

Galactic Liberty

A Teaser

By

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Prologue:

The End of the Line

Yunor

Just a few million kilometers sunward of the Yunor system's asteroid belt, Denise Spencer brought the small shuttlecraft out of superlight speed and oriented it towards Yunor's sun. The planet Yunor was five hundred million kilometers distant and directly in the shuttle's line with the sun, rendering the shuttle difficult to detect.

That was what Denise wanted. The sun's radiation would provide a great deal of interference in case anyone tried to observe the secret communication that her husband, Robert, was setting up. "Have you set up the encrypt frequency yet?" she asked.

"Negative, dear," he replied, smiling that smile that made her heart race even after years of marriage. "It takes half a minute for this computer to set up the frequency. One would think

you're a bit anxious."

Her frown took all the levity out of his expression. "After what we've seen on Farnor, Robert? My own anxiety is the last thing on my mind. We need to let Captain Wills know this information ASAP."

"And we will, Denise. When he hears what we have to say, I bet he'll send the whole Space Navy hurtling towards the capital on Exterr."

Denise knew better than to challenge that bet. Captain Wills was both logical and pragmatic, and he would risk his career—his life—on the urgent information that the Spencers had to impart. They had found vital intelligence on the far-flung world of Farnor, and it could doom the entire Galactic Democracy if ignored.

Robert frowned. "Laser pistols, this computer is slow. You're the mechanic, Denise; slap it for me."

"Slapping won't do it any good. It never does *you* any." Of course, she was only teasing, and she sensed that he knew this. Neither of them had ever considered raising a hand to the other.

"Of course, this machine isn't usually half as incorrigible as I am." His serious tone made her nervous. "I wish I had our son's knack with computers."

"So do I."

He turned to her. "You ever think, I don't know, that maybe we're too restrictive with Alex?"

"Anything that keeps him safe, Rob. Think about all the things we've seen out here. I don't want him exposed to all of that."

"We didn't want Crystal exposed to it, either, and look what she did: ran off and joined

the military. How long will it be before Alex decides to run off?"

"He'd never do that! He'd never."

"Think about it, Denise. Do you see how hurt he looks whenever we tell him he can't do something, just because we think it's too dangerous? He's been a good kid and hasn't complained about it, but that won't last forever. He's eighteen years old. At some point, he's going to rebel. Even if he is the smartest person on Exterr, which I believe in my heart. I can see in his eyes that he wants to explore the galaxy. If we don't guide him, he might get himself hurt or killed."

Denise turned away. They had had this argument many times since Alex had turned sixteen two years ago. Interestingly enough, each one had taken Robert's current stance, but the other always disagreed with it. But their excessive sheltering would only hurt Alex in the long run. It would push him away from them and drive a wedge into their relationship with him. The wedge in their relationship with Crystal had been difficult for Denise. With Alex, it would be unbearable.

"As soon as we get out of this newest mess, we're going on a vacation," she said softly. "You, me, and Alex. You're right, Rob. He needs to see the galaxy with people who know the dangers awaiting him. And the many beautiful wonders, as well."

His eyes met hers. "I'm looking at the most beautiful wonder right now."

She allowed herself to gaze into his eyes until her attention was torn away by blaring proximity alarms. In a flash, she was all business. "What in the galaxy is that?"

Robert tapped on his console, and his jaw dropped. "I don't believe it. This is what's behind us." He tapped a key, and a jet-black ship appeared on the viewscreen.

"It seems we've been discovered. Time to transmission?"

“This computer is still calculating.” A brilliant scarlet light flared from the black ship’s bow and smashed into the shuttle’s shields. Alarm klaxons began to blare before Robert shut them off. “Rear shields at fifty percent.”

“Taking evasive action.” Denise slammed the shuttle into a dive that threw her back into her seat. The black craft kept up and continued firing.

“Returning fire.” As Robert pressed a button, the shuttle’s aft cannon fired a laser that struck the assailant, knocking a hull plate off. Even though she was busy trying to keep the shuttle under control, Denise had to wonder why the attacker’s shields were down. But the intruder was not deterred. The next shot cut through the shuttle’s shields and nailed the engines.

“We’re stopping,” she said in disbelief. This was one of Intelligence’s most recent shuttlecraft. How could the attacker disable it so easily?

The dark spacecraft squared up in the viewscreen, lining the shuttle up for a clean kill. Denise turned to her husband. “Robert?”

“Yes, dear?”

She took his hand. “I love you.”

He squeezed hers gently. “I love you, too.”

The attacker fired one more laser. After a brief pulse of terrible, searing pain, Denise and Robert Spencer knew no more.

Part 1:
Maiden Voyage

Chapter 1:

Farnor Attacks

Exterr

Deep within the infinite blackness of space, a beautiful blue-green planet called Exterr sat on the edge of the galaxy's Core region. This pristine world was the center of government for the Galactic Democracy, the vast republic that spanned the Ceradon Galaxy, and it had a single moon.

The normal space traffic around Exterr, a peaceful, laid-back procession of shuttlecraft, suddenly broke off and fled when an enormous ship bore down on the planet. Entering orbit at a dangerous speed, this massive, vulture-shaped Farnorian Intimidator opened fire on Exterr's large northern continent with powerful laser batteries.

A handful of Exterran Defense Frigates flew up from Exterr's surface to respond to the

threat, but their meager laser weaponry was blunted against the assailant's shields. Two additional Intimidators joined the first. They made no attack on the Exterranean frigates but rained laser fire down on the surface.

* * *

Exterr's capital city of Arlinga was the home of innumerable crystalline skyscrapers that awed many visitors. In seconds, the Farnorian lasers had stricken many of the downtown skyscrapers and set them crumbling.

The population panicked. The air erupted with screams as people of every description and every nameable race crowded the streets, running for their lives towards the public spaceport in complete disorder.

Alex Spencer had no time to think as he cut across Main Street and through the crowd, trying to follow his older sister, Crystal. He came close to being swept away numerous times, and people shouted him curses that made his ears burn. It seemed an eternity before he reached the abandoned alley to which his sister was leading him.

When he arrived, he paused to catch his breath, feeling that he might collapse at any moment. In his eighteen years, he had never lived through a planetary bombardment. This was a rare occurrence in the galaxy's civilized central worlds, but the savage outer worlds suffered such attacks with astounding regularity. He ran his hand through his jet-black hair and was not surprised that it was drenched with sweat. He turned his hazel eyes to his sister, who stopped suddenly about three meters away from him. Her stop was so sudden that some of her long brown hair flew across her neck.

At twenty-two years of age, Crystal was a little taller and a good bit more muscular than he was. She was trying to control her agitation, but she did not succeed. In stressful situations,

she often laid into her brother verbally, though she was never abusive. “Come on, Alex, we have to go!”

“Go where, Crystal?” Alex felt terrified about the attack, after what had happened at home earlier. “It isn’t safe anywhere in the whole city.”

“Just a little farther, and we’ll be all right.” Turning around, she started running again.

Alex bit back a curse that would have brought a lifelong grounding. He summoned his tired legs into motion. “Why are we doing this, anyway? We ought to be going with everyone else towards the evac ships.”

Crystal shook her head. “No time to explain.”

Alex disliked his sister’s unwillingness to explain herself. It had gotten her into trouble more times than he could count. “Come on, Crys. Mom would’ve taken the time to explain.”

He realized the second after he uttered the last syllable that it was a mistake. Crystal hit the brakes so hard that he nearly collided with her, and the frown that she gave him made his blood run cold. “Mom and Dad are dead, do you understand? Dead! If you ever bring it up again, you jerk, I’ll. . . I’ll leave you here.”

For a moment, they stood silent. Alex thought of a million things to say, but they were all wrong. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard another laser thunder through the air. Whirling around, he saw the laser hit a building at the end of the alley and set it crumbling. He turned back to his sister suddenly. “Have it your way, Crys. Let’s just go, okay?”

Without another word, Crystal turned around and led the way down the alleyway. Alex felt sorry about her reactions since they had heard about their parents’ death earlier. The attack had started soon after they heard the news, in fact. Alex felt that it was no coincidence, somehow, but he had no evidence to back up this feeling.

“How in the galaxy could the Farnorian Kingdom attack Exterr, anyway?” he asked.
“This is supposed to be the capital.”

“Where have you been for the last year, a barn?”

No, in a physics lab working on my thesis, he felt tempted to retort. He thought better of it. He did not like upsetting his sister, and he never did it on purpose.

“They’ve been threatening insurrection for months. They have the latest offensive weaponry. I doubt our defense fighters are making a dent in them.”

“I know, but they’re no match for the Space Navy’s Galactic Starfleet. Shouldn’t they be here to stop this?”

Crystal’s impatience came through in her abrupt sigh. “You must be the most naïve idiot in our million-year history, you know that? We’re near the Galaxy Core. The fleet is spread out in the galaxy’s Outer Arms. You’re the science expert; you tell me how long it takes to travel that distance.”

Alex was silent for a moment as they continued. He was surprised when he figured out the answer, but he supposed that he should not have been. “Wow. Two days at least. Even more if they bring in the capital ships. Arlinga will either capitulate or be destroyed before the fleet arrives.”

“Exactly. Next time, think before you say something stupid.”

Alex frowned but said nothing in retort. She would never say something like that if she weren’t upset. She was pragmatic and proactive, which had saved his life, but she rarely considered how deeply her words might hurt.

He found himself wondering about her fiancé, Jeremy Fox. It seemed she had mellowed since meeting him. A major in the Exterr Air Force, Jeremy was a JAG investigator, one of the

most level-headed people Alex knew. Unfortunately, his generous cockpit time guaranteed that he had to be up in the air to respond to the attack. Alex realized that Crystal had to be worried sick about him. He felt a sharp pang of sympathy in response.

Alex had yet to tell her what had happened yesterday between him and his own girlfriend, Amy Grant. He had been with Amy for over a year. Unlike with past breakups, he had not seen this one coming, and it still hurt. He hoped that she was still alive and well.

Chapter 2:

Borrowing a Shuttle

Exterr

Alex felt ready to collapse again when they emerged from the alleyway into an open space. To his great surprise, he saw Arlinga's Air Force hangar in front of them. He noted no activity besides him and Crystal, and no craft were visible outside on the landing pavement. "Oh, wow, a hangar! How did you know this alley would lead us here?"

"I've learned a lot of secret routes while working in the city planning office." Crystal started heading towards the hangar's main doors. "Not to mention from serving in the space army for a couple of years."

"Yeah, that follows. But Crys, won't they be annoyed that we're stealing one of their craft?"

She turned to him with a half-smile. “Borrowing, Alex. We’ll bring it back when this mess is over. I’m sure they’re all up there fighting. We’ll be able to escape the city.”

He considered this a moment before he understood the problem. “But you can’t fly.”

“You can.”

Alex turned to her when they stopped outside the wide-open hangar doors. “No way! I haven’t flown military craft before.”

She crossed her arms. This was one of those rare occasions when her greater stature managed to threaten him. “You’re going to fly if I have to hold your hands on the flight yoke.” Alex had no doubt that she would make good on that statement. “Come on, Alex, we need to get out of here. This place is probably a big bull’s eye, and—”

Without warning, a laser blast flashed through the sky and lanced into the flight control tower, and the top of the tower crashed to the ground. A curse was almost out of Alex’s mouth when he realized what his mother would say, and he led the way into the hangar. The only craft remaining was a shuttle-type craft, painted red and blue in the colors of Exterr’s Air Force. “Well, we’re going to die anyway, so we might as well go in a glorious crash.”

Crystal made no effort to conceal her sarcasm. “I just love your optimism.”

This craft was fairly good sized, with a couple of cabins in the aft section. The cockpit dominated the forward section with four stations. Alex seated himself at the fore port controls as Crystal situated herself at the fore starboard controls. When he looked over his board, Alex was relieved to see that it resembled the controls in the shuttle he had flown during civilian flight training. He even saw a flight yoke, not necessary because of the control panel but still preferred by most pilots. When they had both strapped in, Alex started up the engines. He was disappointed when he saw the fuel gauge sitting at the halfway mark. He speculated that the Air

Force had landed this shuttle when they had to scramble their other craft.

He turned to Crystal. “While I’m busy getting us killed, you might want to look for the weapon controls. If they start sending fighter craft—”

“Right. I’m on it.” Crystal readily located the weapon controls on her station.

As Alex gently engaged the drive, the shuttle lifted up off the deck and exited the hangar. Much to his dismay, moments after the shuttle had left, lasers began to bombard the hangar. It collapsed into a heap in seconds. He could not control the tears coming to his eyes. “Oh, holy—we were almost killed. We almost died, Crys!”

Her impatient sigh brought his panic crashing down. “You can’t jump at every little thing, you crybaby. Get us out of here, or we *will* die.”

That hurt him hard, and for the first time since this misadventure had begun he began to feel furious. He cleared the tears from his eyes. “As soon as we get out of this, you’re on your own; you got that? I hate it when you talk to me like I’m a little kid.”

“Then grow up and quit acting like one. This is serious business, Alex. You can’t be missing the fact that people are dying from this attack.” She closed her eyes. “Blast those Farnorians. No one can reason with them. They’ll destroy the whole planet of Exterr if they think it’ll help them gain independence. Oh, I wish I was still in the army. Then, I could do something.”

Alex did not like the possibility that she might get hurt. “I can’t have you die on me, Crys. You’re all I’ve got now.”

She turned to him in surprise. “What about Amy?”

“Dumped me like a rock yesterday. Said she was stringing me along the whole time.”

She was apologetic so suddenly that it startled him. “Ouch. I’m so sorry, Alex. No

wonder you're so discombobulated. If I'd known—"

"You'd still have gotten me here. We'd still have a chance."

Crystal was silent for a moment as she turned to examine some sensor readings. The forward viewscreen showed the city center smoking in ruins. One of the only intact buildings was the large Galactic Congress building. Mass panic was still happening in the streets. Crystal had been right. Alex was relieved that he was no longer down there. The barrage extended to the city's outskirts as Alex guided the shuttle away from downtown.

"Alex, this is really bad. This planet hasn't been attacked in five hundred years."

"Where should we go?"

Crystal fell silent for a moment. "I have some old army buddies down in Port Yarvis. Maybe they can take us in for a while."

Alex snorted in amusement. "Port Yarvis, eh? I've heard that called a den of iniquity. Aren't you concerned about your innocent little brother being tainted by the sin there?"

"Hmph. A little sin might do you some good, you know. I bet you've never even thought about making out with a girl."

Alex was half-tempted to describe his daydreams about Amy in tones that would offend even Crystal when a sudden laser blast filled the viewscreen, cutting off his response. On instinct, he rolled the craft to starboard, scraping by the beam. The laser struck a minor municipal building, which erupted into flame. Alex was relieved when he righted the craft. "Too close for comfort. Setting course for Port Yarvis."

"Good. Now answer me: have you even considered being with a girl?"

"Of course I've thought about it. What guy hasn't? You know, I expect this teasing from adolescent bullies, not my grown-up sister."

“All right.” The faint note of apology in her voice satisfied Alex. “You’re just so serious all the time. You need to have more fun, Alex.”

Another couple of laser blasts rained down nearby, but they were at a safe distance. “Oh, like now?” He was tempted to add in sarcastic tones that he was having a lovely time, thank you very much.

“Right. Point taken.” She frowned in concentration as she looked at her readings. “Uh oh.”

Alex’s stomach began to feel very uncomfortable. “What do you mean, ‘Uh oh’?”

“Landing ships are headed towards the city center. Nothing headed our way, but this is not good.”

“Yeah. I think I’m beginning to understand. Can’t we shoot them down?”

“In a transport shuttle? You’ve got to be kidding. These lasers couldn’t light a fire for a weenie roast.”

Alex understood her logic, but it only added to his frustration. They had to help somehow. “What’s to stop them from destroying all our cities?”

“Plenty, but none of it is actually here, Alex. Exterr has become far too complacent. Too many politicians with bloated egos are in the Congress. Port Yarvis may not be safe. We’ll need to get off-world.”

“Whoa, wait a minute. In what, exactly?”

“In this, of course. We should be able to get to Karsus from here.”

“Do you honestly think we can get past their ship?”

“Of course. The sub-light engines are about the best things these shuttles have.”

Alex gritted his teeth. “All right, Crys.” As he pulled back on the flight yoke, the

shuttlecraft began to ascend towards space. The thrill of feeling the G-forces as he neared escape velocity was almost enough to get the attack out of his mind.

But then, a call came over the distress frequencies in the shuttle. A sonorous baritone voice spoke over the comm channel: “S.O.S.! S.O.S.! I’m hit; I’m going down. Ejecting in five seconds.” Alex thought he could recognize the speaker, who was distressed but not panicked.

“It’s Jeremy!” Crystal was delighted, but her face betrayed worry.

“Your fiancé, Jeremy Fox?”

“He’s the only Jeremy I know, Alex. We’ve got to help him.”

Alex turned the yoke to bring the craft around. He consulted his readouts to find Jeremy’s craft. “Absolutely. He’s the only boyfriend of yours that’s ever been nice to me.”

Crystal opened her mouth to argue but closed it again. Alex was right. Her previous boyfriends had not treated Alex well, making fun of him for being a big brain. She had known Jeremy for a couple of years, and Jeremy always treated Alex with kindness and respect.

* * *

Jeremy Fox never did enjoy jumping out of shuttles, but at least this time he had a good reason. A glancing hit from a Farnorian laser had knocked out his engine. He considered himself lucky that the hit had not been more accurate. When his five seconds to prepare were up, he hit the eject button, and the seat launched him into the air several meters above his ruined craft. He was glad that the blue Exterran Defense helmet covering his blonde hair had a visor that protected his blue eyes from the bright sunlight.

After five seconds, the parachute on the back of his white flight uniform deployed to slow his descent. The bone-jarring jerk reminded him why he had transferred to the JAG investigation

unit in the first place: his leg had been badly broken a year ago in an outer-space accident while he was in the Space Navy. He hoped to avoid a similar break on this occasion.

Surveying the sky, he saw an Air Force shuttle pacing him. As he noticed the number Arlinga-Seven, he frowned slightly. That shuttle was supposed to be in the Arlinga hangar. He tapped a button on his wrist communicator and brought it to his mouth. “Exterran Shuttle number Arlinga-Seven, please respond.”

* * *

Alex smiled at his sister as Jeremy’s voice came through. “I think he’s about to accuse us of stealing the shuttle, Crys.”

“Knock it off.” Crystal tapped a button on her console. “This is Exterran Shuttle number Arlinga-Seven.”

The line was silent for a moment. “Crystal Spencer?” Even on the viewscreen, Alex could see the surprise in Jeremy’s face.

A big grin crossed Crystal’s face. “Hi, Jeremy.”

“Whoa. How in the world did you get that thing in the air? You can’t fly.”

“So I’ve been told lately. Alex is at the helm.”

“Ah, that explains it. But that doesn’t explain how you were able to get to the shuttle in the first place.”

“The Air Force base was empty of personnel when we reached it. This shuttle was the only craft there. Not one second after we got into the air, the base was destroyed.”

“Wow. You’re pretty lucky, girl. Pick me up when I touch down. We’ve got work to do.”

“Roger that.”

* * *

The winds were blowing away from the city center, so Jeremy was taken away from the populous inner outskirts and to the wide-open far outskirts, which were still quiet. He landed well on the grassy ground and took off his parachute. Meanwhile, Alex and Crystal's shuttle landed nearby. When he had come to it, the boarding ramp lowered, and Crystal was there to greet him. Ecstatic to see her, he hugged her tightly, and they kissed passionately.

When the greeting was over, Crystal was all business. "Come on, we're getting out of here."

"Right. The admiral ordered a full retreat." Not just any officer, this admiral was the head of Exterr's Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Crystal's mouth gaped open when she heard this. "Full retreat?"

"I hate it, but it makes sense." He accompanied her into the shuttle's cockpit, where he nodded to Alex. "After all, there are three Farnorian Intimidators in orbit, and we have barely enough firepower to kill a rabbit. Arlinga, Port Yarvis, and several other major cities are already in ruins."

Alex felt dismayed. "Three Intimidators?"

"I'm afraid so, pal. The Air Force is useless against those ships. Want me to copilot?"

Alex's eyes widened in surprise. He was expecting Jeremy to take over the piloting. "Sure, Jeremy. Thanks."

Jeremy took over at Crystal's position. At the same time, Crystal settled in at a console behind her brother. "It's the least I can do for you saving this craft. Let's get off Exterr as soon as possible."

"Absolutely." As Alex operated his controls, the shuttlecraft took off and climbed

swiftly.

In the meantime, Jeremy tapped some buttons on his console. “I’m bringing all our weaponry online. No telling if those ships have fighter craft to throw against us.”

“Jeremy, any news from the Galactic Congress?” Crystal asked.

“I haven’t heard a peep. That’s probably the only building they left standing, but I imagine that’s what Farnor’s ground troops are for. Our army is going in, but I don’t think they’ll be coming out.”

“What can we do about this?”

“Nothing, I hate to say. Not here, at least. This attack came too much by surprise, Crys. I tried to warn the admiral that the Farnorians were a threat. My colonel had promised to back me up, but he went back on his word when we were talking to the admiral. He changed his tune very quickly today. The Navy’s Galactic Starfleet is still spread out in the outer reaches of the galaxy. They can’t defend Exterr anymore, but I hope I can get them here to defend other central worlds. That was my colonel’s dying request. He promoted me to lieutenant colonel one second before his shuttle was destroyed.”

Alex and Crystal both turned to Jeremy in surprise. Alex could barely contain his excitement. “We get to go to the Outer Arms?”

“I have to go alone. I’m not endangering you guys. The instant we get to a safe world, you’re staying put. Both of you.”

“Jeremy, my brother and I have very little left to lose,” Crystal pleaded. “I can’t lose you. Please, my dear, bring us with you.”

“Yes, Jeremy, please.” Alex longed to come along. He had had enough of his parents’ excessive protection.

Jeremy looked at Crystal and Alex in turn, and then he sighed and shook his head. “All right, you two. But you’ll have to do exactly what I tell you.”

Alex grinned in excitement. “Absolutely, Jeremy. Thanks.”

“Where were you guys planning to go?”

“We were thinking of Karsus,” Crystal said.

Jeremy considered this. “Karsus. Yes, that’s a good place to start. We can’t stay there long, though, just long enough to refuel. That might be next on the Farnorians’ hit list. Karsus has no defense compared to Exterr.”

Alex did not like the sound of this. “What could Farnor want with Karsus?”

Jeremy spoke calmly, not showing any trace of the annoyance that Crystal would have. “All the mining and manufacturing there is a valuable resource, Alex. And it’s at the crossroads of the two longest galactic routes. If Farnor controls that, they could bring the whole Galactic Democracy to a halt.”

Alex felt a hollow pit in the middle of his stomach again as he gazed out the viewscreen. “Wow. Maybe I am a bit absent-minded.”

Jeremy put a hand on Alex’s shoulder. Alex could tell that Jeremy cared for him like a brother. “It’s okay, Alex. You have seen more today than you ever have before, but it isn’t over yet. I’m afraid you’ll learn a lot more than you want to on this trip.”

When the shuttlecraft had broken through the atmosphere and into outer space, Alex executed a partial orbit around Exterr to gain velocity. After this maneuver, the shuttle then shot towards the outer solar system like a bullet, making it hard for the Farnorian ships to reach them.

The Intimidators seemed too occupied with their planetary mayhem to take much note of the fleeing shuttle. Each of the three ships continued blistering Exterr’s cities with powerful

laser blasts, and many of their landing craft were streaming towards the planet's surface.

Alex was greatly distressed to see this on the viewscreen. "Oh, man. This is horrible."

"Yes." Jeremy's frustration was evident. "It looks like they're intentionally prolonging this. I wish we could hit them where it hurts." He frowned slightly as he examined his readouts.

"What's the problem?"

"Their ground troops have seized the public spaceports. The civilian populace is grounded."

Alex winced. "Ouch. Good thing you dragged me away from going to the evac ships, Crys."

"But that means no one else can escape," she said. "We'd better get to Karsus ASAP."

"I have the navigational computer working on our course. As soon as it's done—" He was cut off when a beep sounded from his console. "There we go. Now engaging the superlight drive."

He tapped a key on the console, and the stars in the viewscreen slowly began to elongate from points to solid lines. Then, the shuttlecraft blazed off and disappeared as it went to superlight speed.

* * *

The tall, imposing Count Solag stood in the middle of the sparse bridge of the Farnorian Intimidator *Odin*, the lead ship. Like his subordinate Farnorians, he was humanoid in shape, with rather feline facial features and facial fur. Every inch of his fur was jet black. Beside him stood the ship's commander, the woman Captain Varth. They were supervising the attack on Exterr.

"Captain Varth, a shuttlecraft has broken orbit and fled to superlight speed," Ensign

Borla reported from the forward scanning console.

“One single shuttle?” Captain Varth said. “Pay it no heed, Ensign Borla. We have our victory.”

Count Solag considered the possibilities, some of which were unpleasant. “I wouldn’t be too confident, Captain. These Exterrans are cleverer than you give them credit for. Especially the native humans. I advise you to track their course.”

“Very well, Count Solag. Ensign?”

The ensign worked her console. “Extrapolating. Interesting. They’re heading directly for the Karsus system.”

The count’s eyes narrowed venomously. “Karsus. What could they want there?”

“Judging from their fuel supply, it’s the farthest world they can reach,” the ensign said.

“Interesting. I want a full list of the worlds they can get to directly from Karsus. That’s a major crossroads.”

“Could there be a problem, Your Eminence?” the captain queried.

Count Solag considered the matter in silence. “There could be, Captain. There very well could be.”

“Then I’ll detail a commando team to tail them immediately.”

“Good, but they must do no more than tailing at this point, Captain. Not until we know what those people are up to.”

Captain Varth bowed respectfully to him. “As Your Eminence commands.”

“After the commando team has been detailed, ready a security team to accompany me to the surface. I plan to meet with the Galactic President within the hour.”

Minutes later, the tremendous forward viewscreen showed a white shuttle emerging from

the *Odin* and aligning itself to the Exterranean shuttle's vector. The white shuttle then took off at superlight speed.

Continued in the book, available from Tate Publishing!