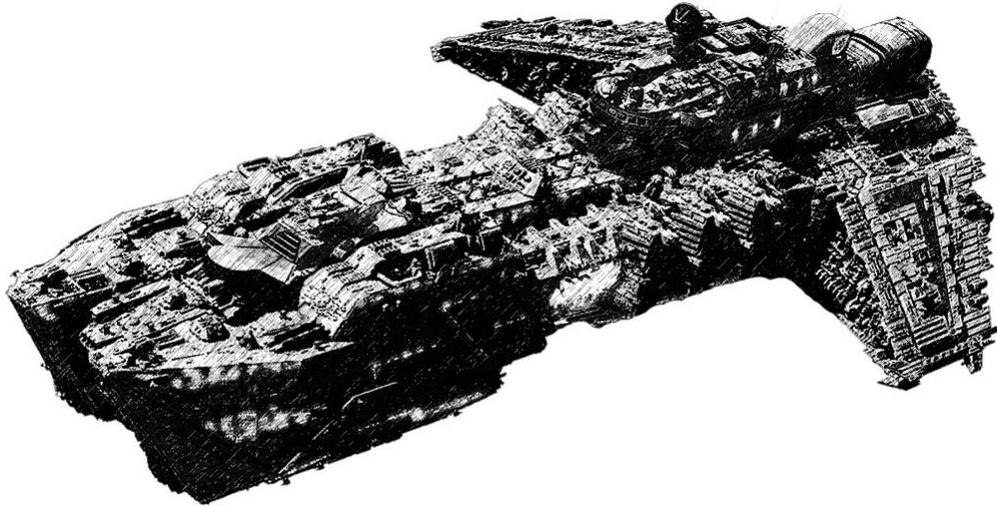


## Chapter 20



One week later . . .

Captain Loba Caldin paced up and down the bridge of the *Intrepid*, passing back and forth in front of the crew stations and the bridge viewports. Every now and then one of her officers would look up from what they were doing and cast her a worried glance. She could read their minds. They were wondering if their captain had gone space sick already.

But she wasn't skiffy from spending too much time cooped up in space. She was worrying endlessly over a question which had no obvious answer. How had they ended up stranded in a gravity field if their SLS fail-safes were working flawlessly? There were only two possible answers to that question, but neither one of them made any sense. Either the fail-safes had stopped working temporarily at precisely the wrong moment, or else the gravity field hadn't existed until they'd already flown into it. With respect to the space-time continuum, the latter option was impossible, and the former was just stupid. No one was that unlucky.

So what had happened?

Caldin's thoughts were interrupted by a hand landing on her shoulder. "Ma'am . . ."

She turned to find her friend and lover, Corpsman Terl, standing behind her, regarding her with a worried frown. "Not now, corpsman," she said to forestall his concerns.

"Ma'am, with respect, you need a break. You've been on your feet all day. You even skipped lunch. The crew is worried about you—I'm worried about you," he added in a gentler voice.

Caldin's eyes skipped from Terl's handsome face down to his broad chest and chiseled arms. She could think of one thing worth leaving the bridge for, and it wasn't a bad idea for dealing with her stress and frustration, either. She was just about to concede to his suggestion that she take some down time when Lieutenant Esayla Carvon's voice cut into her musings—

"I don't believe this . . . contact!"

"What are we looking at?" Caldin asked as she ran to the gravidar station.

"Target de-cloaking at K-35-12-72—just 357 klicks out!"

"*De-cloaking?*" Caldin shook her head. "Double check that scan, Lieutenant!"

They'd been followed. Caldin wasn't sure how that was possible, but she didn't have time to worry about *how* it had happened—only what she was going to do about it.

"The scan is accurate, ma'am! Contact confirmed."

"Sythians! Red alert!"

Ambient lighting dimmed to a bloody red, and the red alert siren blared a few times to emphasize the point.

"I don't think they're Sythians," Esayla said slowly.

"Why not?"

"The sensor profile is not suggestive of known Sythian hull types. It has too many sharp angles."

"Yet it has a cloaking device, and we only developed that tech recently. Are you trying to tell me the admiral sent another mission out here and they ended up stuck in exactly the same place as us?"

Esayla shook her head. "No, ma'am; that would be highly improbable."

"The only way anyone could have found us here is if they were around to see us jump. That means they had to have come from Ikara with us. Get me a visual," Caldin demanded.

"The nebula is blocking our optics, but I can have the computer generate a model from sensor readings."

"Do it." Caldin frowned, her head spinning. No ship could drop out of superluminal space at speed, so the mysterious contact had to have been following them for quite some time without their knowledge.

A hologram of the ship in question appeared projected over the main viewport. Caldin's eyes tracked over the shaded model of the warship from stem to stern. As Esayla had said, the ship looked more human than anything else—made up of hard angles and geometric shapes rather than the organic lines and curves which Sythians preferred. The broad, flat deck on top of the ship looked like it might serve as some type of landing field in atmosphere for "hot" landings and non-vertical take-offs. That led Caldin to believe that the warship had been designed with planetary defense in mind. A

quick look at the scale markings around the rendering revealed that the ship wasn't much larger than the *Intrepid*, at just 302 meters long and approximately 21 decks high.

"What class of ship is that?" Caldin asked.

"I don't know. It's not in our databanks," Esayla replied. "Maybe some type of cruiser?"

"Corpsman—" Caldin began, looking away from the hologram to find Terl, whom she had employed as her comm officer.

"Yes, Captain?" he replied. He was already seated at his control console.

"Hail them for us. I want to know who they are and why they followed us."

"Yes, ma'am."

Caldin waited impatiently for Terl to reply, but before he could, the bridge speakers let out a sharp squeal of protest. Then came a deep, gravelly voice, which said, "Cancel your ship's momentum and lower your shields. We are coming aboard."

Caldin did a double take. "Who is this?" she demanded.

"I haven't established a connection yet. They can't hear you. . . ." Terl said from the comms station, sounding bewildered.

"Then how are they communicating with us?"

"I don't know! They're overriding our gateways."

The gravelly voice returned. "You have 30 seconds to comply."

This time Caldin noted the strange accent which accompanied the voice. The deliberate way the man spoke told her that either he was slow-witted or Versal was not his first language. She guessed the latter, but he would have to be from one of the outlier worlds in the old Imperium for that to be the case, and that raised the question of how it was that they had a cloaking device. Cloaking tech had only recently been developed by humanity, and then only because of their alliance with the Gors.

"Helm—full speed ahead; let's outrun them if we can."

"I don't think that's going to be possible," Esayla said.

"Why not?" Caldin asked, hurrying down to the gravidar station.

Esayla pointed to the grid rising out of the left side of her control station. She had toggled a red vector to indicate the enemy ship's heading, velocity, and acceleration, as well as a green one to indicate their own. The two heading vectors were running parallel to one another, and the enemy ship was just above and behind theirs on the grid. Running below each vector line were two numbers. The first was velocity as a fraction of the speed of light, while the second number was acceleration in KAPS. The enemy ship's acceleration was what really caught Caldin's eye. It was accelerating at 150 KAPS—approximately 150 meters per second squared. No human capital-class ship in existence had acceleration like that.

"Are you sure those readings are accurate?" Caldin asked, her gaze now turning to look at the *Intrepid's* speed and acceleration so she could calculate the difference. The

enemy was gaining on them by one klick every second, with that rate increasing by 75 meters per second.

"Sensors are working fine, ma'am," Esayla replied.

"How is that possible?"

Esayla shook her head.

A cold chill crept down Captain Caldin's spine and she called out to her engineer, "Delayn, I want our crew out of stasis—now!"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

The bridge speakers crackled and the gravelly voice was back. "You are out of time. I am disappointed in you."

"What do they think they're going to do? We're travelling through a nebula at one tenth the speed of light. Energy weapons will refract and dissipate at anything but point-blank range, and there's no warhead in existence with shields strong enough to survive the frictional force at these speeds."

"Maybe they're going to wait until they can get up to point-blank range?" Esayla suggested.

"Maybe," Caldin conceded, eyeing the enemy contact on the grid. They were still 185 kilometers out, but gaining fast. "Delayn, is our crew awake yet?"

"They will be in just a few more minutes."

"We don't have a few more minutes!"

Suddenly, the *Intrepid* shuddered and the sound in space simulator (SISS) produced a sharp hiss as whatever it was hit their shields.

"Aft shields at 85%—equalizing," Delayn reported.

"What the frek was that?" Caldin demanded.

The ship shuddered again and another hiss came from their shields. "Seventy percent!"

"Fire back!"

"With what?" the weapons chief asked. "They're too far out of range!"

"Then how are they shooting us?"

The deck shuddered again.

"Shields at 64%!"

Caldin turned away from the gravidar station and sprinted for the set of stairs leading up to the gangway and the captain's table. By the time she reached the top of the stairs, the deck shuddered twice more in quick succession, and this time the lights dimmed, followed by a sudden, sickening sense of weightlessness. Caldin made a grab for the grav gun on her belt just as artificial gravity failed and her momentum carried her free of the deck. She aimed the gun between her feet and fired, grappling back down.

"Shields critical!" Delayn said from engineering.

Gravity returned in a slow gradient as the inertial management system (IMS) stabilized. Caldin turned off her grav gun just before her knees could buckle.

"Frek it! What kind of weapons are they using?" Whatever was hitting them, it was strong—at least as strong as the *Intrepid's* main beam cannon.

"Computer analysis suggests that something is exploding in front of us and we're running into the explosions," Delayn replied.

"I thought it's impossible for warheads to travel at this speed inside a nebula?"

"It is. They would need shield generators almost as strong as ours in order to survive it."

"Then?"

"We're not detecting any warheads firing from the enemy ship," Esayla added as another violent tremor shook the deck, followed by a loud roaring noise which wasn't simulated at all.

"Forward shields at 15%! Nebular dust is bleeding through our shields," Delayn explained. "If they fail, the nebula will rip us apart in seconds!"

Caldin saw her life flash before her eyes as she waited impotently for the next mysterious explosion to take out their shields entirely, and with them, the *Intrepid* herself.

Then the ship's sound system squealed once more. "This is your final warning, *Intrepid*. Cancel your momentum and lower your shields. You have five seconds to respond."

"Respond?" Caldin screeched. "How are we supposed to respond if they won't let us establish a connection!" Then, a split second later, she understood what the speaker meant, and she felt stupid. "Helm—reverse thrust one hundred percent! Let's show these kakards that we're complying with their demands."

"Yes, ma'am," the helm replied.

A few seconds later the sound system screeched once more and back was the same deep, gravelly voice, now speaking in a much more pleasant tone: "You are wise to heed us. We will be aboard as soon as you are able to drop your shields."

Captain Caldin wanted to tell that man, whoever he was, that it would take them several days to slow down enough to drop their shields without taking serious damage, but the voice returned saying, "Do not deviate from your present heading. You can expect to see us in . . . approximately 112 of your people's hours—four and a half of your standard galactic days."

Caldin's brow furrowed. "*Your people's hours*—what is he, a Sythian?"

"He sounds human to me," Terl replied.

"Then either he's a skriff, or he's been cut off from the Imperium since before the establishment of standard galactic time."

"That was almost thirty millennia ago . . ." Delayn put in from engineering.

Caldin couldn't think of anyone who had been cut off from the rest of the galaxy for that long, except for . . . *Avilonians*.

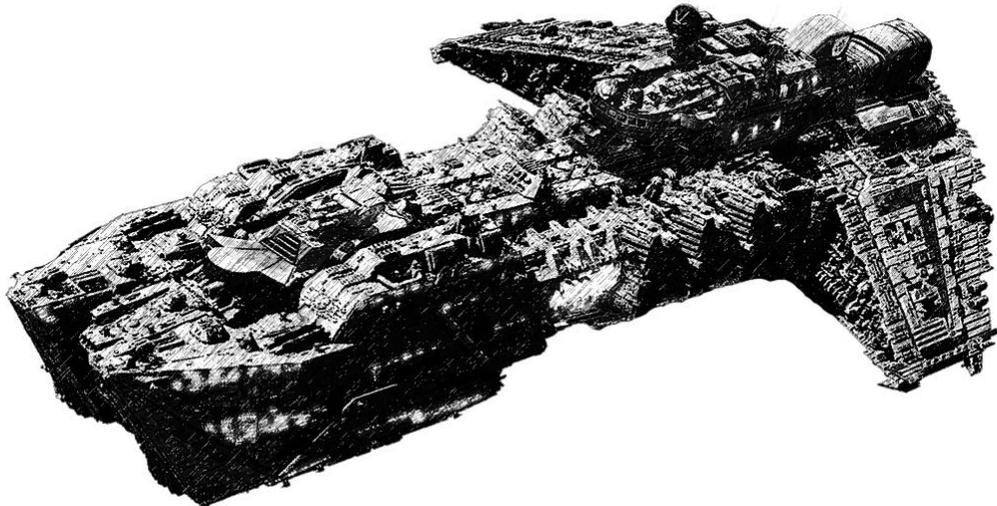
Caldin felt hope and terror rise up simultaneously—hope because the Avilonians were real and they could rescue the *Intrepid* and her crew, possibly even Dark Space, and terror because the Avilonians did not appear to be friendly.

Captain Caldin turned to the comms station. "Cancel the red alert and set condition green. Tell our crew to make their way to their postings in a leisurely fashion. For now, they don't need to know what's happening."

"Yes, ma'am," Terl replied.

Caldin turned back to the captain's table and gazed down on the enemy contact. *What are you doing here?* she wondered. The fact that Avilonians had followed them into the gravity field raised more questions than it answered. Reaching up to her ear, she activated her comm piece to make a call. The only one aboard who knew anything about Avilon was Commander Ortane. They still had a few days to prepare before the Avilonians came aboard, and Caldin was determined to prepare for their arrival as much as possible before then.

\* \* \*



Atton awoke, cold and naked in the dark. He found himself standing up inside a coffin-sized chamber with a transpiranium barrier mere inches away from his face. Visible just beyond that barrier was another coffin like the one in which he was standing, filled with another person, a familiar-looking woman . . . Ceyla Corbin. By the expression on her face, her horror and shock was no less than his own. Then Atton remembered where he was and why. The whole crew had been locked in stasis tubes until the *Intrepid* escaped the gravity field which had snared it.

They'd been scheduled to come out of stasis after four years. To Atton, those four years seemed to have passed in the blink of an eye. It felt like just yesterday that they'd

put him in stasis. By now plenty of things would have changed, not the least of which being that Dark Space was no more. Perhaps a lucky few had managed to escape, but Atton doubted those survivors would include his family. His mother and father had been lucky enough to escape the first invasion, but that kind of luck didn't come around twice. As for Hoff and Atta . . . their chances were just as abysmal.

No, now the crew of the *Intrepid* were, for all anyone knew, the last surviving members of the human race—besides the immortal Avilonians. That thought struck Atton with dull force as he stumbled out of his stasis tube. Was that where they were headed now? Had Captain Caldin made contact with Avilon already?

People were stumbling out of their own tubes all around him. This stasis room had space for 30 people, all of whom were busy waking up in various states of confusion and shock. Atton waved to Ceyla just as guide lights came on in the deck of the stasis room and cast a wan green glow into the dark, airy room. Rather than wave back, Ceyla turned away. The fact that she was naked had no doubt provoked her sense of modesty. It wasn't possible to see very much of her now that she had stepped out of her stasis tube's internal light, and he'd been too distracted to really look before that, but he did see her turn to follow the guide strips to the lockers on the other side of the room.

He was about to follow her when something cold seized him in a painfully tight grip just below his waist. He let out a sharp gasp, and a familiar voice said, "I should break it off."

"Gina . . . for frek's sake, we have bigger problems than our personal issues right now."

"Yes, I suppose you're right—*sir*," she said, releasing him. He turned to watch her stalk away, a fuzzy shadow which revealed only a hint of her naked backside. He caught himself staring and looked away with a scowl. Gina was the last person he wanted to be thinking that way about. She would probably stab him in his sleep.

Atton followed the guide lights to the lockers. Once there, he passed his wrist over his locker's identichip scanner. It popped open and he retrieved his things. As soon as he was dressed, he began following the guide lights out of the stasis room. On his way out, a hand slid into his and he turned to see Ceyla walking along beside him, now fully clothed. "Hoi there, Commander. Did you have a good sleep?" she asked.

Atton nodded mechanically, taking a moment to feel the electricity passing between his hand and hers. "Well enough," he said. "How about you?" The question sounded lame to his ears, but any pretense of small talk was bound to sound lame. What he really wanted to know was what the *frek* had happened in the last four years.

"I had nightmares," Ceyla replied. "What do you think we're going to do now?" she asked as they filed out through the double doors of the stasis room and into the blindingly bright corridor beyond.

"I'm not sure," Atton lied as his eyes began tearing from the brightness. He noticed that the ship's P.A. system was playing a pre-recorded message on a loop.

“Please proceed to your duty stations in an orderly fashion and await further orders. Thank you. . . . Please proceed to your duty stations in an orderly . . .”

Atton tuned out the message. His eyes finally stopped tearing from the light, and he found himself staring into Ceyla’s deep blue irises and her startlingly beautiful face.

“I guess we’re the only ones left,” she said. Atton didn’t have to ask what she meant. “Maybe we’re going to start over somewhere new?” she suggested while tucking a lock of blonde hair behind one ear. Ceyla didn’t know about Avilon. She had been asleep already with the rest of the crew when Atton had explained his mission to the captain, so she obviously thought that the 100 plus crew aboard the *Intrepid* were the only humans left in the galaxy and that now they had to begin the work of repopulating the species.

Atton guessed that was the motive behind her holding his hand. She’d decided that if she had to breed with someone, she wanted it to be him. Atton tried not to be flattered by that. After all, there were probably only 50-70 other eligible men on board, and most of them would be too old for her. Atton decided to put her out of her misery. People were bumping into them on all sides on their way out of the stasis room, so he pulled her to one side of the doors.

“What is it?” Ceyla asked.

Atton waited a few moments, until everyone was out of earshot, and then he said, “Look, this is going to come as a shock . . . but we’re not the only ones left.”

“How do you know that?” Ceyla asked, her eyes widening with hope.

“The whole reason we came out here was to get reinforcements, not to look for survivors at Ikara.”

“Reinforcements from who?”

“From Avilon.”

Ceyla shook her head. “I don’t—”

Atton placed a finger to her lips. “Shh, just listen.”

“Okay . . .”

He launched into a long explanation about the immortals and Avilon, about their history with the Sythians and the once-thought-to-be mythical world of Origin where it all began. That world was actually Sythia—the Sythians’ home world, found in the heart of the Getties Cluster.

“I don’t believe you,” Ceyla said, shaking her head quickly. Now she jerked her hand out of his and shot him an angry look. “The Immortals are in Etheria.”

Atton offered an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry, but they’re not. They’re in Avilon.”

“No,” Ceyla said, still shaking her head. She obviously didn’t want to believe that her religion had sprung up out of legends about people who had attained eternal life through technological rather than spiritual means.

“Look, just because your religion speaks about the Immortals, doesn’t mean they are the same immortals as the ones living in Avilon. The Immortals you believe in,

which are immortal souls that have died and gone to Etheria, are not threatened by the existence of immortal humans living in a lost sector of our galaxy.”

The angry lines in Ceyla’s expression faded somewhat and Atton reached for her hand once more. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to invalidate your beliefs. I’m just telling you what I know.”

“I . . . it’s a lot to take in, Atton. Why doesn’t anyone know about this? Why am I only hearing about it now?”

“Admiral Heston was one of them before he left—or was forced to leave. That was a long time ago, but he’s a witness to their existence, and he told me. He’s the one who sent me out here to find them and convince them to help Dark Space. It’s too late for them, but it isn’t too late for us. We’re going to Avilon, Ceyla. That’s the plan.”

“I don’t want to live forever,” she said, looking defensive again.

Atton felt a headache building like a volcano inside his head. “Then why do you believe in Etheria?”

“Because . . .” Ceyla withdrew her hand again. “First of all, I don’t believe in Etheria because I want to be immortal. I believe in it because the physical world doesn’t explain everything. It doesn’t explain where we come from, for one thing, or where we go when we die.”

*How about the ground,* Atton wanted to say, but he bit his tongue. Besides, the truth was he couldn’t answer the first question, and that was the reason behind all religions in the history of the human race; they all existed to explain that one damnable question—*where did we come from?*

Science could explain how the universe had inflated from a microscopic speck to an unimaginable vastness; it could predict what would eventually happen to everything; it could even suggest how humanity and everything else may have evolved without any need for a creative agent, but it couldn’t explain where the universe had ultimately come from, or what, if anything, had unleashed everything from that infinitesimally small point all those billions of years ago. So, Atton had no choice but to concede Ceyla’s point.

“Okay,” he said, “but wouldn’t you trade the theoretical immortality in your religion for a real and plausible immortality via technological means?”

Ceyla crossed her arms over her chest. “What I believe isn’t theoretical.”

“So you’re saying it’s a fact? Show me the proof then.”

“It’s not a fact either. It’s not something you can prove or disprove, and my certainty comes from my heart, not from my head.”

Atton gave up. “Okay, well, I’m sure the Avilonians will let you die if you really want to.” He couldn’t keep the sarcasm from his voice as he said that; Ceyla accepted his remark with narrowed eyes and a frown. Before she could respond, however, Atton’s comm piece buzzed—*Incoming call from Captain Loba Caldin*. He excused himself and took a few steps away from Ceyla to answer the call.

“Captain, I was just about to—”

“Commander, I need to see you in the operations center *right now*. There have been some important developments while you’ve been in stasis.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be there in two minutes.”

“Make that one minute, Ortane.”

Before Atton could reply, the captain ended the comm, leaving him feeling bewildered once more. He’d just spent the last four years in stasis and now all of a sudden the captain was in a rush to see him?

“I have to go,” Atton said, turning to find Ceyla.

But she was already gone.

He looked the other way to find her walking down the corridor ahead of him, obviously too annoyed with him to stick around any longer. Atton hurried after her with a frown. *You dumb skriff, Atton. The first girl in forever who shows any real interest in you, and you drive her off by making fun of her beliefs. Nice work.*