours.

She glanced towards the observation mirror.

"Rell, I'm going to bring in someone else to ask you a few more questions. He works with me. He's not military, but he's here to help."

The alien gave no visible reaction.

The door opened with a soft hydraulic hiss, and a man in a dark suit stepped inside. His close-cropped hair and sharp eyes contrasted with Whitaker's composed warmth.

"Rell," she continued, "this is Mr Daniel Harcourt. He's with the government."

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## **Secure Briefing Room 2, Faslane**

### **One hour later**

The room was windowless, lit by recessed LEDs that gave every surface a sterile sheen. A Union Jack stood behind the head of the long oak table.

Around it sat senior Royal Navy officers, intelligence chiefs, and one Cabinet Office representative. The door shut with a thump, and Harcourt took his seat beside Lieutenant Commander Whitaker.

Admiral Sir Peter Laughton, Commander of the UK's Strategic Forces, steepled his fingers.

"Well, Mr Harcourt — what have our guests had to say?"

Harcourt placed his slim folder on the table and flipped it open.

"It's been slow going, obviously — starting from zero with their languages — but we've established a few key points," he began. "First: the Volgran are not a solitary raiding party."



They operate multiple classes of ship, from carriers to smaller strike craft. Ship Beta is mid-range, likely a troop transport with some combat capability.”

A low murmur passed around the table.

“Second,” Harcourt continued, “they control many star systems — perhaps around a hundred — and they are expanding. They target habitable worlds as new colonies or conquests, exploiting them for food, materials, and population.”

Laughton’s eyes narrowed. “Population?”

“Yes, sir. Our source confirms that the ‘mixed group’ aboard Ship Beta are captives taken from other systems. Slavery is not incidental to their operations — it’s a core function.”

Harcourt glanced at his notes. “Finally, this was an exploratory fleet. It’s not the vanguard of a larger invasion force. That means there’s no immediate threat... but that won’t last for long.”

Silence gripped the room.

Rear Admiral Singh broke it.

“How much time do we have?”

Harcourt spread his hands. “We don’t know. But given their ability to cross interstellar distances, it could be years... or months.”

The Cabinet Office man’s voice was measured, almost too calm.

“Then this information stays within this room. No leaks, no public disclosure. The Americans will want to grandstand; the French will want a joint statement. We give them neither until we have a defensive posture in place.”

Whitaker spoke up, her tone clipped but firm.

“With respect, sir, if they’re coming in force, the public deserves warning.”

The man fixed her with a flat look.

“Commander, panic will serve them better than any fleet. We will control the message.”

Laughton tapped the table once, decisively.

“I have to update the PM and French President. Harcourt — keep talking to our... guests. If there’s more to be learned, I want it yesterday.”

“Yes, sir,” Harcourt replied.

As the meeting broke up, Whitaker caught Harcourt’s arm.

“You didn’t tell them everything.”

He met her gaze without blinking.

“No. And until we know how much truth they’re giving us, I don’t intend to.”

## Chapter 4

### **Raven Rock Mountain Complex ("Site R"), Pennsylvania**

**09:30 UTC, 04 October 2029**

Brigadier General James Howard stepped forward, voice calm but commanding.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. President, this is a Top Secret / Eyes Only briefing. If you do not hold clearance, please leave the room now."

A moment passed as several civilian aides and junior staff filed out. Once the room was clear, the General turned toward the display screens behind him.

"Sirs, this is the current situation since the extraterrestrial incursion. We are now at Attack Day plus twenty-two. The craft that attacked Los Angeles, designated Ship Alpha, remains under full containment. The UCLA exclusion zone remains sealed. All known alien personnel and materials within the continental United States are secured. We have detected no additional vessels in the solar system, but we recommend remaining at DEFCON 3 for the foreseeable future. It is the Joint Chiefs' recommendation that the President may return to the White House, and Pentagon operations resume as normal."

"Thanks, Jim. Good work, as always," said General Jonathan Pierce, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. "What have we learned about the ship? Any updates?"

"Yes, sir," Howard nodded. "We've made significant progress. I'd like to bring in Dr. Hilda Chester from the DARPA Exobiology Division."

A slim, confident woman approached the podium.

"Good morning," Chester began briskly. A new slide appeared on the screen, showing the alien ship looming over central Los Angeles. "As you're aware, three craft entered Earth's atmosphere and launched unprovoked attacks on Los Angeles, Berlin, and Mexico City. In the immediate confusion, we responded with overwhelming force. It appears our allies in Europe and Latin America did the same."

The next slide showed the same ship — heavily damaged and grounded.

"At our last briefing, we reported limited understanding. The interior was chaotic. We lacked linguistic or cultural insight. The Europeans are still withholding findings—"

"They'll come running soon enough," interrupted President Robert Lake, folding his arms.

Chester gave a short nod. "Yes, Mr. President. Regardless, we now have a much clearer picture. And it's both alarming and surprising. At first, we suspected deception or misdirection, but it appears the truth is far stranger. Ship Alpha contained multiple alien species. The ruling caste — the Volgran — commanded the vessel. The others served them, essentially as slaves."

She advanced to a slide showing four non-human figures.

“These subordinate species had limited access to ship systems, as they were relegated to labour roles. Nevertheless, they provided valuable intelligence. Particularly the Molarians — they worked with our linguistic team to decode the Volgran syntax.”

“Doctor,” interjected Vice President Elaine Vincent, her voice tense, “you used the word empire. Should we be concerned?”

“Yes, ma’am. Deeply. The Volgran officers showed unwavering loyalty, while the subordinate castes feared something they called ‘the wrath from the sky.’ Let me show you.”

She brought up a stellar map.

“This is our local stellar neighbourhood. Earth is here,” she pointed to a small blue dot. “The Volgran Empire spans this region — roughly 190 light-years in diameter, including about seventy star systems. Bright red marks their territory; dark red are subjugated systems. They’re the dominant power in this corner of the galaxy.”

Faces in the room stiffened.

“But,” Chester continued, “when we gained access to Ship Alpha, nothing matched what we expected.”

“How so?” asked CIA Director James Hollings. “They got here. That says something.”

Chester turned to face him. “Sir, the ship is made of wood.”

Silence fell.

“Do you understand what that means?” she asked.

Dr. Alan Strickland, Director of DARPA, frowned. “Some kind of biotech? Organic hulls?”

“No,” Chester replied. “Literal planks. Timber. Iron nails. Black tar used to seal compartments. No power conduits. No electronics. This vessel could have been constructed by 18th-century Earth mariners — if they had access to anti-gravity.”

She flipped to an interior shot.

“Our team found almost no recognisable modern technology. Navigation is done using something like sextants. Communications? Flags and lanterns. It’s as if someone gave George Washington a gravity drive and he slapped it onto a Man-of-War.”

Pierce leaned forward. “What about their weapons? Propulsion?”

“The core systems — anti-gravity and faster-than-light travel — are simple. Crude, even. The Volgran discovered these concepts early in their history, giving them a huge strategic advantage. But they never advanced beyond basic metallurgy or pre-industrial agriculture. They don’t have electricity in any meaningful sense. Their empire totals around forty billion — spread across seventy systems.”

“Doc,” Hollings smirked. “Forty billion sounds like a lot.”

“With respect, Director,” Chester snapped, “Humanity is approaching nine billion on one planet. At our density, the Volgran would have two hundred billion. They are dramatically underdeveloped.”

Secretary of Defense William Keating cut in. “So how did they build an empire? Do they have any kind of special abilities that would explain how they got so powerful?”

Chester brought up a new image — a stocky humanoid figure.

“The Volgran are bear-like bipeds. Slightly shorter and bulkier than humans. No signs of telepathy or exotic physiology. They appear to be aggressive and hierarchical. Their political system is closer to 15th-century France — feudal, with noble houses competing for dominance. Conquest, not collaboration, is their model.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Brigadier General Howard returned to the podium. “Sirs, Mr. President, while the initial threat seemed existential, our updated assessment is far more optimistic. We are facing an enemy whose capabilities are centuries behind our own. They lack digital systems, long-range sensors, and strategic coordination. They have no frame of reference for our technology — we are, quite literally, beyond their comprehension.”

“Excellent work,” said the President. “Elaine?”

VP Vincent nodded. “We’ve heard about Ship Alpha. What’s the situation with the other two?”

Secretary of State Eric Danson sighed. “Not promising. Ship Beta, which attacked Mexico City, is now in British custody. It was recovered from the British Virgin Islands, loaded onto a makeshift super-barge, and transported to a secure facility in Scotland.”

“I saw that on the news,” chuckled Strickland. “Looked like two oil tankers duct-taped together.”

“We tried to stop them,” muttered Keating. “After all, we took it down.”

“The UK and France were emphatic — any interference would be treated as an act of war,” Danson said flatly. “Even Beijing stood down. The British convoy was escorted by a dozen nuclear subs and half the British and French fleets.”

“And Ship Gamma?” Vincent asked.

Danson frowned deeper. “Still at its crash site. Fifty miles north of Odessa. Under joint EU-UK control. We have no access. Ukraine permitted European boots on the ground. Not ours.”

President Lake leaned forward. “What if we toss a few billion in aid? Grease the wheels?”

“Already tried, sir,” Danson replied. “They want leverage, not charity. They’re keeping it close.”

“Then make them talk. I don’t care how.”

“Sir,” Vincent said cautiously, “We have no NATO jurisdiction. But perhaps... perhaps it’s time to initiate coordinated diplomatic pressure. If other powers reach the same conclusion — that these aliens are primitives with advanced propulsion — then we may have an opening. America can lead again. Not just in defence, but in guiding how this technology is used.”

Lake stood. “Fine. Make it happen. Start working on a plan. Same time next week — I want proposals on the table. Let’s find out how this stuff works and use it before someone else does.”

## Chapter 5

### **Humanity's Tipping Point: The Volgran Incident and the Rise of the TODO Initiative**

*By Lucy Benfield*

It was the day the stars stopped being silent.

The Volgran assault—once dismissed in military briefings as a “brushed-off” encounter—quickly proved anything but minor. For humanity, it was a psychic shock. The illusion that Earth was alone, or at least safely unnoticed, evaporated overnight. The skies, once a symbol of wonder, now hinted at danger. Humanity was no longer a distant spectator of the galaxy—it was on someone else’s radar.

The world changed. Not instantly, but irrevocably.

### **Aftermath and Global Paralysis**

In the weeks following the attack, debris from the downed Volgran vessels was recovered across several continents. The most important, the power and propulsion systems, fell into the hands of Western powers, sparking what would become one of the most intense diplomatic stand-offs in modern history.

The United States, United Kingdom, and European Union moved quickly to contain and classify the materials. Quickly coming to common cause, their public statements were vague. Their scientists worked in secret. But the rest of the world wasn’t blind. Satellite imagery, leaked documents, and rumours of reverse-engineering efforts triggered a wave of suspicion and outrage from other global players.

China, Russia, India, and a dozen regional powers demanded transparency. The threat wasn’t just that someone might weaponise the alien tech—it was that the balance of global power was already shifting beneath their feet.

For six months, Earth stood on a knife-edge of strained alliances. Proxy conflicts flared. The threat of open war loomed, not over ideology or territory, but over who would control the keys to the stars.

### **Reykjavík: The Breaking Point**

The deadlock broke at the 2038 Reykjavík Security Summit, a last-minute assembly of ninety-four heads of state, scientific envoys, and military representatives. The stakes were clear: cooperate, or collapse into chaos.

Out of the summit emerged the TODO Initiative—short for “Terran Orbital Defense Organisation.” The agreement was radical and divisive, but its message was simple: space was now a shared frontier, and what lay beyond Earth’s atmosphere had to be managed collectively.

TODO's framework granted all signatories access to the alien-derived anti-gravity systems. But there was a catch: no nation, corporation, or private entity could use anti-grav technology to breach the 75-kilometre boundary above Earth without TODO's approval. Any space-bound mission using advanced propulsion would be coordinated centrally. Surveillance was mandatory. Violations would be treated as acts of planetary endangerment. The clause, dubbed the "Space Lock," infuriated hardliners in several countries. Some saw it as a Western power grab dressed in the language of unity. Others feared that ceding control of space exploration would stifle innovation. But the fear of a rogue launch broadcasting Earth's position—or worse, triggering another alien response—ultimately swayed most governments. By the end of the summit, 83 nations had signed on.

## **Unity, and a New Purpose**

Surprisingly, the TODO Initiative didn't just prevent conflict—it ignited a new era of global collaboration. Space, long a theatre of competition, became a catalyst for unity. Scientific cooperation reached levels not seen since the early days of the International Space Station. Joint missions were launched. International training centres opened. The term *planetary citizenship* entered political discourse.

Public interest in space exploration soared. Enrolment in science and engineering programs skyrocketed. Stock markets surged as investors bet on spin-off technologies. Media outlets churned out documentaries and round-the-clock analysis. The dream of colonising the Moon or Mars, once the domain of science fiction and billionaires, began to feel like a real, shared ambition. Even Earth-bound problems felt, for a time, more solvable.

## **TODO's Legacy**

In just a few years, TODO had achieved what no space agency ever could alone. A solar-system-wide monitoring grid was established, alert to any further extraterrestrial incursions. A multinational rapid-reaction fleet—equal parts scientific and military—was stationed in orbit. Permanent bases were founded on the Moon, Mars, and several key asteroids.

Though TODO would eventually be absorbed into the larger framework of the Planetary Accord decades later, its role as humanity's first serious response to an alien threat cannot be overstated.

It marked the moment when the nations of Earth began to act not just as competitors, but as custodians of a fragile, shared world on the edge of a vast and unpredictable galaxy. From panic came purpose. From fear, unity. The stars, once symbols of human dreams, now reflected something more: a future worth protecting, together.

Yet history is never written by treaties alone. Behind TODO's grand declarations were the daily negotiations, compromises, and quiet battles that held the fragile alliance together. Few knew this better than Supreme Commander Matthias Bosch.

"Sir, do you have a moment?" asked the young Japanese woman at his office door. "We have a few issues with the scheduling."

Bosch looked over his glasses at his personal assistant. "Of course, Julia. What's the trouble?"

"I just sent the details through. Nothing impossible, but we'll need your input on a couple of matters," she said, pointing to his monitor.

He scanned the list. "Ah, Ukraine still refusing access to Russian scientists. Hardly surprising." He frowned. Despite the ceasefire, neither country had signed a formal peace agreement, and every minor concession became a battlefield. "But this one—China threatening to veto Taiwan's participation? I thought we'd resolved that. Never mind, I'll reach out to their delegation."

Bosch leaned back in his chair. For all his lofty title, he knew he was no global dictator. He had been chosen for his skill as a diplomat, not a commander. Born in neutral Austria, with more than thirty years in domestic and European politics, compromise had been his craft. TODO was now using that craft to the fullest—but compromise with one nation often meant antagonising three others.

"And how are you, Julia?" he asked, softening his tone. "The job treating you well?"

"I'm fine, Mr. Bosch. Very interesting work." She spoke carefully, as if measuring every word.

He smiled faintly. "Yes, it's certainly that. Geneva must be very different from Kyoto, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Smaller, quieter. But I enjoy the peace—it gives me time to study."

"Good, good. Please let me know if you need anything. We'll have to learn to run very quickly, so don't hesitate to ask for help."

"Of course, sir," she said softly.

"Anything else I should know?" Bosch asked.

"Only the usual disputes, but nothing urgent. All reports are up to date—we're handling things quite well at the moment."

"Excellent. Well, I need to prepare for this afternoon's meeting, but I'm available if anything important comes up." He turned back to his screens.

Julia nodded. "Your daughter is scheduled to arrive at 12:30, sir."

"Thank you." A smile flickered across Bosch's face. Seeing Sabina would be a welcome change from the constant parade of issues. The strategy meeting ahead would be brutal—TODO was



already in danger of splits and delays—but for a moment, the thought of his daughter lightened the weight of responsibility.

The office fell silent again, broken only by the hammering of keys and the low hum of Geneva’s winter winds beyond the glass.

## Chapter 6

### **Earth Station – ISS Unity 2**

**12 April 2032 – 06:17 UTC**

“Sir, you’ll want to see this,” Lieutenant Watkins called, eyes fixed on her console. “We’ve received a proximity ping.”

Commander Heisen crossed the operations deck quickly, leaning over the comms panel. “Talk to me.”

“Lagrange Point 3 just registered an FTL flash—reflected off the relay at L4. The vector doesn’t match any registered traffic. It originated about fifteen light-hours out.”

Heisen narrowed his eyes. “Plot the trajectory.”

Watkins drew a red path across her display. “If they’re headed to Earth, they’ll likely pass near Neptune.”

“Flag that region for the Superweb,” Heisen ordered. “Have it monitor for course corrections or energy emissions.”

He turned toward the security console. “Set station alert level to Two. I want full readiness. No assumptions.”

As amber indicators lit across the deck, a multilingual announcement echoed through the station corridors. Heisen exhaled, quietly hoping it was a false alarm.

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### **08:38 UTC — TODO Supreme Command HQ, Geneva, Switzerland**

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining on short notice. I’ll be brief.”

Supreme Commander Matthias Bosch stood at the head of the oval room, flanked by regional commanders, scientific advisers, and a wall of virtual feeds showing representatives from dozens of nations.

“Just over two hours ago, our deep space sensors at Lagrange Point 3 detected an FTL wake approximately fifteen light-hours from Earth. Unity II flagged it for follow-up. Forty minutes later, three more FTL flashes were logged, this time near Neptune—likely course corrections. The final flash occurred near Saturn’s orbit.”

He turned to his aide. “Julia?”

Julia Takashima, poised and efficient, stepped forward. “Good morning. After the last flash, we trained all long-range assets on the Saturn corridor. Here's what we found.”

She tapped the console. A high-resolution scan appeared. Murmurs of surprise rippled through the room.

“Four Volgran ships,” she continued, “travelling at ten percent of light speed. No evasive action. No signal activity. Formation suggests they are neither patrolling nor invading—just... arriving. Based on trajectory, they will reach Earth orbit in approximately eleven hours.”

Bosch nodded grimly.

“In accordance with TODO Protocol Seven, an intercept mission has already launched. The UEF *Outback*, *Damocles*, and *Big Bang* are en route. Our objective is to establish contact and, if necessary, capture the vessels intact.”

The room erupted. Multiple feeds showed shocked or furious officials speaking over each other. Bosch let it go for three seconds, then cut the line.

“Our feed is one-way,” he said quietly. “We don’t have time for another summit. We will update all governments continuously. TODO Supreme Command out.”

He turned back to his commanders.

“We’re not assuming hostility, but we also can’t afford naivety. Not after last time. We’ll meet them halfway.”

He turned toward the digital Earth slowly spinning on the wall map, his expression unreadable.

“This time, they won’t catch us by surprise.”

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## **12 April 2032, 12:04 Eastern Time** **Live from MSNBC**

“...And once again, for those just tuning in, an attempted alien incursion into Earth’s space has been thwarted by human ships. For more, we go live to Geneva and our senior correspondent, June Carpenter.”

The feed cut to Carpenter, wrapped against the chill outside the glass façade of the Supreme Command headquarters.

“Thank you, Peter. Quite extraordinary developments here. An emergency press conference was called earlier this morning—5:30 local time, 11:30 Eastern—and it has confirmed what many had suspected after a night of heightened military activity worldwide. Increased naval

deployments, patrol aircraft, and satellite alerts all pointed to something unusual. We now know why.”

She gestured behind her toward the building.

“Commander Matthias Bosch, head of Earth’s defence forces, announced that a second Volgran fleet was detected entering the solar system in the early hours. Three Earth vessels—the *Outback*, *Damocles*, and *Big Bang*—intercepted them between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. Rather than an engagement, the alien ships were escorted under armed watch to a secure, undisclosed Earth location.”

The MSNBC anchor leaned in.

“As you say, June, that is remarkable. What can you tell us about the identity of these aliens? Are they the same as those who attacked three years ago?”

“Yes, Peter,” Carpenter replied crisply. “Bosch confirmed that the four intercepted ships belong to the Volgran—known to viewers from the Los Angeles, Mexico City, and Munich landings during the original invasion.”

“And what happened during the interception itself?” the anchor pressed.

“Details remain limited,” Carpenter said. “But Bosch’s statement was clear: and I quote, *‘The Earth ships defended themselves with aplomb, suffered no casualties, and were able to escort the alien fleet without significant incident.’* Experts here interpret this as the first true interstellar combat in human history—an encounter that ended in Earth’s favour.”

The anchor nodded gravely.

“Truly historic. But are officials warning of further incursions? Should people be bracing for a wider conflict?”

“That’s the question everyone’s asking,” Carpenter responded. “Bosch stressed that long-range surveillance performed exactly as intended, and he insisted Earth’s defences remain fully vigilant. Still, there is unease here in Geneva that today may mark the opening chapter of something larger—”

“June, apologies,” Peter Jones cut in, his tone urgent. “We’re going live to the White House, where President Lake is about to speak.”

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## **The White House — Live Broadcast**

The screen flicked once again, this time showing the President striding towards a central podium, the presidential seal prominent before a bank of flags. His face was grave but steady.

“My fellow Americans and fellow citizens of Earth,” he began, his voice carrying a weight that silenced the press corps instantly, “today we confirm what our people feared and suspected. Humanity has once again been visited by the Volgran. This time, however, our defences held firm. Three of our ships intercepted four Volgran vessels in deep space and, without loss of life, escorted them under control to a secure location.”

He paused, letting the words sink in.

“This is not a day for panic, but a day for resolve. We are not alone in the universe—this we already knew. But tonight, we can say something more: we are not defenceless. The nations of Earth have acted together, with courage and clarity, to meet an unknown force and prevent it from threatening our home.”

Reporters shifted restlessly, cameras flashing, but Lake pressed on.

“I want to make three points absolutely clear. First: there was no attack on Earth. Our forces acted with restraint and professionalism. The aliens are in custody, and there is no imminent danger to our citizens. Second: international unity has proven vital. Without shared intelligence and cooperative command, we would not be speaking under such calm circumstances. Third: this administration, in cooperation with Supreme Command, will share further details as they become available. Transparency is our safeguard against fear.”

Lake’s gaze hardened, voice taking on a steel edge.

“We do not yet know why the Volgran have returned, nor what their intentions are. But let it be known: Earth will not be intimidated, and we will not be divided. Should diplomacy be possible, we will pursue it. Should defence be necessary, we are prepared.”

He stepped back from the podium, pausing only to add:

“Humanity has faced its first true test as a spacefaring civilisation. Tonight, we did not fail.”

The feed cut abruptly, plunging anchors and commentators into a flurry of analysis.

## Chapter 7

**Joint Allied Interrogation Center, Thule, Greenland**

**15 May 2032 – 15:04 UTC**

**SECURITY CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET – EYES ONLY**

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**[EXCERPT: Field Interview Log – 0900Z]**

**Interrogator:** Colonel Maggie Raines, US Navy

**Subject:** Supreme Commander Ur-Khal Vroton, Volgran Fleet

**Observers:** Lt. Majed Al-Khatib (Xenolinguistics), Dr. Liao Zheng (Cultural Specialist), Admiral James Warner (TODO High Command, via live feed)

The alien is shorter than expected—shorter even than many of the other Volgran prisoners. Ornate robes flow like archaic naval dress. Bronze filigree—real bronze—decorates his pauldrons and sleeves. His fur is pale gold. His gaze—sharp, unwavering—betrays no fear.

The room is clinically cold. Intentionally so. The Volgran protested the temperature only once. They do not appear to understand discomfort as something negotiable.

**Colonel Raines:** “Begin recording. Commander Vroton, do you understand that you are a prisoner of war under the laws of armed conflict as defined by—”

**Ur-Khal Vroton:** (*interrupts*) “I am no prisoner. I am a hostage of misunderstanding.”

**Dr. Liao:** (*quietly, to the Colonel*) “They don’t have a concept of ‘prisoner.’ Captivity is either shameful or strategic. No middle ground.”

**Raines:** “You entered our system without consent. Your ships resisted interception. There were attempts to attack. We’ve reviewed your logs—you knew you were not above a rival empire’s territory.”

**Vroton:** (*smiles*) “We knew only that our vanguard did not return. We sought answers. This planet was not charted. Its existence... was beneath notice. And yet... here you are.”

**Al-Khatib:** “What was the purpose of your mission?”

**Vroton:** “Resupply. Observation. Recovery, if required. Our vanguard expedition, dispatched by the Chancellery of Lord Porta, made no transmission. We assumed piracy. Or incompetence.”

**Raines:** “And what do you assume now?”

**Vroton:** (*leans forward slightly*) “I have seen little of your tasteless world beyond this peculiar prison. You have strange customs and mechanical trinkets. You are a paradox—too

primitive to matter, too dangerous to ignore. The Empire will bring you civilisation and honour. You would be wise to accept.”

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**[FIELD NOTE: Dr. Zheng]**

The Volgran mindset is not religious, but imperial. Their understanding of spacefaring civilisations is limited to weak client states and compliant vassals. They’ve never met a peer. Their technological base is intentionally static—maintenance over innovation, doctrine over disruption. To them, Earth is just another planet to be conquered. They cannot value our strengths because they cannot comprehend them.

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**[INTERVIEW: Admiral Warner Debrief to TODO High Command]**

“This species is not a threat in the conventional sense. Their weapons are inferior. Their doctrine is centuries outdated. But their pride is nuclear. They believe they are in command of reality. That arrogance is what made this encounter dangerous—and it's what gives us leverage.”

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**[EXCERPT: Continued Interrogation – 0927Z]**

**Al-Khatib:** “Why did one of your ships attempt to ram our formation?”

**Vroton:** (*flatly*) “It is our right to enter any system we please. Imperial Fleets stand aside for no-one and your ship was in the way – it was a fair tactic.”

**Raines:** “And firing your cannons?”

**Vroton:** “You feel we shouldn’t fight? That we should parley like crying children?”

**Raines:** “So that was protocol?”

**Vroton:** “It is our right.”

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**[OBSERVATION: Dr. Zheng]**

They believe surrender is a myth invented by the weak. What they are experiencing now—complete crew internment, ship seizures, medical scans, isolation—is unthinkable in their worldview. The fact that they are still alive and being fed is likely confusing.

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**[FIELD INTEL: Technical Debriefing]**

Capturing intact Volgran ships has proven to be an intelligence breakthrough:

- Volgran propulsion systems match those recovered from Ships *Alpha*, *Beta*, and *Gamma*. No significant variation exists between the flagship (approx. 500 meters) and the smaller “Sky Triremes” (approx. 350 meters).
  - Internal architecture is broadly consistent across all four vessels, with minor differences based on cargo type and crew configuration.
  - Crew complements range from 200 to 300 per ship. As few as 40 Volgrans could pilot a vessel in an emergency. Each ship carried an additional complement of 250, equivalent to marines.
  - Communications rely entirely on line-of-sight optical signals or flag-code equivalents. Updated codebooks, maps, and logs were recovered and passed to Linguistics.
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**[INTERVIEW: Final Exchange – 0945Z]**

**Raines:** “Commander Vroton, your ships and crew are impounded here on Earth. You cannot leave—for obvious reasons—but we can be generous. We can make you comfortable, if you’re willing to cooperate. Before we end this interview, is there anything else you wish to say?”

**Vroton:** (*contemptuously*) “Help you? Why would I—or any Volgran—come to your aid? You are little more than cattle in the fields.”

**Al-Khatib:** “You think you’re better than us? That we’ll just submit?”

**Vroton:** (*blinking slowly*) “Of course. It is the natural order.”

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**[CLOSING REMARK: Dr. Zheng]**

He believes everything he says. That’s what makes him dangerous. But it’s also what makes him predictable.



## Chapter 8

### **Private Location, Reykjavik, Iceland**

**18 June 2032 – 18:11 UTC**

The room was warm against the Icelandic chill. Its walls were soundproofed, the windows blacked out, and a single ring of light fell over the low obsidian table. Around it sat the most powerful people on Earth. Their aides had been dismissed and the interpreters gone. The door sealed with a soft hiss.

Supreme Commander of TODO, Matthias Bosch, stood at the head of the table with his hands clasped loosely behind his back. He looked less like a general and more like a statesman now, in a civilian suit, no medals, no theatrics. The weight of his presence filled the room.

President Lake greeted him. "Matthias, always a pleasure. Congratulations on yesterday's speech. It played well across the Atlantic."

Jean-Michèle Durand, the French President, swirled his mineral water. "Merci for the poetry, as always. But when the Supreme Commander calls a private meeting in Reykjavik, one assumes the curtain speech was not the whole play."

David Llewellyn, Britain's Prime Minister, leaned back with his fingers steepled. "Yes, sounds like something was left unsaid. Care to enlighten us?"

Bosch allowed a faint smile. "You're all correct. My address yesterday was accurate, but deliberately incomplete. What I didn't share is why we can afford to breathe a little easier, and why we cannot afford complacency."

Chen Wei, China's Premier, raised an eyebrow. "Then let us begin."

Bosch tapped his wrist console. A projection bloomed into life on the wall behind the table showing the solar system ghosted in blue, with a scatter of icons pulsing faintly.

"The Volgran hyperspace analysers are crude, short-range, directional, barely functional beyond ten light-hours," Bosch said. "We've integrated their calibration matrices into our own systems. We can now track an FTL event from nearly one hundred light-hours. By year's end, probably more."

President Lake murmured, "That changes everything."

Bosch nodded. "Their analysers also revealed inefficiencies in our own FTL drive harmonics. Adjustments reduce our hyperspace signature by ninety percent. To them, we'll be whispers in the dark. Unless they're almost on top of us, they won't see us."

Indian Prime Minister Sahana Rao whistled. "That's extraordinary. Why wasn't this in the speech?"

"Because good news breeds two things, panic or hubris. Neither serves us," Bosch replied evenly.

Durand gave a dry laugh. "So we sit here in secret like conspirators. Très dramatique."

"Not conspirators," Bosch corrected softly. "Survivors."

The silence that followed was heavy. Bosch let it linger before continuing.

"Half the world wants fleets of warships. The other half wants treaties, appeasement, committees. Both paths lead to ruin. We're not building empires or carving up colonies. We're buying time."

Llewellyn's voice was cool. "And your plan to do that?"

Bosch keyed another command and the projection changed to a lattice of tiny red points encircling the solar system far beyond Pluto.

"Two projects. First, an early-warning net. A ring of stealth detection stations on the edge of the Oort Cloud, up to two percent of a light-year out. Anything jumps in, we'll know before they even clear hyperspace. And they won't see the sensors, at least not before we get a warning."

Chen Wei observed, "That sounds expensive."

"Cheaper than annihilation," Bosch said without hesitation. "Second, long-range reconnaissance. Ghost ships. FTL-capable, low-signature, self-sufficient. We send them out to Volgran space before the next fleet leaves port."

Kowalska, the EU President, frowned. "To spy or provoke?"

"To learn," Bosch replied. "Right now, we are blind. The Volgrans believe they own the stars because they've never met an equal. Their arrogance is a shield, but shields break. We need to know what lies beyond their empire. We need allies. Or at the very least, accurate maps."

President Lake tilted his head. "You sound like you expect another fleet soon."

Bosch's expression hardened. "We do. Our analysts believe eighteen months, give or take. Six months before they realise Vroton's mission isn't coming home. Another six to assemble a response force, probably larger than the one we faced. Then six for the journey."

Rao asked, "Why so slow? Their drives aren't much slower than ours, are they?"

"No, not really" Bosch said. "But their ships are relics. No water recycling. No sanitation worth the name. Some oxygen from plants. They follow trade lanes like 18th-century galleons. They must stop often for supplies and crew relief. That's their Achilles' heel."

Durand gave a low chuckle. "So they are aristocrats in gilded frigates."

"Arrogant aristocrats with a grudge," Bosch corrected. He pulled up an image of Ur-Khal Vroton, the captured Supreme Commander, seated stiffly in his ornate robes, eyes hard as glass.

"Vroton is no fool. He didn't stumble here blind. He was cautious. Their logs show multiple course corrections, three false-entry points before they dared approach the inner system. That's not standard procedure. That's a commander expecting ambush."

Chen Wei frowned. "Which suggests he suspected something?"

"Perhaps," Bosch said. "We know Vroton's mission profile: resupply and recon for the expedition lost three years ago. But here's the concern. Vroton was carrying enough marines to invade Iceland twice over. Four ships, full combat complement, not scavengers. And he brought a fleet flagship."

Durand raised an eyebrow. "A reconnaissance fleet with a hammer."

Llewellyn asked, "And your answer is to send our own ships deep into their space?"

"To watch. To listen. To find out if they stand alone or if they have enemies of their own. We need eyes in their space before they launch. We need to know if Vroton left a fail-safe, a reserve fleet, or something worse. His arrogance suggests one thing. His caution suggests another."

Silence followed. Durand raised her glass of water with a sardonic smile. "Mon Dieu. Reconnaissance in force. Ghost fleets and sentinels in the dark. Tell me, Matthias, when do we stop surviving and start conquering?"

Bosch's eyes were cold steel. "When we know enough to choose."

## Chapter 9

### In orbit Barnard's Star B, Barnard's Star system

11 December 2032 – 18:11 UTC

Against the backdrop of interstellar night, the UEF *Nyx* vanished into nothingness. Thirty meters of matte carbon, built for one rule: never be seen. Its sole role was to slip in and out of enemy planetary systems without detection. Its mission inside those systems would vary, but rule one never changed: stay unseen. Humanity could not afford otherwise.

However, even the best-designed craft needed a maiden voyage. The *Nyx* and her sister ship, The *Eclipse*, were currently as far from Earth as any human had ever been, beating the record held by The *Whisper* and The *Duskfall*, which had visited Alpha Centauri the previous week. These shake-down cruises, although uneventful, had proven successful, giving humanity a huge step forward in ways that would have been unimaginable less than five years earlier.

"Kerso, get the *Eclipse* online," Commander Bilton said to his comms officer. "If they're good, we can prep for the next jump. We can send everything over H-wave now. There's a tonne of data here."

"Aye, sir," replied the young Spaniard, punching keys across his panel. "*Eclipse* is good to go, ready to sync drives."

"Thanks, comms," Bilton said, entering commands into the Nav panel. Holding his microphone button, he continued, "*Eclipse*, status green. All systems good, hyperdrive ready. On my mark."

Two ships, locked by the power of twenty-first century computing, pulled away from the rocky planet below. Their anti-gravity drives purred softly, lifting them from Barnard's orbit to unimaginable speeds. Commander Bilton clicked his microphone again. "*Eclipse* – mark."

A bubble of blue-green energy expanded around the two ships. Space itself responded. A shimmering circle of energy appeared in front of them, the portal to the hyperspace tunnel unfurling like liquid glass ahead, swirling bands of light bending in impossible arcs, allowing the two human craft to slip in, taking them on a voyage far faster than light itself.

Although not the first FTL jump the crew had made, there was no mistaking the tension in the command cabin. Earth was five light-years behind them. No cavalry if this went wrong.

"We're in the tunnel, Commander. All systems green," stated Lieutenant Carter from the co-pilot seat. "Next stop, Gliese 725."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Bilton said, "Good work, guys. You two take a break and I'll keep an eye on things."

He wondered what hyperspace really looked like beyond the screens. The *Nyx* was sealed tight, its viewports blacked out to prevent even a glimmer of light. No simulation ever matched the Human Eye Mark One, he thought. Yet even here, behind layers of steel and carbon, Bilton felt awe—and something else: the certainty that there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

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## **Approaching Gliese 725 system**

**16 December 2032 – 12:34 UTC**

Another shimmering portal appeared in the darkness of space, this time a vivid red, marking the arrival of the two human ships. Neither of the red dwarfs in the binary system generated enough light to appear as anything more than dots at this distance from the inner solar system. However, astronomers had long suspected hidden worlds here, so it was on the list as part of the milk run.

The crew smoothly checked the ship systems, looking for even the smallest issues or deviation from expected results. So far the ships had performed well, and the crew even better. Routine gave way to anomaly in an instant.

"Commander, I'm seeing something," Kelso said from Comms. "Not hyperspace, but the sensors say there's something unusual in the group of asteroids about 150 million kilometres away."

"Define unusual, Kelso," Bilton replied, biting his lip.

The forward display bloomed with a grainy feed from the long-range optics. Nestled in the middle was an angular shape. It didn't resemble a Volgran ship, but it certainly wasn't natural either.

"Damn, that's not ideal," he muttered. "And they're about eight light minutes away?"

"Yes, Sir. That's how long it'll take before we know if they've seen us."

"Alright, tie in the Eclipse. Let's see what they think," the Commander said.

"Aye, Sir," Kelso responded.

A click, then Jenkins' easy drawl filled the bridge. "What've we got, boss?"

"Unknown contact. Sending you the feed," Bilton replied.

"Thoughts, Carter?" Bilton asked, turning to his second in command.

"Seems we may have one of those no-win scenarios," Carter said. Her flawless English carried a hint of an American Midwestern accent, striking straight to the core of the problem. "What if they've seen us? How would they know?"

"Hmmm, bit of a quandary we've got here," Jenkins continued over the speakers. "The good news is they won't be able to see us optically, and presumably they won't have radar or computers. So the question is, did they see the hyperdrive tunnel?"

"We can wait another... six minutes... and see if they twitch," Carter said. "But that still doesn't answer the question. We'd have to wait a lot longer than that to be sure."

Bilton remained quiet as his team discussed the situation and possible solutions. Finally, he interrupted. "Okay, we're in no rush. Let's just stay put and wait a while. Kelso, keep an eye on the video feed."

"Yes, Sir!" the ensign responded, scrutinising his displays.

Time crept slowly forward with little to report. Displays and lights blinked. The ship creaked and popped softly under the faint sunlight. Atoms fizzed silently in the vacuum. Inside, every breath was measured.

"Sir!" Kelso called, turning to his superior officer. "It's moving! Bearing away from the cluster. Accelerating."

"Send the estimated vector up here. We'll plot a course," Bilton replied. "Eclipse, this is *Nyx*. Sending hyperspace course now. We'll try to cut them off." His fingers flew across the console, feeding escape geometry into the Nav AI.

Interstellar combat was less Star Wars and more chess and geometry. How could you track a foe when light was too slow to show you where they were? Hyperdrive and a very fast computer were part of the solution. Well-trained pilots were the other.

Both Lieutenant Carter and her counterpart aboard The *Eclipse* had trained hard to get into their coveted flight seats, and it showed. With some creative flying, the vessel tumbled into view, every turn blocked, cutting every escape route. Soon its silhouette was visible against the dim suns. Not Volgran. Not anything in the archives. Its lacquered wooden hull was scored and scratched, bound with metal hoops, and far smaller than anything seen before. Lights flickered from its hull—lanterns blinking in frantic rhythm.

"Sir, it's signalling," Kelso whispered, as though the thing could hear him.

"What's it saying?" Bilton's voice was low and tight.

Kelso stared at the crude flashes of light, AI translating. "Surrender. Request parley."

The silence on the bridge was heavier than any gravity well.

A chime sounded.

"Sir? I've got Lieutenant Commander Jenkins online. He wants to know what we do now," Kelso asked.

Bilton paused for a second before replying. "Tell him... I'll let him know."



## Chapter 10

### Internal Report – Project Ghostlight: Phase 1

**Date:** 29/12/2032

**Status:** TOP SECRET

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#### Overview

Project Ghostlight is the plan to build a reconnaissance and espionage arm of the United Earth Forces. Using small stealth-based craft with a small, high-performing crew, its role is to enter unknown or enemy space, conduct system-wide analysis, insert human assets where possible, and lay groundwork for human-aligned influence—be it political, social, or technological—in hostile environments. Phase 1 was the initial extrasolar testing, conducted in December of this year.

#### Phase 1 Review

Phase 1 involved the deployment of six ships—*Whisper*, *Duskfall*, *Nyx*, *Eclipse*, *Phantom*, and *Shadow*—all of the new 300-Class stealth reconnaissance design. All were identical and followed the same mission profile: visit two nearby star systems in pairs, analyse each, and return. The only difference was in the number of crew members per ship, to test procedures and operational efficiency. These shake-down cruises were intended to verify operational readiness under live conditions with minimal risk. Working in pairs was intended to minimise threats as much as possible.

#### Results

- **Mission A** (*Whisper* & *Duskfall*) assigned: Alpha Centauri and Sirius
- **Mission B** (*Nyx* & *Eclipse*) assigned: Barnard's Star and Gliese 725
- **Mission C** (*Phantom* & *Shadow*) assigned: Wolf 359 and Ross 128

Missions A and C passed without incident, with all data transmitted to Astrometrics at TODO. Mission B—initial review of Barnard's Star passed without incident. However, on arrival at Gliese 725, the pair's arrival was detected by an unknown vessel.

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#### Review of UEF *Nyx* and *Eclipse*

- **Captain Nyx:** Commander Eric F. Bilton
- **Co-pilot Nyx:** Lieutenant Jane Carter



- **Comms Nyx:** Ensign Joaquim Kelso Fernandes
- **Captain Eclipse:** Lieutenant Commander David P. Jenkins
- **Co-pilot Eclipse:** Lieutenant Mihai Popescu
- **Comms Eclipse:** Ensign Joseph A. Mwangi

Both ships and their crews were performing within expected parameters upon arrival at Gliese 725 at 12:34 UTC, 16/12/2032. Onboard sensors detected an unknown object approximately eight light-minutes away, within a cluster of asteroids. A brief visual review confirmed a vessel approximately 30 metres in length of unknown origin. Due to the distance, there was no immediate confirmation that the vessel had observed the arrival of the *Nyx* and *Eclipse*.

At 12:44 UTC, the unknown ship was seen to depart at high speed on a vector opposite to the UEF ships' entry trajectory. After a six-minute pursuit, the alien ship signalled its surrender. See attached log for full operational details.

### **Post-Interdiction**

The unknown ship was escorted to a previously uncharted planet orbiting Gliese 725, which was declared safe by its crew. The planet, now designated Gliese 725 A, is classified as Class L. A landing was made at a temperate equatorial location at 19:34 UTC, 17/12/2032. The landing zone was situated near several freshwater lakes and appears to have been regularly used by the alien vessel.

While the climate was cool and relatively harsh, a variety of fruits and vegetables were observed growing naturally. Samples were collected by the *Nyx* crew and forwarded to Unity-1 Station for analysis.

### **Initial Findings**

The alien crew identified themselves as the Nexlon, a minor spacefaring race under Volgran vassalage. Communications were aided by the presence of a few Molarians and shared use of Volgi, which appears to be the dominant lingua franca in this region of the galaxy.

There were 20 Nexlon aboard. Both the crew and their vessel appeared in poor condition. They were fatigued and malnourished, claiming to have been in space for over 12 months with only occasional service stops. Debriefings indicate the Nexlon are scavengers; when detected, they were attempting to mine a local asteroid using only rudimentary tools. Logs show low-level trade with outposts of unknown affiliation.

## Negotiations

Commander Bilton is to be commended for the successful negotiation and resolution of the encounter. It was determined that the Nexlon vessel could not be allowed to depart with even partial knowledge of the *Nyx* and *Eclipse*, whose technology and capabilities are significantly more advanced than those of known interstellar actors.

Additionally, the emergence of a new spacefaring race immediately after the disappearance of two Volgran fleets near Earth would have raised intolerable suspicion.

The Nexlon captain, *Key Vro Kal*, agreed to surrender his ship voluntarily in exchange for assistance and resupply. Emergency water and ration packs were provided as a gesture of goodwill, despite the potential for dietary incompatibilities.

Following full resupply, the alien ship—designated *rEUh-malda-Tor* (“*The Silver Pond*”)—was escorted to the Sol system, landing at Thule Station, Greenland on 22/12/2040. Flight telemetry attached.

## Post-Landing

After a standard decontamination and quarantine period, full crew debriefs were conducted. The crews of the *Nyx* and *Eclipse* remained composed and professional throughout, with medical and psychological reviews confirming all parameters within expected norms.

The Nexlon crew were interviewed at the Joint Allied Interrogation Center, Thule. Initial surprise was evident upon discovering Molarians and Kellians among the interrogation team. Despite early reservations, the Nexlon confirmed much of our pre-existing intelligence. All individuals were classified as low-risk and have since been transferred to Camp Gemini for further questioning and medical support. Their ship remains under containment.

Information concerning their homeworld, Naexla, has been added to this report.

## Summary

Phase 1 has been completed successfully. All ships and personnel operated within mission parameters. Only minor adjustments to equipment and protocols are recommended.

The interception of the Nexlon ship was both an unplanned success and a warning. Future missions should assume hostile or unpredictable contact is possible, even during reconnaissance. A Volgran encounter would likely not have ended peacefully.

In light of additional assets now available, recommend promoting reserve vessels *Nightfall*, *Twilight*, *Sunset*, and *Afterglow* to active operational status and initiating Phase 2 of Project Ghostlight.

/\*\* TOP SECRET \*\*/

## Chapter 11

### Classroom 202, Supreme Command HQ

Josh McFadden swept into the room with the confidence of a man who knew he was the expert — and everyone else knew it too.

“Good morning, class. Settle down. I hope you’ve enjoyed the holidays, because we’ve got a lot ahead of us.”

The twenty students straightened immediately. Some adjusted jackets; others shuffled tablets and notepads into place. These weren’t average recruits — each had been hand-picked by the Initiative from across the globe: young, brilliant, unorthodox. Experts in quantum engineering, linguistics, artificial intelligence, or high-gravity planetary architecture.

They were Earth’s best shot at out-thinking an empire.

“In case the holidays made you forget,” McFadden began, pacing in front of the big display screen, “you’re not here because you got good grades. You’re here because what you learn in this room may decide whether Earth survives or not.”

A flick of his hand tapped the wall console. The doors sealed with a hiss.

“Welcome to Astromechanics 101. Sounds innocuous, right? A bit of math, some drive equations, maybe a few orbital diagrams?” He smiled, wolf-like. “This class — and everything in it — is classified Top Secret. If I catch you discussing any of this with someone below your clearance level... well, best-case scenario: expulsion. Worst case? Court-martial. Are we clear?”

Nods. Silence.

“Good. Let’s get to work.” He pointed at a student in the second row. “You. Why are you here?”

The young man jumped slightly. His name tag read *Erikson, Sven*.

“Uhh... I like space? And stars? I got a message, and—”

McFadden was already swiping through a tablet. “Sven Erikson. Gothenburg. Math genius, graduated university at seventeen. Chess grandmaster at fifteen. But I’m guessing not much of a linguist?”

Sven looked down at his desk, blushing. “No, Mr. McFadden. Not really.”

“Don’t worry. First — call me Josh in the classroom. We’re not running a boot camp. Second — each of you has a specialty. But your comfort zone is not where the future is decided. You’ll be going into situations where your only backup is your own initiative and wits.”

He tapped again. The screen behind him came alive, revealing a rotating image of a Volgran officer — arms folded, eyes narrowed.

“Who wants to tell me about this charming fellow?”

A tentative hand rose. “Lucas,” Josh noted. “You’re our big bio brain. Go ahead.”

The student stood. “This appears to be a Volgran male, low-ranking crew based on insignia. They’re roughly 160 centimetres tall, heavily built — about 120 kilos on average. Their physiology suggests evolution from a bear-like ancestor — dense muscle mass, clawed digits, forward-angled knees for quadrupedal bursts. They’re significantly stronger than humans, but their night vision is poorer, and they appear to tire more easily. He’s male because we haven’t seen any females yet.”

“Nice summary. You get a gold star,” McFadden replied, flipping to a new slide showing musculature diagrams and bone density scans. “Physically, they’re tough. You do not want to get caught in close quarters. But they burn energy faster than we do, and they don’t see well in the dark. Rule of thumb: don’t be seen — or run fast.”

He flicked the screen again. A blue-green planet appeared.

“This is Thrankul — their homeworld. Slightly bigger and denser than Earth. Gravity’s a bit heavier. Landmass about 40%, with one megacontinent sprawled across the southern hemisphere. Two moons. The only habitable planetary body in the system — but there’s a barely Class-L planet further from their sun with extensive mining operations.”

The students watched, rapt.

“You’ve heard the stories,” McFadden continued. “How their ships are made of wood, how they use muskets, and don’t have electricity. They’ve barely industrialised, let alone digitised. So... Melissa, back row. Thoughts?”

The young Brazilian leaned forward. “It sounds like we have every advantage — technology, numbers, strategy. I mean, how do they even fight us? Missiles and AI would devastate them.”

McFadden smiled. “Exactly! They’re relics. Backward. Primitive.” He turned. “Mr. Li, your take?”

The Chinese physicist didn’t look up. “I don’t believe we have enough data to make that assumption.”

McFadden nodded. “Let’s add some data, then.”

The screen zoomed out. A vast star map bloomed into view. Dozens, then hundreds, of red dots spread across the galactic sector.

“Meet the Volgran Empire.”

A bright blue dot pulsed on the far left — Earth.

“Red: their territory. White: unclaimed or neutral systems. You’ll notice we’re the tiniest speck — here.” He zoomed in. Earth’s system barely registered.

He gestured to three coloured overlays. “I’ll summarise what we know. None of the Volgran crew were particularly keen to help, for obvious reasons, so we’ve gleaned what we can from logs and the other races aboard.

Bright red is the Core Worlds — thirty-seven systems, twenty-two billion Volgrani. This is the beating heart of the Empire: historical, political, industrial. They’ve been spacefaring for more than five hundred years.”

“Pink: New Territories. Under development, lighter population, but growing. These feed new resources into the Empire. Eventually, systems become developed enough to join the Core. Depending on your definition of ‘inhabited,’ there are between ten and twenty of these systems, with a total population under a billion.”

“Dark red?” The screen darkened ominously. “The conquered.”

There was a pause.

“These are inhabited by alien species. There are two categories: *Rajan* — ‘The Loyal’. These vassals pledged allegiance and kept their flags and anthems. Pay tribute, obey orders, and no one blows up your capital. There are about twenty Loyal systems. The Empire carefully extracts just enough to avoid rebellion — think of them as the Warsaw Pact of the stars.”

He flipped again.

“Then there’s *Rulora* — ‘The Vanquished’. Military occupation. No rights. No voice. No mercy. These systems are directly ruled by the Empire — often with extreme brutality.”

A hand rose. “Yes, Paula?” McFadden said.

The Irish student tilted her head. “Have any of them chosen to join?”

McFadden didn’t answer right away.

“No. That’s not how the Empire works. You don’t join the Volgrans. You survive them. They don’t negotiate. They conquer. You resist? You die. You surrender? You become useful. Maybe.”

Another tap. A diagram of Volgran government appeared — an imposing tree-like structure of power.

“At the top sits the Emperor with absolute authority. It’s hereditary, but challengers are allowed under very specific — and very dangerous — circumstances. It’s a patriarchal system. Women can’t rule. The current Emperor is considered ‘strong’ — multiple campaigns have been waged directly under his command. He surrounds himself with the Crescent Council — seven noble houses, each vying for favour, power, and territory.”

“In recent generations, Emperors have allowed the Council more autonomy — not just a rubber stamp anymore. They’re allowed their own fleets, but nothing that rivals the Imperial Armada. The Emperor keeps them in check by playing them off one another — rewarding loyalty, punishing overreach.”

McFadden stopped pacing. His tone softened.

“This is why diplomacy isn’t part of the Volgran makeup — weak Emperors don’t last long. This system has worked for them for centuries. Every part of it is designed to keep them unified, aggressive, and expanding. So yes — they may be centuries behind us technologically. But they’ve never needed to evolve. Not when everyone else was weaker.”

He checked the old analogue wall clock. 10:30.

“That’s time. Homework: 300-word summary on the political structure and power dynamics of the Volgran Empire. Be smart. Be clear. No waffling.”

The students filed out, murmuring quietly.

McFadden watched them go. He already knew which ones would crack — and which had a shot at surviving what came next.

Ghostlight didn’t need perfect minds. It needed resilient ones.

Earth could not afford passengers.

## Chapter 12

“Supreme Commander! A pleasure to see you again!”

Jonathon Murray crossed the conference room in a few quick strides, the kind of purposeful energy that seemed to draw everyone into his wake. He gripped Matthias Bosch’s hand in both of his, shaking it as if greeting a brother-in-arms. Behind him trailed a pack of junior engineers and assistants, juggling tablets and styluses, murmuring over schematics, their steps quick to keep pace—like the tail of a comet chasing its head.

“Please, Matthias, don’t make me sound like a politician,” Bosch said with a half-smile, his Austrian accent soft but precise.

“Isn’t that exactly what you are? Speeches, luncheons... cutting ribbons?” Murray winked, then turned to his entourage. “Everyone—this is the man who made all of this possible. Remember that face.”

He swept his arm toward the plate-glass wall. Beyond it, the cavernous assembly hall stretched for hundreds of metres, lit in an even blaze by overhead floodlights and a grid of LED panels. Three massive Protector-class cruisers sat along the production line, each in a different stage of completion. The first gleamed in gunmetal grey, ready for its final systems check. The second was swarmed by robotic welders and scaffold teams. The third was still a bare skeleton of ribs and struts.

“Alright, back to it, people! I want a full update on my desk by the end of the day.”

The group dispersed with a flurry of movement and clipped voices. Bosch watched them go, noting how Murray’s enthusiasm carried weight—his people wanted to impress him.

Murray was a man of contradictions. For someone of his qualifications, he was almost aggressively unremarkable—average height, average build, pale skin, brown hair cut short. He’d once joked that he could stand in a crowd at his own birthday party and no one would notice—until he opened his mouth. Then the room shifted toward him. The man was a born problem-solver; it was no wonder he’d been the near-unanimous choice to lead the Protector project.

“Jonny, how’s it going? Everything running smoothly?” Bosch asked.

“Well, boss, you know how it is—big departments, big personalities... and still no decent coffee.”

Bosch chuckled, slipping into his politician’s smile. “The coffee will be in the next budget.”

“In all seriousness,” Murray said, straightening in his chair, “the cruisers are in good shape. The design took longer than expected, but we’ve built something special—more capable than



the old Response-class, and informed by real-world testing, not just the simulations the admirals like to wave around.”

Bosch let him run with it.

“Now the line’s running, we can roll out one ship every two months. All the modules are finally coming in on schedule, and we snap them together like Lego. We’re past the teething problems.”

“Gut. And the first *Protector*?”

“Coincidentally...” Murray grinned, “she’ll be signed off at the end of the week. Ready to fly.”

“Yes, what a coincidence!” Bosch laughed.

----

The word *vast* hardly did justice to the factory floor. The Malaysian humidity pressed against the tinted skylights, losing a silent battle to the icy hum of environmental control units. Even so, Bosch caught the faint tang of ozone and hot metal as they stepped onto the assembly level.

Above them, gantry cranes hummed across their tracks. Sparks fell like tiny comets from welding rigs. Engineers shouted instructions in English, Malay, and Mandarin, their voices bouncing off the cavernous walls. A golf cart zipped past, two techs in safety harnesses carrying equipment for who knew what.

“She’s ready,” Murray said as they walked the length of the first hull. “Weapons systems calibrated, anti-grav drives stable, sensors all green. The only thing left is the FTL calibration—and that’s not something we want to do in atmosphere.”

“No, I imagine not. And the anti-grav sync issue?” Bosch asked, raising an eyebrow.

Murray winced. “Hey, we only destroyed two test sleds. But yes—it’s rock solid now. I could hang my mother-in-law on it.”

Inside, the ship was a study in controlled intimidation—polished deck plating, armoured hatches, bulkheads studded with interface panels and screens. Five years ago, this fusion of alien technology and Earth engineering would have been dismissed as science fiction. Now it was a tangible thing under Bosch’s fingertips.

“The Champion will be ready for handover in eight weeks,” Murray said, “and then another every two months. That’s flat-out for us right now. But...”

“But?” Bosch prompted.

Murray stopped in front of an unmarked panel door and tapped the access plate. “Something Jacob’s been working on. You’ll like it.”

----

If Murray looked anonymous outside his domain, Jacob Singer was the embodiment of the mad scientist stereotype—wild hair sticking out in improbable directions, thick glasses smudged with fingerprints, and a lab coat that seemed to be in a constant state of escape from his shoulders. His workspace was a chaotic sprawl: circuit boards jostled for space with coffee mugs, an alloy cylinder rested precariously on a stack of printed schematics, and three half-disassembled drones lay like mechanical carcasses across the back bench.

“Jacob! Sorry to interrupt,” Murray called, “but I’ve got an important guest. Show him the project.”

Singer frowned briefly, then lit up. “Commander Bosch, yes? Mr. Murray said you’d be coming. Come! Come!” He swept a mess of tools and papers aside, revealing a broad ceramic disc about the size of a manhole cover, studded with recessed ports and faint sensor lines.

“This,” Singer announced with the confidence of a man unveiling a miracle, “is RADD.”

“Rad?” Bosch repeated, deadpan. Dealing with scientists left him rapidly out of his depth.

“Remote Autonomous Defence Drone,” Jacob explained, not missing a beat. “Designed to be cheap, fast to produce, and easy to deploy.”

“Does it work?”

“Absolutely!” Singer snatched up a tablet, fingers flying. “We can operate it manually or let the AI handle its own targeting and manoeuvres. Watch.”

With a low hum, the disc lifted off the bench, stabilising in mid-air. It drifted forward, rotated in place, then zipped across the room to avoid a dangling power cable before returning to hover in front of Bosch.

“Impressive,” Bosch admitted. “And its purpose?”

“Modular design,” Singer said eagerly. “Reconnaissance package, missile mount, anti-grav motor with laser—swap them in minutes. We’ve got more variants on paper, but this is the baseline.”

Bosch folded his arms. “We already have military drones. They’re being upgraded even now. Why is this special?”

“They work,” Singer said, “but they’re expensive, and the manufacturers are... reluctant to lower their margins.”

Murray stepped in. “Tell him the number, Jacob.”

Singer’s grin widened. “We can build one a week, in-house... for five thousand dollars.”

Bosch’s eyes narrowed, his mind already turning over the implications. For a moment, the factory floor, the gleaming warships, and the constant hum of production faded to a distant buzz.

“Now that,” Bosch said quietly, “is interesting.”

## Chapter 13

### **Commando Training Centre Royal Marines, Lympstone, Devon — Annex “Z” (Zero-Gravity Operations Wing)**

The parade ground smelled faintly of resin and scorched polymer.

Where there had once been assault courses and mock-up urban blocks, there now stood a cavernous white-domed facility — new steel grafted to old brick. The Royal Marines called it *The Bubble*. Official paperwork listed it as the “Zero-Gravity Combat Simulation Dome, Annex Z.”

“Atten-shun! Captain on deck!”

Thirty of Britain’s best snapped to attention as Captain Tarrant strode into Prep Room One. The room echoed with the faint hiss of air scrubbers and the creak of armour plates as the Marines shifted slightly in their brand-new combat-suits.

“At ease. Morning, Sergeant. Ready to go?” Tarrant’s tone was easy, almost conversational.

“Aye, sir — we are. All ready for your pep talk,” grinned the affable Yorkshireman.

“Lovely stuff. I’m sure they’ll be all ears,” smiled Tarrant. He turned to the assembled ranks.

“Right, lads — let’s start at the beginning. I hear you’re the best we have. Time served. Multiple tours. Awards coming out of your ears. And because you’re the Royal Marines, that makes you the best in the world.”

He paused, letting the words sink in, watching the pride swell — pride in themselves, pride in their service.

“But now we’ve got a new challenge. Something we’re making up as we go along. And because we’re the best, you’re going to succeed. Through those doors, you’re going to learn how to fight — and win — in space, the most hostile environment you can imagine.

“Never mind the deserts, jungles, mountains and trenches — screw up up there...” He jabbed a finger upward for effect, “...and you’re dead in thirty seconds.”

The silence was immediate and heavy. He let it hang for a heartbeat before continuing.

“You’ve done your bit for King and Country. Now it’s time to save the world. We can’t let the Yanks have all the fun.”

He glanced sideways at Dryden.

“By the way, Sergeant — where’s your lieutenant?”

“Temporarily indisposed, sir,” replied Dryden, with the hint of a smirk.

“Indisposed, you say?” Tarrant’s eyebrows rose.

“Absolutely, sir. Shouldn’t be more than, say... ten minutes, I’d imagine. Shall I say you were looking for him?”

“Yes, please. But some things,” Tarrant said, striding off towards the equipment lockers, “shouldn’t be rushed.”

----

Lieutenant Lee Blackstone dashed across the courtyard towards the admin offices, cursing the gods of timing under his breath. The autumn wind coming off the River Exe cut through the narrow lanes between the buildings, carrying with it the faint tang of salt and machine oil from the docks.

Despite Captain Tarrant’s well-earned reputation for being firm but fair, Blackstone knew first impressions mattered. This wasn’t just another posting. This was Annex Z. This was the training ground for the men and women who had fought — and won — against the Volgrans at Anegada. Every step he took seemed to hammer the thought into his skull: *Don’t screw this up.*

The low, functional admin block stood in sharp contrast to the gleaming dome of The Bubble that loomed beyond it. Its white curve seemed to hover over the base like some grounded alien craft — fitting, given what they were training for inside.

“Good morning, sir!” chirped the Captain’s personal assistant as he entered the reception. She was sharp in uniform, eyes bright, the sort of relentlessly cheerful presence that could make even a Monday morning bearable.

“Please take a seat while I inform the Captain you’re here.”

Her name badge caught the sunlight as she passed him — *Private E. F. Lucas*. Always so relentlessly happy, Blackstone thought as he sat. *I wonder what the ‘E’ stands for. Probably something posh.*

She rapped smartly on the inner office door.

“Come on in, Lieutenant!” Tarrant’s voice boomed from within.

Blackstone straightened his tunic and stepped through. The Captain’s office was surprisingly ordinary — grey walls, a desk that had clearly seen better days, a bank of filing cabinets. It could have been an office in any dull government building... except for the crisp Union Flag hung behind the desk, the formal portrait of the King, and the faint smell of gun oil and ozone.

Captain Tarrant dominated the space. Tall, broad-shouldered, and immaculately turned out, he was the embodiment of the Royal Marine stereotype — except the glint in his eye suggested there was more calculation than bravado in his bearing. He wasn’t just muscle; he was a proven campaigner, a master planner, and a man with a memory like a steel trap. As the

officer in charge of Britain's "Space Marines," he ran Annex Z with the same precision as a warship's bridge.

"Lee," Tarrant said, gesturing to the chair opposite his desk, "how are you today? Settling in well?"

Blackstone sat, spine straight, aware that every word he spoke might be quietly judged.

"Yes, sir. It's... impressive — unlike any posting I've had before."

Tarrant's mouth quirked in what might have been a smile.

"Oh, it's exactly like other postings, Lieutenant. Only here, if you make a mistake, the vacuum gets you before the enemy does."

Blackstone gave a careful half-smile.

Tarrant leaned back in his chair.

"As Lieutenant of the platoon, you'll have all the usual responsibilities, but I'm especially interested in your continuous assessment of the men. This is new ground for all of us, and I need to know they're at one hundred percent — not just physically, but mentally. Out there, they'll have to stay cool under extreme pressure."

"Absolutely, sir. I'll keep on top of them."

"Good. The meet-and-greet with the Molarians is at oh-nine-hundred on Thursday. After that, we've got a couple of hours of tactical analysis and Q&A."

"I'm looking forward to it, sir. It'll be good to find out more about them."

"They're a good bunch," Tarrant said. "Smart, inquisitive. If they'd had the chance, they'd have been like us." His eyes flickered, just for a moment, with something Blackstone couldn't read.

"Any questions?"

"No, sir."

"Dismissed, Lieutenant."

Blackstone rose, snapped to attention, and left the office. *Meeting aliens!* he thought, almost giddy. *And not Star Trek extras in rubber suits, but honest-to-God beings from another world. Whatever next?*

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## **Briefing Room 2**

"Good morning, everyone." The small, pale alien stepped forward, hands clasped neatly at her midsection. Her voice was melodic but deliberate, as if each word was placed carefully on a shelf. "My name is Eli Whitaker-Jorell, and this is Rell Sarah Lura." She gestured to her

slightly taller, pale-eyed companion. “It is a delight to meet you. I apologise... in advance... for any mistakes in your language.”

“You already speak better English than Scouse here!” a voice called from somewhere in the back rank.

A ripple of laughter moved through the Marines. Even Tarrant allowed himself the ghost of a smile.

Eli’s mouth stretched into a grin that made more than one man shift in his seat — too many teeth, too symmetrical. “Thank you. We try to learn from our hosts.” Her head tilted slightly, an oddly birdlike motion. “We are from a planet called Molar, conquered by the Volgran Empire approximately one hundred Earth years ago. In many ways, it is like your world... but smaller, and far fewer of us. We did not have the technology you have. The Volgrans were too powerful. Since then, they have taken our resources, our people as slaves... controlled our lives.”

The Marines were silent now, watching the two delicate figures in their pale-grey outfits. Some scribbled notes in their pads; others exchanged glances.

“Today,” Eli continued, “we will tell you everything we can... and answer your questions.”

Her fingers danced briefly over a control pad. The big display screen at the front of the hall flickered to life with a series of still images.

“In comparison to us, the Volgran are huge... but perhaps you will think differently.”

From the second row, Sergeant Dryden’s eyes narrowed. He stood abruptly.

“Watson. With me.”

The burly Marine blinked. “Er—yes, Sarge.” He rose reluctantly, following Dryden out through the side door.

Eli pointed to the changing images on the screen. “This is a Volgran soldier. Quite low rank, but typical. This... is who you will face in combat.”

Through the thin walls, muffled thumps and dragging noises began filtering in.

“By your standards, they are not tall — perhaps one hundred sixty of your metric centimetres. But they are extremely strong, with powerful upper bodies. They also run very fast.”

More noises from outside.

“Jesus, Sarge,” came a muffled voice. “It smells like a wet dog.”

“Did I ask for your opinion on the olfactory elegance of our friend here? No, I did not. Now put your back into it before I have you running ten clicks before breakfast.”

Eli continued as though nothing were amiss. “In a fight, it will be... very hard to win. We will help you.”

The doors finally banged open and Private Watson staggered in backwards, his boots skidding on the polished floor. Dryden followed, red-faced, with his shoulder wedged under the weight of what they carried.

It wasn't just a dummy. It was a presence.

The full-size Volgran replica loomed over the front row, its segmented armour catching the light in dull bronze plates. Thick shoulders sloped forward like those of a predatory animal, the helmet's narrow visor a black slash above a blunt snout. The smell of cured leather, oil, and something faintly animal clung to it.

Eli's unsettling smile returned. "Good. We made a model for you."

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Rell stepped forward, his posture more hesitant than Eli's. His eyes — large and blue as the sky — flicked to the towering Volgrani model before settling on the Marines.

"We lived on a Volgran warship," he began, voice low but steady, "a vessel they called *The Silver Claw*. For five years, we were part of its crew... though to them, we were valueless."

The word hung in the air, heavier than any insult.

"We — and the others captured from my world — did the jobs they considered beneath them. We scrubbed the decking, emptied the latrine pots, carried their food. We cleaned their armour after battle. We saw... things."

He gestured again to the armoured replica, and for a moment his composure cracked — his fingers curled involuntarily, as if resisting an old reflex to flinch.

"Even now, looking at this, I feel the fear in my chest. You have treated us as equals, something we never thought we would feel again. But together... there is hope. Hope for you... and for Molar."

Eli's voice took over, smoother, more deliberate.

"They have never been beaten — so their stories say. For hundreds of your years, they have only known success. This makes them... blind."

One of the younger Marines raised a hand. "Blind how, ma'am?"

"They cannot imagine defeat," Eli replied without missing a beat. "They will only follow orders. They do not question. Initiative is... alien to them. Order and hierarchy are everything. If the chain of command breaks, they do not know what to do. They are arrogant, and cannot imagine people like you."

Another Marine — older, his face a patchwork of past scars — leaned forward. "So what, we just knock off the boss and they'll fold?"



Rell's expression tightened. "If only it were that simple. A Volgran commander will be surrounded by guards, and those guards will die before allowing harm to come to him. But without leadership, yes... they hesitate. That hesitation is your weapon."

Sergeant Dryden gave a grunt of approval. "So... they're big, they're strong, they stink, and they're thick as two short planks. Sounds like half my recruits."

A ripple of laughter moved through the room, but Eli didn't smile this time.

"Do not underestimate them, for they have many leaders, many ships, and many worlds."

An uncomfortable silence fell as the scale of their challenge was shown.

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The platoon scraped chairs back into place and filed out of the briefing room in that loose, post-meeting shuffle that Marines perfected — not quite a parade, but not far off it.

Tarrant watched them go with quiet satisfaction. The session had gone well; the men had treated the Molarian visitors with the respect due to allies, while showing just enough healthy scepticism to reassure him they weren't swallowing every word uncritically. Their questions had been sharp, relevant. Good.

He spotted Lieutenant Blackstone at the far side of the room and beckoned him over, striding toward the two aliens.

"Eli, Rell," Tarrant greeted warmly, "many thanks for this morning. It's good to see you both again."

"It is our pleasure, Captain," Eli replied, her tone formal but her expression bright. "We are thankful to... repay you for your kindness to us."

He remembered the first time he'd met them — the chaotic boarding action aboard *The Silver Claw*, the shouts over the comms, the stink of the alien ship and blood in the air. He and his men had cut the locks on the Molarian holding bay and found them there: small, pale, exhausted... but alive. Since then, he'd kept tabs on their progress as they integrated with the multinational forces now overseeing alien presence on Earth.

"Right," Tarrant continued, turning to his junior officer. "This is Lieutenant Lee Blackstone — he's commanding the platoon, and will no doubt be all ears."

Rell tilted his head. "All... ears? Is his species different to other humans?"

Tarrant laughed, clapping Blackstone on the shoulder as the younger man reddened. "No, Rell, sorry. Just an expression. Means he'll be very keen to work with you."

"I see. That is less... surprising," Rell replied gravely.

"Well, I'll leave you three to it," Tarrant said, giving Blackstone another encouraging pat. "Paperwork and meetings for me today. But we'll speak again soon."

“Goodbye, and thank you once again, Captain,” Rell replied, while Eli inclined her head in a small, formal bow.

Devon was hardly the French Riviera, but as Tarrant stepped out into the courtyard, the spring sunshine had fought its way through the cloud cover, and he decided to make the most of it. He slowed his pace for a moment, soaking in the warmth.

Beyond the courtyard, the gleaming white curve of *The Bubble* rose against the rolling green of the Devon countryside — 21st-century architecture set like a pearl in an ancient setting. For a brief moment, he allowed himself the view. Then, with a sigh, he turned toward his government-grey office and the day’s stack of dull-but-essential tasks.

## Chapter 14

### **Imperial Dispatch: Report to Baron Vellak of House Drellik**

**From:** Administrator Tirxen Vale, Overseer of Vassal Records

**Location:** Secondary Offices, Kalimar Colonial Bureau – Sector Delta

**Date:** 38th Cycle of the Crescent Moon, Imperial Year 943

**Subject:** Minor Disturbances Reported on Vassal Worlds Molar, Kellia, and Aleria

Most Esteemed Baron Vellak,

By your leave, I submit the following compiled summary from recent administrative returns from our provincial governors across three vassal worlds: Molar, Kellia, and Aleria.

1. Molar – Reports indicate several tribal elders have ceased their regular tax tributes of grain and livestock. While their excuse pertains to seasonal shortages, multiple runners intercepted by our watchwardens suggest unusual gatherings in the hills near the Southern Provinces. Our local governor, Lord Shar Grol, has requested an additional garrison of watchmen, though he assures us there is “nothing more than peasant superstition and rustler mischief.”
2. Kellia – Slightly more troubling, our monitors report that several provincial militias have begun drilling with greater frequency than allowed by vassal law. These militias were long ago disbanded following submission to our glorious Emperor, but it appears they have reconstituted under the guise of “cultural revival societies.” Governor Prell Marn suggests these may be driven by dissident elements, possibly remnants of the pre-joining nobility. He has requested permission to investigate discreetly, fearing overt actions may cause unrest.
3. Aleria – Most recently, two previously recorded subjects reappeared in the company of beings of unknown species. Descriptions are vague, but they do not match known planetary stocks. These foreigners have engaged in low-level proselytising and the dissemination of strange ideas — mentioning “paths among stars” and “distant brethren.”

Of particular note is a certain Tollun, who has begun attracting rural gatherings. One informant reports he invoked the phrase “born to be free,” though context is unclear.

**Recommendation:** Place Shadow Auditors among the monastic wine routes. Delay formal action until their full moon report.

While none of these incidents individually warrant immediate military escalation, I humbly suggest permission be granted for limited investigative detachments on all three worlds. These would be staffed with loyal veterans and accompanied by judicial scribes to assess

whether corrective taxation, indenture, or symbolic punishment might forestall further decay in discipline.

I remain, as ever, your obedient and watchful servant.

**Signed,**

Administrator Tirxen Vale

Overseer, Colonial Affairs – Sector Delta

Volgran Imperial Bureau

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### **Response from Baron Vellak**

*Scrawled in ink at the bottom of the parchment, barely legible:*

“Vale — your report is received.

These matters — whispers, itinerant labourers, and agricultural oddities — appear more suited to your local constables and clerks than to my direct concern. It is not the first time former stock has returned speaking nonsense; if they inspire rebellion, see that it is handled swiftly and quietly.

Regarding Kellia and Molar: if the crops grow and the workers are content enough to stay in the fields, then I see no crisis. Let the peasants dig however they wish, provided the quotas remain met.

As for Aleria: I am unconvinced that rustic gatherings or obscure foreigners constitute a threat. Assign a Watchman or two, if you must, and discourage any sermons that sound too clever.

Do what you must, but keep costs down. I will not ask the Duke for more ships over farm gossip. Use what you have. I expect quiet before the next Crescent Council.

I expect the autumn tithes to arrive without delay.”

## Chapter 15

### UEF *Nyx* – HD 117939 System

The star at the heart of the Orsolan system burned brightly at the centre of the main display. Known to human astronomers as HD 117939, it was a close match to Earth's sun and had long been suspected of hosting habitable planets. That, however, wasn't why *Nyx* was here.

Slipping cautiously through the darkness toward the warmth of the inner system, *Nyx* silently probed, searching for anomalies — be they friendly, hostile, or natural. So far, nothing had disturbed the calm aboard.

Commander Eric Bilton stood alongside his new Science Officer, reviewing the steady stream of data scrolling across the navigation console. Now that the shakedown cruises were complete, all the 300-Class ships were fully crewed, far more capable, and ready for real missions.

"Looks like there's a few sights to see... three gas giants out here. What about the inner planets?" Bilton asked.

"We're still too far out to get much detail, sir," Lieutenant Tkachenko replied. "But we've spotted three potentials." He pointed at the system map. "One's pretty close to the star, so probably not a good choice. But here, and here... these look like better options."

"Good work, Chek. Send the closest to Carter and we'll take a look." Bilton turned to the communications station. "Anything out there, Fernandes?"

"No, sir. Real tranquil at the moment," the ensign replied, eyes still locked on his displays.

"Carter!" Bilton called to the pilot on the Command Deck. "We're good to go — jump when ready!"

Despite the astonishing achievement of faster-than-light travel, a hundred light-years from home, military routine had reduced it to something almost mundane. The crew decided where to go, and the computers handled the hard part. Still, it was this technological magic that humans hoped would give them an edge in their struggle against the Volgrans.

Earth's most distant citizens arrived at the third inner planet after an uneventful thirty minutes. From orbit, Orsolan-C was a rusty tan world, perhaps 30% the size of Earth.

"Sir, sensor data coming in now," Tkachenko reported. "Diameter approximately 4,200 kilometres. Thin atmosphere... one moment..." The ship's sensors swept the surface for more information. "Yes, atmosphere only about 10% of Earth's pressure. Average surface temperature minus 25 degrees Celsius."

"Probably not inhabited, then?" Carter asked.

“No — not unless we start digging for microbes. No sign of any colonies, either. Could be something small, but nothing we can spot from here,” Tkachenko replied.

“Alright then. Stick a flag in it, Carter, and we’ll leave it for the scientists to argue over its name,” Bilton decided. “Head for the next one.”

“Aye, sir. Hopefully we’ll have better luck there,” she replied.

After logging the planet into the growing database, Carter locked in the coordinates for their second choice — wondering what they might find next.

Stunned silence filled the cabin of Nyx as the forward cameras lit up the screens with the planet below. Bathed in sunlight and lying deep within the habitable zone, Orsolan-B was no rumour or wild goose chase.

— — —

## **Private Location, Reykjavik, Iceland**

**11 July 2033 – 14:01 UTC**

Matthias Bosch once again stood at the head of the obsidian table, alone with his thoughts. The year had passed quickly — marked by great successes tempered by the caution required to keep Earth safe. Yet here they were again: same room, same leaders, same privacy... different time.

There was no Icelandic chill this time — another “unseasonal” heatwave — only the coolness of air-conditioning and iced water. Fumbling with the remote control, the black screen came to life, displaying the stylised TODO logo. TODO — never would the need for everyone to pull together be greater than today.

Turning back towards the table, he observed in silence as the world leaders took their seats: China, the USA, the EU, and others, each representing vast portions of the world’s industry, economy, and population. This was where decisions were truly made — not in the talking shop of the UN, nor in the promises of TODO membership. The door closed softly behind the last of the departing staff.

It was the French President, Durand, who spoke first.

“Bonjour, and thank you for the invitation to this soirée, Monsieur Bosch. But the atmosphere feels a little different today, non?”

“Have we been invited to a funeral, Matthias? It certainly feels like it,” followed President Lake.

The Supreme Commander stood erect, arms behind his back, gathering his thoughts.

“Apologies, my friends. The original plan for today was a straightforward update after the last twelve months. Project Ghostlight has been successful in meeting potential allies — we know far more without arousing Volgran suspicion. Also, SolNet is now fully online. All of these

reports are available to your attachés for review. However, something extremely troubling has come up, so the previous agenda is — how do you say? — out the window.”

He paused again, looking around the table.

With the Supreme Commander appearing unusually subdued, EU President Kowalska looked to the French and British leaders before replying.

“That sounds quite ominous. Please continue.”

Bosch mentally shook himself before continuing. The familiar map of the Volgran Empire and surrounding systems appeared on screen.

“Ever since the initial invasion, we’ve been working with other aliens — the slaves — aboard Volgran ships. At first they were terrified of us, convinced the Volgrans would return and finish the job properly. Over time, though, we built a good understanding, and they came to trust us. They proved invaluable during later interrogations and in integrating the new aliens we encountered. But they still speak of ‘the wrath from the skies’ — something they are genuinely frightened of. And it makes sense — their planets had no space travel and were all invaded by aliens with overwhelming power.”

“But,” interrupted the British Prime Minister, “you think there’s more to it than that?”

He paused again. The screen zoomed into the upper right of the red zones.

“Yes, we did. So we went through the logs and interviewed all the aliens again. We wanted every scrap of intelligence — anything to get inside the minds of the Volgrans. Once we had what we could, we sent out the *Nyx* on what might have been a wild goose chase.”

“Seems like Commander Bilton is rapidly turning into our go-to team. I’m guessing they found something,” quipped Llewellyn.

“They certainly did,” Bosch replied, smiling grimly. The screen updated once again, zooming in on a white star system completely surrounded by the red of Volgran space.

“This is system HD 117939, known as Orsolan. Its star is very similar to ours, and the system is fairly unremarkable — some gas giants, asteroid belts, and three rocky inner planets, one of which lies in the habitable zone. The *Nyx* was sent here as part of the mission.”

The display changed to show Orsolan-B.

“This is what they found just over three weeks ago.”

The planet filling the screen was nothing like the politicians had imagined — surrounded by rings of rocky debris, with a massive crater cutting deep into its magma. Something catastrophic had clearly happened.

Pointing at the image, Bosch continued,

“Orsolan-B was an Earth-like planet, but we know almost nothing about its civilisation — only that it fought some kind of war with the Volgran Empire about 150 years ago. Our information is limited.”

“Dear God,” exclaimed Lake. “How could they have done this? The planet... it’s in pieces... They don’t have the technology, surely?”

“The *Nyx*’s readings have been analysed, and it’s completely plausible. You can see the crater is enormous — about 6,000 kilometres across — which suggests a colossal impact that shattered the crust and expelled most of the atmosphere and oceans. This wasn’t a ‘Death Star’ — just good old-fashioned relativistic energy. Take an iron asteroid, accelerate it fast enough, and this is the result.”

His words were met with sombre silence, the implications almost too immense to grasp.

“But this isn’t a smoking gun. There’s no evidence directly linking the Volgran Empire — so it could have been something else.” The screen changed again.

“However, HD 63765 is.” Bosch pointed to another white star.

“You can see this system lies mostly within the Core Worlds but borders several vassal systems. That’s no coincidence.”

The map shifted again, now dated Earth Date 01/01/1989, with a pale green zone covering HD 63765 and neighbouring systems, labelled *The Commonwealth of Merendi*.

“These systems maintained a defensive alliance for a long time, trying to remain neutral amid Volgran expansion. Ultimately, war broke out about forty years ago. We didn’t initially have full details, but some of the aliens were able to provide fragments of information. It seems they fared well against the Volgrans, repelling multiple invasion attempts. The key was HD 63765 — or Yalana — the most advanced and populous of them all. Eventually, the Volgran offered a ceasefire and peace treaty... but something went wrong. Yalana was heavily attacked, and the war ended.”

“Expansionist empire conquers its neighbours — that’s nothing new,” remarked Prime Minister Rao. “We’ve seen it many times before here on Earth.”

“We certainly have,” Bosch agreed, “but we have rules about how we fight — we’ve learned the difference between right and wrong. More or less.”

Some leaders shifted awkwardly in their seats, but the silence remained.

“After the *Nyx* finished at Orsolan, they had two more systems to visit. Nothing came of the first, but we wanted to know what happened to Yalana — and why it hadn’t been absorbed into the Empire like the other vassals.”

The screen now showed a blue-green world.

“This is Yalana-B, a type-M world, and the home of the Yalani — a humanoid alien race not unlike us. The reason they aren’t part of the Empire is because... they don’t exist anymore. The Volgrans wiped them out.”

“What? All of them?” gasped President Kowalska.

“You can see the planet appears normal at first glance — but here are some closer images.”



The display cycled through photographs showing the surface was far from pristine.

“The *Nyx*’s surveys revealed thousands of craters — recent ones — far more than statistically possible. There’s no evidence of anything larger than small trees, almost no animal life on land or in the sea. The place has been scrubbed clean of life.”. Bosch’s expression darkened. The room fell silent, everyone absorbing the scale of the destruction.

Bosch lingered on an image of a small group of islands near the southern pole.

“Except here. They found a few survivors. The *Nyx* terrified them at first, but after we made it clear the Volgrans were no friends of Earth, they opened up a little. They are the last remnants of the Yalani civilisation — those who survived the attack or were off-world at the time.

Around 3,000 remain, with a few more slipping past Volgran quarantine from time to time.”

“One of the elders claimed to have taken part in the peace negotiations forty years ago. His account is largely corroborated by others. He wanted to tell us what happened — so the betrayal would not be forgotten. And what a story it was.”

---

### **Recording: Elder Miliato**

The recording began with the hiss of static, then resolved into a dimly lit room — the wooden walls were decorated with tattered flags and banners. The date stamp read *20/05/2033, 14:22 UTC*.

Commander Eric Bilton sat opposite an elderly Yalani male, the alien’s skin a pale grey with faint lavender undertones. Age spots marbled his cheeks. The translation AI labelled him Elder Miliato.

Bilton leaned forward. “For the record, can you confirm your name, your role during the Volgran War, and the events you wish to recount?”

Miliato gave a faint nod, his voice soft but resonant in the AI’s translation. “Yes, human. I will tell you what I remember. But... I warn you — memory is both a gift and a curse.”

---

“When the High Council announced the ceasefire, the celebrations lasted a week. Years of war, finally over—and for the first time in so long, we dared to hope again. We’d faced everything the Volgrans threw at us and survived, side by side with our allies.”

The Yalani were tall, slim humanoids, much like most of the other species humanity had met so far. Elder Miliato was smaller—whether by nature or from the weight that had bent his shoulders over the decades, it was hard to tell. He claimed to be sixty-five years old, but his lined grey skin and slow, deliberate movements could have been from a man who had lived far longer.

“I was just a junior military attaché when the war began,” he said, voice thick with memory. “But I earned my medals defending my world. We bloodied the Volgrans more than once, kept

them from gaining more than a toehold on our soil. We expected the peace to be fair—equal terms, hard-won.” His blue-grey eyes glistened.

“We agreed to let a single ship from a friendly nation bring the Volgran negotiators to us, and host the talks on board. I remember every detail as if it happened this morning—our First Minister, our generals... we walked into that chamber as equals. You could feel our pride in the air... but their arrogance and disdain was thicker still. It was all a trick, of course.”

He stopped, drawing a wheezing breath, and waved away a young woman who fussed around him—likely a granddaughter—before continuing.

“There was a long wooden table by a glass wall. From there we could see our world hanging below us, and half the solar system beyond. I’d never been aboard such a grand vessel; our own ships were built for function, short-range, with no room for ornament. This was my first taste of politics.” A faint smile touched his lips, ancient pride still visible.

“It was the light that caught my eye first. Our fleet was in a defensive ring around Yalana—close, but not too close—and one ship suddenly flared. I watched in disbelief as it split in two. Then another, and another, until almost all were gone. But the fleet wasn’t the real target—they were just collateral. We could see the weapon strikes hitting the planet too, over and over.”

He looked up sharply. “Have you heard them laugh, human? That harsh, grating rasp?” Shaken heads answered him.

“No matter. That’s what we heard as it happened,” he said bitterly. “A squad of their guards came in, claiming to ‘ensure the safety’ of the talks. Our supposed neutral host was just one of their vassals, bullied into playing the part. We were prisoners, forced to watch our home burn.”. Anger bubbling to the surface, the thin figure struggled forward.

“We were fools—naïve and trusting. They’d slipped an entire fleet past us, timing its arrival with that diplomatic ship so we wouldn’t detect them. Then they threw rocks—asteroids—down on us. Not to destroy the planet, no... just us. The planet heals. But we are all that’s left of five hundred million souls. I have thought about that day every week since. Was standing up to them worth our destruction? My heart says no... but my pride still whispers yes.”

Miliato sagged back into his bedding, drained.

Commander Bilton laid a hand on his shoulder, then faced the camera.

“Commander Eric Bilton, reporting at 16:48 UTC, 20 May 2033. This concludes the interview with Elder Miliato on planet Yalana, system HD 63765. Returning to ship. Out.”

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The video ended, the screen fading to black. In the silence that followed, the AI-enhanced translation still seemed to hang in the air like smoke.

Bosch lowered himself into the chair at the head of the table and resumed, his tone grim. “The *Nyx* conducted additional interviews and a full orbital scan over two days before departing for Earth. Everything corroborates Elder Miliato’s account — an asteroid bombardment. Thousands of craters across every island and continent, but no single massive strike like Orsolan. They used smaller asteroids — no bigger than a hundred metres each. The message was clear: submit or die.”

“Good God,” Premier Chen breathed. “That’s genocide.”

“Yes. The Volgrans exterminated almost everyone, then declared a quarantine. Likely to claim the planet later. After this, every other Commonwealth member surrendered, and they’ve been under occupation ever since. Better to live on their knees than be wiped out.”

The Supreme Commander paused, letting the weight of that settle. Bosch’s jaw tightened. The room remained silent, the enormity pressing down on every leader.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is our reality. We believed our technology, our resolve, and a fair fight would be enough. But the Volgrans don’t seek fair fights. They don’t need cutting-edge weapons to destroy civilisations — they have the numbers, the supply chains, and the discipline to impose their will. We must be ready. They will return.”

Llewellyn leaned forward. “Matthias... what exactly are you asking for?”

Bosch’s eyes swept the room. “Earth needs to move to a war footing. Increase our defences. Expand the fleet. The public must play their part. Right now, we’ve downplayed the threat — perhaps too much.”

The reaction was immediate.

President Lake spoke first. “Do you understand the implications? Panic. Civil unrest. Resistance to change. Most people saw a handful of wooden ships years ago, and now you expect them to believe this is an existential threat?”

Durand nodded. “We live in an age of ‘alternative facts.’ Mobilisation will bring economic strain, political backlash... but this evidence is compelling.”

Bosch’s voice was steady. “I understand your doubts — spoken and unspoken. But the Volgrans have thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of ships. We have fewer than thirty. We can’t defend against a massed or dispersed attack.”

He let the silence linger before pressing on.

“We need to leverage our biggest advantage — industry. They take over a year to build one mainline warship — a month for a small flyer. We will turn out one of the new gravitic drones in days. How many assembly lines could we run simultaneously? The same with our new

cruisers. But we must start now — before it's too late. We need to stop building flying cars and toys. We need to spend our money on defending ourselves, not on sports teams."

President Kowalska began, "We'll need close coordination, but it seems we have—"

A sharp knock interrupted her. The door swung open. Julia Takashima, Bosch's assistant, stood in the doorway, her face ashen.

"I'm sorry... there's a Priority One message from the *Duskfall*," she stammered.

Chen's head snapped up. "The *Duskfall*? What is it?" The ship carried a large number of Chinese nationals.

Julia swallowed hard. "Volgran fleet sighted at Point Alpha. Upwards of fifty ships."

Her voice dropped to almost a whisper.

"They're coming."

*Pathways Through the Dark Sky* is the story of humanity's first step into an unknown and hostile galaxy.

Part two coming in early 2026!