

PROLOGUE

Standard Galactic Date: 015.09.5073

(Earth Date: 05/04/2082)

Vox Commander Kavmar marveled at the majestic beauty of the doomed planet. Kanoor was indeed a sight to behold. It had a lovely golden hue, and except for an icecap at the pole, most of it was covered with luscious green vegetation or light blue oceans. The Akakie cities, also golden, looked to be a natural part of the planet, not the grotesque, environment-killing monstrosities he had already seen on Tangaar. And the entire planet was teeming with life. A cursory scan had shown more animal and plant species than could be studied and categorized in a lifetime.

Plus ten billion Akakies, waiting to die down there.

For a brief second, he wished he did not have to destroy this wondrous planet. If only the Volts could conquer it instead and relocate all their people. No one else would have to die due to hunger. His children, all Volt children, would have a bright future. He looked wistfully at Kanoor. Alas, this was impossible.

Kavmar contacted his second-in-command. "Still nothing?"

"We have scanned the entire system five times. There are no ships in the system, except for those transport vessels that jumped away as soon as we arrived. It looks like a massive evacuation effort was under way."

Evacuation to where? When we are done here, not a single habitable planet would remain in this galaxy.

"I cannot believe they have left their planet completely defenseless," said Kavmar.

"There are some planet-based weapons powering up, but that is all."

This was very strange. After the surprisingly strong resistance the carbon-based aliens had put up on Tangaar, Kavmar expected destroying the second planet on their list would be even more difficult. If this were some sort of a trap, he could not think of a way it would work.

Why should I complain if they are planning to make things easy for us? The relatively high losses they had suffered in Tangaar had worried him, so much so he had decided to call in the Vox reserves. If anything, this should have been a relief.

Because such an easy victory would be a hollow one, he told himself. He wished the insectoids had put up a fight instead of running away and leaving billions of their people behind to die. On the other hand, what else could they do? The Akakie fleet had nine thousand ships against Kavmar's two hundred thousand, not counting the reserves, and the destruction of Tangaar had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt the carbon-based aliens did not have a prayer.

Speaking of prayers, praise Vilyek.

He contacted the rest of his warriors. "Proceed as planned."

Two hundred thousand Vox soldiers dashed towards the golden planet.

Next stop: Earth.

Hopefully, the humans' homeworld would prove to be a better challenge.

CHAPTER ONE

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Standard Galactic Date: 012.09.5073

(Earth Date: 30/03/2082)

I stood in front of the living room window and sipped a cup of hot chocolate. I'd bought a beach house on Lake Ontario, a mere ninety-minute drive from the new fleet base in Buffalo. My living room view was astonishing. The rising sun shone on the lake, its radiant glow reflecting on the surface of the sapphire blue water. A deep sense of serenity overcame me as I listened to the chorus of birdsong from the surrounding luxuriant bushes. I'd developed a habit of admiring the view and drinking hot chocolate (which didn't help getting rid of my belly) while waiting for my wife to wake up every morning.

Ella walked in. She was in her PJs and looked sleepy. She stood by me, put her head on my shoulder (she had to stand on her toes to do that, and I tried to help by bending my knees), and said, "Good morning, honey."

God, I love that accent!

Ella and I had spent a lot of time together after Operation Endgame. I enjoyed her company and her dry wit. Her perpetually calm manner was in such sharp contrast with Liz's explosive personality. One thing led to another, and we'd ended up dating. In the beginning, we were drawn together more by loss than love, but that soon changed.

I kissed her hair. "Good morning, wifey." Then I put a hand on her belly and said, "Good morning, my son. Or daughter. Or twins, triplets, or quadruplets."

I was, of course, kidding. I didn't know (didn't want to know until he or she was born) the gender of my child, but I knew there was only one tiny precious heart beating in there.

My child.

I wondered how this much happiness was even possible.

I'd always wanted kids. I didn't have any siblings, and I was never close to my parents: Dad was consumed by his grandiose vision of a united Earth, and Mom lived in a literal fantasy world where I didn't exist. In fact, as a child, I often fantasized I was adopted, or even kidnapped right after I was born, and my real parents would one day come find me. So, this was my only chance to have an actual family. I, Mr. Macho Man, almost broke into tears when Ella told me she was pregnant. We'd been dating for about a year at that point, and we got married two weeks after

that. I hadn't stopped teasing her about "the shotgun marriage" ever since, even though she'd threatened to throw me out of an airlock the next time I was on her ship.

The last few years had been very kind to me, probably in compensation for all the shit I'd had to endure before.

I wrote two more autobiographies after we came back from Tangaar, depicting the battle on Earth and the subsequent events. I named my new books *Winterfell* (yeah, I didn't take Kurt's atrocious suggestion. It did have a nice ring to it, but who would pay money to buy a book called *The Crimson Deathbringer?*) and *The Galactic Gambit*. Along with my first book (*Nights of Thunder*, which was about my experiences during the war with the East Asia Coalition) they made a trilogy titled *The Ace Fighter Saga*. Everyone on the planet bought one (or several) copies. I was the savior of humanity and all, but I didn't see this coming, and I suspected Tarq and the still-operating MFM had something to do with it. There were also several documentaries, two movies, and a TV series based on my books. I donated half of my income to charity (I supervised Liz's orphanages, and now there was one in every major city in the world); still, I rolled in money.

Needless to say, I had to leave a lot of stuff out of my books. Anything that was considered a military secret or could possibly give the Xortaags an advantage in the future was replaced by pure fiction. I even had to hide how Keiko and I managed to kill Maada and took sole credit for it. Who knew? We might've ended up trying to pull the same trick on him again one day. But if it happened, the next time I'd do what Keiko did. I'd always fantasized about flying a kamikaze mission.

I was so encouraged by the success of my books that I started writing a space-opera series, which also became an international bestseller. The main protagonist of the series was a wise-cracking, movie-quoting fighter pilot who was accompanied by his sidekick, an alien prankster. The first time Kurt heard about this, he told me to look up *author insert*. He also said if I'd missed Tarq so much that I wrote him into my books, maybe I should've just space-called the little alien.

My books were also translated to all the known languages in the galaxy. I was certain Tarq was behind this one too. He was still trying to build up the Kingslayer legend. By Kurt's advice (he believed spreading that legend was good for us), I even appeared in a few interviews with some alien reporters. That probably pushed up my book sales on the other planets too, not that I ever saw a dime. Including the Xortaags and the Akakies, there were fourteen space-faring species in the galaxy (most of which occupied more than just one planet), but despite having formal relations, they mostly left each other well alone, and there was no official trade or exchanges of information.

An unpredictable result of my fast-spreading reputation was that an Akakie woman wrote an erotic novel based on yours truly. She called it *Fifty Shades of Kingslayer*, whatever the hell that meant. I could swear this was one of Tarq's pranks. When Ella heard about this, she arranged a meeting with the Akakie ambassador and demanded to receive a copy. I had to endure unspeakable horrors in our bedroom when she got one. Who would've thought Captain Wood—who, with her standoffish personality and perpetually impeccable behavior and appearance, was the very picture of a British naval officer—had such a vivid imagination?

Another unpredictable consequence of my fame and fortune was that Crystal and Amber, the two strippers whom Tarq had paid a million dollars to stay with him for a month, went to court and sued *me* for tricking them into sleeping with an alien. I obviously had nothing to do with it (and so far as I knew Tarq didn't even touch them, being under a hologram and all), but I offered them a five-million-dollar settlement. I was rolling in cash anyway, and I did feel guilty about the whole thing. A Southern gentleman such as myself should've probably warned the girls what they were getting into, regardless of their chosen profession.

So now I wasn't even in my mid-thirties yet, and I had everything a man could possibly desire: power (commander of the fleet!), fame, money ... and, most important of all by a parsec, Ella and the baby. Plus, Venom (the nickname I'd chosen for the OCD-induced stream of negative thoughts in my mind which more often than not drove me crazy) was mostly quiet these days. I'd died and gone to heaven.

I still carried a photo of Liz in my wallet (and I had a thousand other photos in my PDD, obviously). She'd always have a special place in my heart, but I honestly believed she'd have wanted me to move on and be happy. Of all people, Liz knew how much I wanted to have a family.

Ella's deceased husband, John, was buried in Calvary Cemetery, next to two empty graves belonging to her twin daughters. The girls had died when Xortaags' MFM was activated—along with 700 million other souls—and their bodies were never found (John, under the influence of the Xortaag mind-control device, buried them and then killed himself when he realized what he'd done). We'd visit the cemetery once a year on April 13th, the anniversary of the Xortaag invasion. Ella would say a prayer or two while I hung back, wishing I weren't agnostic, so I could've joined her in prayer.

While my writing career kept me busy, I really didn't have much to do as the commander of the fleet. During the last three years, the fleet had participated in a couple of peacekeeping missions, but that was it. We heard about things that could've been done only by Tarq and his Special Operations Unit (dealing with minor issues with Tarq's usual decisiveness), but we decided not to get involved. So, most evenings, I had nothing to do but sit in front of my living room window and watch the sun set on a peaceful planet. The peace I'd played a major part in achieving. Not a bad legacy to leave behind for a simple fighter pilot.

You'd never hear me complain about living happily ever after.

We hadn't forgotten about the planet that disappeared right before Operation Endgame. We asked the Akakies about it a few times, but they had no updates, and nothing like that happened again. As months turned into years, we figured it was either a natural or an unintentional man-made disaster.

The only things I missed from my old life were flying and shooting down enemy ships. I was a fighter pilot to the core, and nothing in life matched the rush of adrenaline I experienced while rushing into battle. The last time I felt that was during the dogfight with Maada on Kanoor's orbit three years ago. All fighter pilots were adrenaline junkies, and I used to be the worst of them. Moreover, during a dogfight, I always experienced what I called a *heightened reality*, when I was

100 percent in the present, and the past and the future didn't even exist anymore. There was a time I lived to fly and blow up stuff—until I met Liz for the first time.

I slapped Ella's bottom. "Hurry up, sleepyhead. We're gonna be late for the inauguration ceremony."

She dimpled, blew me a kiss, and went back to the bedroom.

"I'll make breakfast," I added.

Three hours later, my hover car, Max, entered the new fleet base's parking.

Since we took Earth back from the Xortaags, we had been using Winterfell's command center to coordinate our fleet's movement. Kurt, however, had decided we needed to build a new command center. Winterfell's location, which was in the middle of nowhere (in Canada!), was very inconvenient; moreover, it was a sign that we were dependent on the Akakies and unable to run our own fleet.

The Fleet Command was right at the center of our new fleet base. It was a blue low-rise structure. Within it, the new CIC was a bigger replica of the command center in Winterfell (a high-tech room full of various controls, computers, monitors, communication devices, and huge VR screens floating mid-air) minus the Akakies' stupid everything-white policy. There were several semi-circular rows of tables and monitors, with a slightly raised platform for an officer to oversee the operation. And a transparent glass dome covered the CIC.

And best of all, the Fleet Command was under an undetectable Akakie force field. Even if an enemy found the location of the command center, the shield could absorb a lot of hits before it'd collapse. I couldn't imagine a situation where an enemy fleet could enter our orbit, somehow find the building, and take enough shots at it until the force field collapsed. Even if we went to war (whom were we going to fight in a peaceful galaxy?), this was the safest place on the planet, which was music to my ears, because Ella was stationed here until after the baby would come. We couldn't allow a pregnant woman to sit on a starship's command chair.

We met a familiar face when we walked in. Two, in fact.

Kurt, wearing a black tux, was talking to a few people, one of them Lilly, in the fleet's azure dress uniform, similar to the ones Ella and I were wearing, but with different rank insignia. I could smell Kurt's perfume from fifteen feet away. He'd grown a full beard, which went very well with his blond hair; his advisors had probably convinced him that his ridiculous goatee was too unfashionable to be presidential. I watched him unconsciously tugging on his beard and smiled sadly when I remembered how much Oksana disliked his habit.

"President von der Hagen," I said formally and extended my hand.

He shook my hand excitedly, happiness flashing in his storm-cloud gray eyes. His responsibilities as the United Earth's president left him with little free time, which meant we met a lot less than what I wanted.

Lilly saluted, rather formally. I was her boss, after all, and Ella was her superior officer. Seeing Lilly in uniform made me feel old. I'd known her since she was a child and Allen, for some reason, used to bring her to my birthday parties to hang out with me and my then-teenage friends.

She'd finally stopped dyeing her hair violet (or pink, or whatever other ridiculous color she thought was fashionable) and now was a brunette, which brought out her beautiful amber eyes.

"Have you met Colonel Ivan Ezekh?" Kurt pointed at a black man standing next to him.

A couple of years ago, I'd immediately make a Black Russian joke, but I'd learned to hold my tongue, especially when it came to people's ethnicity. I stuck out my hand. "I know him by reputation."

Ivan was the new commander of the Marines. "It's an honor to meet the Kingslayer in person," he said with a thick Russian accent that reminded me of our old friend Sergey, who had fought and died by Kurt's side during Operation Royalty. Brave man. I let the sense of loss I felt every single time I thought of one of our fallen friends wash over me. I'd learned a long time ago fighting it would be no use.

"I wonder if this one's gay too," said Venom. Making tasteless jokes was his way of pushing away my sorrows.

You're hopeless, I told him.

"I'm you," he pointed out.

In that case, you're the worst of me.

"Mr. President," said Ella. "Are we still on for tomorrow night? The piano's waiting for you, since we never use it."

"Of course we are," answered Kurt. "You guys look fabulous in dress uniform, by the way, even though if Jim keeps going like this, it'll be difficult to say who's pregnant."

I sheepishly touched my belly. All the hours I'd spent writing meant I'd gained a few pounds. Not that much—it wasn't like I was badly out of shape or anything—but Kurt kept teasing me about it, probably in retaliation for all those years I made fun of his goatee, and much to my chagrin, everyone around us seemed to have sensed I was a bit sensitive about my weight (Liz always said I was easy to read) and followed his example. It was the whole you-are-a-racist prank Tarq had started all over again.

"That's married life for you," I answered, but it sounded like a lame excuse as soon as I said it.

"So, it's my fault now?" asked Ella.

"*I'm* married," Kurt pointed out.

I blew out a noisy breath. "Your metabolism's freakishly fast."

"You guys are coming too, right?" Ella asked Lilly.

"Kevin's out there climbing some mountain somewhere in the Rockies," explained Lilly. "But I'm coming."

"We'd be happy if you join us too," I told Ivan.

He bowed his head. "I'd love to, but I have a prior engagement."

Ella and I went to the Fleet Command's auditorium, where Kurt was scheduled to make a speech. Our seats were behind the podium in the middle of the stage, next to the Talgoinian ambassador. The alien, who looked like a cross between a human and a turtle, took selfies with me and asked for an autograph. I dutifully obliged but asked Ella to sit between the ambassador and

me so that he (or she, difficult to say with most aliens) didn't bother me anymore. Ivan sat next to me.

Kurt stood at the podium, facing the thousands of people packed inside the auditorium. I was certain most people on the planet were watching too. Kurt was without a doubt the most popular president in history, and not only because of the role he'd played in saving humanity. The phenomenal revival of Earth's shattered economy—compliments of both General Zheng and the Xortaags—which Kurt had orchestrated was nothing short of a miracle.

"We've come a long way." Kurt leaned into the microphone. "Five years ago, we weren't aware of the existence of other races in the galaxy, and with the Xortaag fleet on its way to Earth, humanity was on the brink of extinction. Now, we have our own fleet, and thanks partly to our alliance with the Akakies and the peace treaty with the Xortaags, we're a big player in the galactic scene. I have every confidence that things will only get better from this point on, and together, we can make a better future for all humanity. And in a few short years, we'll have our first colonies, which are being terraformed by the Akakies as we speak."

"He's pretty good at this," Ella whispered in my ear.

"He's had a lot of practice in the last three years," I said. "Politicians. They talk a lot."

"The president isn't happy about it," said Ivan. "He keeps asking me to switch places. I tell him he'd get bored. It isn't like the Marines have a whole lot to do these days."

"Be thankful," I told him. "Our infiltration teams tended to have very high casualty rates."

That was an understatement. From the forty-three Marines and Commandos Kurt had led to Operations Royalty and Endgame, only two were still alive: Xornaa, and a woman who had done the wise thing and left the armed forces after we took Earth back from the Xortaags.

The ambassador, who looked like he was hanging on to every single word coming out of Kurt's mouth, gave me an exasperated look.

Ivan nodded. "I know, and I am. I have three kids. My wife will kill me if I get myself KIAed and she ends up having to raise them without a father."

"You have three children?" I asked, playing with my wedding ring. "We're expecting our first."

"I've noticed. Congratulations. First of many, I hope."

"I don't know about *many*." I chuckled. "Maybe one more. May I ask you a personal question? What kind of name is Ezekh? It doesn't sound very Russian."

"Do I look East-European to you?" he asked. "My ancestors immigrated to Russia from Ghana."

The Talgoinian shushed us. We sat quietly and listened to the rest of the speech, which was mostly about honor, duty, and a bright future. Freaking politicians and their empty speeches.

"Jesus, man," said Venom. "He's supposed to be your best friend."

It doesn't make listening to him any less boring, I answered.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BATTLE OF TANGAAR

Standard Galactic Date: 009.09.5073

(Earth Date: 24/03/2082)

Sitting alone on the balcony of his house in Tanoor, Maada watched Tangaar's orange-yellow sun set on the horizon.

The general owned an old, compact house on the outskirts of the city. He had inherited it from his father, who had also been a fleet officer. The old man, who was extremely proud of his son's achievements, had lived there the last few years of his life. It was not a remarkable building by any means—a simple, box-shaped, two-story structure with a small garden, overlooked by the balcony in the back. Maada could well afford a bigger, more luxurious place, but he had decided to move into his father's house.

Retirement is so boring, he thought, idly sipping a cup of black coffee. He had asked the human ambassador to Tangaar to bring him some, and she had obliged.

Maada had told the king he wanted to retire right after they signed the peace treaty with the Akakies and the humans. He said he felt old and tired, and there was no place for him in a peaceful universe anyway. The king was surprised, but he agreed with the general's request—only after making him promise to return if there ever would be a need. Maada hoped that would never happen because that meant something had gone terribly wrong.

These days, Maada spent most of his time reading. He had always loved to read, but in the past, he rarely had the opportunity. He had just recently read Jim Harrison's books (he would not refer to the human with that idiotic nickname, *Kingslayer*). Much to his own surprise, he enjoyed reading those books, especially the chapter describing the battle that led to his own death. He liked Harrison's sense of humor, even though the human once called him—what was the expression?—*Whiskey Delta*.

He had been following the joint Xortaag-Akakie terraforming efforts. In a few short years, five new planets would be ready for colonization, and not a drop of blood was spilled.

Maada had thought about finding a partner and fathering a child. He often tried to tell himself that, after everything he had done for his people, he deserved some companionship, love, and contentment. But deep down, he knew he did not, and if he forgot that, there were always the nightmares to remind him. He vividly remembered the dream he had the previous night; he had been flying his crimson Deathbringer in an ocean of dead people from various species who were

trying to hold on to his fighter. He tried to escape by wildly maneuvering his fighter up and down, left and right, while shooting incessantly. The Crimson Deathbringer was a fast and powerful vessel. He obliterated thousands of the dead. Millions of them. But eventually, both he and his space fighter were buried under the sheer weight of several billion corpses, many of them children.

Unlike the rest of the Xortaags (and especially his old friend Mushgaana and the rest of the royal family), Maada had never fooled himself into believing he was a god and it was his divine right to take whatever he wanted, regardless of the cost. He knew sacrificing all those people to save the Xortaags was wrong, but having a guilty conscience was well worth the survival of his species. At the time, he had thought it was the only way, but now he was not so certain anymore. What if they reached out to the more advanced civilizations—like the Akakies—and asked for help from the beginning? No one might have helped them if they did not ask from a position of power; moreover, if all those years ago he had suggested to Mushgaana and the king that they beg other species for help, they would have ignored him.

But he would never know for sure.

Maada heard an unfamiliar noise. When he listened carefully, he realized someone was knocking on his front door. This was strange. Nobody would ever come to visit him here, especially unannounced. He went back inside the house and down the stairs to the living room. When he opened the door, he found the king standing on the porch.

“Your doorbell does not work,” said the king.

Maada frowned. “I did not know I had one.”

Three vehicles were parked in front of the porch, and several royal guards were standing in front of them. “Why are you here, Your Highness? You could have summoned me to the palace.”
Or just sent a telepathic message.

The king shrugged. “I needed to clear my head. May I come in?”

Maada hurriedly moved out of the way. “It is an honor.”

The king entered the living room and looked around. “You still think you live in the barracks, do you not?”

“I have never been one to enjoy luxury, but you know that already.”

The king nodded. “Do you remember you promised me to return to active duty if there ever was a need?”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

“Put on your uniform. The time has come.”

Maada’s posture stiffened, and he had a heavy feeling in his stomach. Something very unusual was going on, but he had no idea what. Had the humans or the Akakies violated the peace treaty? He rushed to his bedroom and took his black and dark blue uniform out of a wardrobe. Before putting it on, he touched the fabric and paused for a second. He had done glorious things and horrible ones while wearing this uniform. He had saved his people from extinction but, in doing so, condemned several other species to the same fate. He wondered what was about to happen next.

The king was fixing himself a drink when Maada came back. “Sit down, General. It is going to be a lengthy conversation. You remember Commander Tarq, do you not?”

Maada sat by the dining table. “Very difficult to forget that individual.”

“Do you also remember a planet called Mantux was destroyed around the same time you attacked Kanoor, and we never found out how?”

The general nodded.

“I had a most fascinating conversation with Tarq today,” said the king. “Apparently, they found some kind of a disturbance on Mantux’s orbit after the planet was destroyed. Nobody is certain what that was. Later on, they found a similar disturbance close to every single inhabited planet in the galaxy.”

Maada sat up straight. “Including Tangaar?”

The king took out his PDD, touched the screen, and threw it at Maada. “Tangaar, and all our colonies. This is the one on our orbit.”

Maada looked at the screen, but he was not certain what he was looking at. It looked like a red and yellow rift in space, and it *moved*. Well, mostly throbbed and rippled, to be exact.

“Some of their scientists think it might be a temporal anomaly, but it is just a theory with no evidence to back it up. The insects monitored these, but they were tiny little things, almost unnoticeable, and nothing happened until just recently, when all of them suddenly started expanding exponentially, with the one on our orbit growing the fastest, followed by the one on Kanoor and Earth, respectively.”

Maada gave the PDD back to the king. This whole thing was unbelievable. Time travel? It was probably a trick. The insects were up to something. “Are you sure it is not some elaborate practical joke? The Akakies are infamous for their pranks.”

The king shook his head. “That was my first conclusion too, so I took a ship and examined this ‘disturbance’ closely. When I looked at this thing in our orbit, I had a strong premonition that whatever destroyed Mantux is coming for us, and it is indeed coming from the future. I know you do not trust the Akakies, and neither do I, but trust me when I tell you we are in mortal danger.”

Now this was serious. The king’s premonitions were never wrong, and whatever had caused Mantux’s destruction without leaving a trace was no doubt a deadly threat.

“We are about to face an unknown enemy, a very strong one by the looks of it, and I need the greatest military genius in the galaxy to be by my side when that happens,” said the king.

Maada rubbed the scars on his face. This was a habit he had inherited from the original Maada, who had earned his scars in battle and was strangely proud of them. *You were complaining that retirement was boring, were you not?*

But being bored was certainly better than having to face the planet-destroying peril coming their way.

Maada did not have to wait long.

Three days later, he was in the Xortaag command center when *something* came out of the still-expanding rift.

Maada stared at the command center's main screen and wondered if his eyes were deceiving him. What had just entered their orbit did not look like a spaceship. It looked like a huge, round, dark brown piece of rock, as big as a small shuttle. Its surface rippled as Maada was looking at it.

So, not a rock. Maybe a blob?

The general looked at an officer in front of him. The man shook his head in frustration. "We cannot scan it. Our scanners cannot penetrate its outer surface."

"Any weapons?" asked Maada.

"None that we can see," answered the officer.

Maada looked around the command center. Several officers were working at their respective stations, looking at the images of the newcomer on various screens. He raised his voice. "Can anyone tell me something useful?"

"That thing is alive," said the king, who had just entered.

Maada looked at him incredulously. "What? How is it flying in space?"

The king threw up his hands. "I do not have a clue. I cannot tell you what this is or what it is doing, neither can I read any actual thoughts. But I can tell you with certainty that thing is a sentient being."

Maada rubbed his scars. If the king was right, this meant they had just encountered a species that was capable of space travel with no need for spaceships. This was unimaginable. His face tightened, and he felt a slight quiver in his stomach. This was completely uncharted territory, and it was likely that they were as unprepared to face it as the Latoors were. He hoped for a different outcome for his people though.

The Latoors did not have me, did they?

"What is it doing, just standing there?" asked the king.

Maada's warrior instinct shouted furiously at him, and he felt all blood drain from his own face.

"It is me," he murmured.

"What was that?" asked the king.

Maada looked at him. "You know what I used to do right before we attacked a planet, do you not?"

It was the King's turn to pale.

Maada had a ritual: before attacking a planet, he used to have his Deathbringer jump alone to the orbit. He would just sit there, looking at the target, and enjoy the few minutes of peace and quiet before the rest of the fleet joined him and the battle started. He somehow knew this was exactly what the alien—who had already destroyed an entire planet—was doing.

"Still no answer to our hail?" he asked.

"None."

"Time to go meet our new friend then," Maada growled through clenched teeth.

Shortly after, Maada was in the Crimson Deathbringer's cockpit, flying towards the enemy. He looked at the cloud of the Deathbringers rising from the surface behind him. Thirty thousand space fighters, two-thirds of which the new models. This was the strongest fleet in the galaxy, rushing to meet a single ... whatever the hell that thing was.

And still, he was worried, and with good reason. For one thing, his instinct, which had never failed him in a lifetime spent as a soldier, warned him that something dreadful was about to happen. Moreover, he had seen the Akakie report about what happened to Mantux. An enemy that had destroyed the Latoors so comprehensively, and with such apparent ease, must have been frighteningly strong.

And then the general's worst nightmare came true.

The rift throbbed a few times and then suddenly expanded. Hundreds of ships (it was difficult for Maada to think about those things in any other terms, sentient beings or not) similar to the first one, but with small variations in their sizes, some smaller, some bigger, and all ink-black, poured out, flying straight towards Tangaar, ignoring the Xortaags' frantic efforts to communicate.

Thousands of them.

Hundreds of thousands of them.

Maada checked the VR screen in front of him three times before he could believe his own eyes. *Two hundred thousand ships!* How was that even possible? A sudden coldness grabbed his heart. Who were these people, where did they come from, and what the hell did they want? Come to think of it, after what had happened to Mantux, it was pretty obvious *what* they wanted, but *why* was a totally different question. His hand moved towards his face before he remembered he was wearing a helmet. How was he supposed to fight an enemy who outnumbered his forces almost seven to one?

There was, of course, a distant possibility that the enemy ships were not as modern as the Deathbringers, especially since they had no obvious weaponry. Maada, however, doubted that would be the case. He could already see the black vessels were as fast and maneuverable as his own space fighters. If the Akakies' theory were correct, these things were coming from the future, which hinted at a more advanced technology. Moreover, the Latoors had a formidable and modern fleet, but it had not done them any good.

So, we are prey now.

The general was surprised at his own calmness. There was a certain serenity in accepting his inevitable doom. But if these bastards had thought the Xortaags would give up without a fight, they were dead wrong.

He opened a channel to his fleet. "Stay in formation but move back closer to the planet where our anti-spacecraft artillery can support us."

Then he contacted the commander of the artillery units. "Open fire as soon as they enter the orbit, but make sure your guys do not hit any of us."

"I do not think they need to be reminded, General."

“Do it just the same. Tell them if they shoot down any of my ships, they will answer to me. That should keep them on their toes.”

The ground-based defenses came to life, lighting up the sky with countless red-hot energy bolts shot at the enemy. The aliens scattered and started maneuvering to dodge the ground fire. Dozens were hit. Red, yellow, and white explosions filled the space. Maada noticed the alien vessels, despite apparently not having shields, were very durable, and it required several hits to bring them down. Even then, a lot of them would not explode but fall onto the planet. Maada followed one of the falling enemy ships on his screen. The alien aimed for and fell right on top of a laser cannon. The general scanned the surface and saw a similar pattern: the destroyed enemy ships tried to take out military targets when they hit the surface. These aliens would try to destroy their enemies with any means possible, even if it meant their own death. Now that was truly dangerous.

Here they come!

It was thirty thousand of them against two hundred thousand enemy ships. His mind raced, going over all the possible tactics he could use in this situation, but he could not find anything that would work. This was hopeless. Maada tightened his fists and pushed back his shoulders. If this were the last time he would fly the Crimson Deathbringer into battle, he was determined to make it count.

“For Tangaar!” he roared into his mike.

“For Tangaar!” thirty thousand voices roared back.
