

ESCAPE

Chapter X

“It seems as though they are slowing down. Perhaps they realize that we’ve given them the slip,” Joseph turned to talk to Mark. “How much longer do we have the concealment device?”

At that moment tracer fire began to rain down on the group from all directions. Maxwell gave out a shriek as he took a direct hit in the chest. Blood splattered out of the wound as he fell in a heap. He didn’t move.

The others zigzagged their way towards the ship. One of the Bignols took a hit in the leg and fell to the ground. As Somat went to help him, he was hit in the arm. Even so, he managed to help the Bignol to the ship. Joseph began returning fire with his Knoxthian tracer when suddenly the Krolon Power canons on the ZX/2 went into action. The powerful tracers blew holes through the guard tower to the right and then the one to the left.

“Great shooting,” Joseph thought to himself wondering who had taken control of the guns on board the ship.

Just as the last of the Bignols got on board, Joseph climbed in behind. Conrad was sitting in the pilot’s seat and engaged the thrusters. The ship began to lift off of the ground. Regis pulled up the door and secured the latch making the escape complete.

There was tracer fire all around and the ship took some direct hits, but the shields were holding; nothing was seriously damaged.

Denise looked over at Joseph and smiled. Joseph smiled back as he worked to get

the armor suit off.

“We’re on our way. Mark and your father reinstalled the CPU and the ZX/2 is working like a dream. The CPU needs a little more time to become fully charged, but we have enough processing power to get out of here. In a few seconds we’ll be able to engage the McMarian Hyper-Warp drive systems,” Conrad said with a giant grin on his face.

Sitting next to Conrad, in the co-pilot’s seat, was Mark. He was firing the Krolon Power canons with great accuracy while Dr. Xelco was checking out all of the operational systems.

The ZX/2 lifted off of the ground and Conrad directed the craft out of the courtyard, into the sky and then off of the planet. The ride was a little bumpy as the CPU because the CPU was still regaining strength. As soon as the lift-off thrusters had done their job, the Greco-Light system kicked in sending the little craft out into space.

“Computer, ready to engage the McMarian Hyper-Warp drives on my mark,” Conrad said as he pushed the craft out of the atmosphere, “NOW!”

Nothing happened. “What’s wrong?” queried Mark, “We should be in hyper-warp and we’re not! Dr. Xelco please check this out.”

Just then Conrad spoke up, “Either I’m seeing spots before my eyes or we are being chased by an entire squadron of Reidforcian fighter ships, and they’re headed right for us!”

Everyone began to panic.

“Where did that panel go?!” exclaimed Mark. He was frantically looking in and around the console.

“What panel?” Joseph asked Mark.

“The one that should be right here,” Mark answered. “It is the one that engages the McMarian Hyper-Warp system, and it’s gone.”

Poking his head up from the lower compartment Dr. Xelco replied, “It wasn’t there to begin with, as far as I know. We were working on that part of the McMarian Hyper-Warp drive system when we were interrupted by the Reidforcian attack.”

“Then how did you get here Joseph?” Conrad turned around and questioned Joseph.

“Well, we just used the Greco-Light drive system. I didn’t even think to use the

McMarian Hyper-Warp system, mostly because I didn't know how to engage it." replied Joseph with a sheepish look on his face.

"We had better do something quick or we're going to be overrun by those ships coming up behind us!" Mark panicked.

"I'll go below to see if I can put something together so we can disguise ourselves," Mark said as he ducked down the hatch to the control section. With that, Mark disappeared and Joseph moved into the co-pilot's seat.

Mark stuck his head up out of the lower cabin and asked, "Joseph, what did you do down here? It looks like you rigged up some type of jamming device."

"I did that when we were on our way here so the Reidforcians wouldn't be able to track us," Joseph replied.

"No wonder they knew you were coming. You switched polarities on the converter and you actually created a pulsing beacon that made you an easy target. I'll reverse the polarity so it will work as you originally planned."

"Wait a minute," Denise chimed in, "Why can't we take the concealment devices we used on our atmosphere suits and connect them to the ship so they can't see us or track us?"

"That's a great idea!" Mark burst out. "Give me one of the suits and I'll hook it up. With the added power of the batteries on the ship, we should be able to stay under cover long enough to evade them."

Mark once again slipped down into the control section.

"Computer, by using the concealment device on the main power supply, how long will we remain under cover?" Joseph asked the CPU.

"Twenty-four minutes eighteen point seven seconds," the CPU responded sounding like its normal self.

"How far are the Reidforcians from us now?" Dr. Xelco asked with a sense of urgency in his voice.

"They are still out of visual range but they have locked onto us with their trackers. We should be within firing range in about five minutes," Joseph monitored the data on the

console in front of him.

“Four minutes twenty-seven point nine minutes,” the CPU corrected Joseph.

“I think that CPU is a wise guy,” Mark retorted from below as he popped his head up out of the hatch. He let everyone know that the needed systems were now in place.

Conrad looked at the oncoming ships on the console and couldn't count the number of ships trailing them.

“Here is what we're going to do. On my signal we're going to increase our speed to maximum using the Greco-Light drive system. Then when I give the second signal I want Joseph to turn off all nonessential systems. Next we will engage the concealment device and finally on my third signal will put the drives into full reverse,” Conrad relayed his orders.

The others looked at each other in amazement and disbelief. “Are you sure about this Conrad?” Joseph asked the obvious question.

Conrad just nodded. Each took a seat and buckled themselves in for the ride of their lives.

“NOW!” Came the command from Conrad. He pushed the throttle forward and the little ship lurched forward. They gained a little distance from the squadron following behind. Then the pursuers engaged their light speed thrusters and began to gain on the ZX/2 once again.

“OK, turn off all of the nonessential systems!” Conrad gave the second command. “Mark, engage the concealment device!”

Mark obeyed the order and then Conrad yelled out, “HOLD on, here we go!” as he began to throw switches.

The cockpit went dark except for the dim lights from the console panel. Conrad pulled all the way back on the throttle and the craft immediately reversed its path. For a few seconds a deafening sound filled the cabin as the ship jerked and shimmied, and then there was absolute silence. The force of the reversal left every one of them deafened and dumbfounded

Just then, the entire squadron came into view through the forward windows

sweeping past them as if they were standing still, while in actuality the ZX/2 was going as fast backwards as the Reidforcians were going forward.

“I don’t think that has ever been done before, especially at light speed,” a shaken Dr. Xelco said as he recovered from being thrown forward so violently.

“Can you believe that?” Mark gasped. “They went right past us, and they never knew it. That’s got to be one for C.I.G.A. (Confederation of Interplanetary Governments’ Academy). They’ll teach that maneuver to every graduating cadet from now on!” Mark congratulated Conrad.

“Hey, it worked, now what do we do?” Joseph asked.

Conrad had a large bump on his forehead. “Boy that was some ride, whew!” he said as he held his forehead checking out the size of his bump.

Denise came over to give medical aid to Conrad, but he just pushed her aside.

“I think we’ve given them the slip for now, but we don’t have that much reserve power to stay here for long,” Conrad said as he checked the control panel to get a bearing on their location.

Conrad left the craft on minimal internal power, slowed the ship’s backward progress, turned the craft around, and laid in a new course.

“Where are we going?” questioned Dr. Xelco.

“I thought it wouldn’t be wise to set a course for Earth, so I have set a course for the Sigmata colony. We can get reinforcements, and reunite Denise with her parents,” Conrad replied while he carefully set the coordinates for the Sigmata outpost.

Meanwhile, Denise, working with the aid of the light from an atmosphere suit, began to repair the damage to Somat’s arm and the Bignol’s leg. Although the first aid kits were limited, she was able to make them comfortable. Joseph came back to help, but Denise, being as efficient as always, needed none.

“Hey where did the whittier come from?” Joseph asked as he noticed the furry beast sitting on the floor looking up at him begging for a morsel of food. “Isn’t he going to give us away with the transmitter we planted in him?” Joseph asked.

Denise just looked at him with a ‘have a clue’ expressions. “Do you think we would

risk that?" she responded. "We checked him out and he has lost the transmitter.

"How did he do that?" Joseph asked.

Denise just rolled her eyes and went back to work

Avoiding the risk of seeming stupid, Joseph just nodded. The whittier leapt from the floor onto Joseph's shoulder and it began to search through his pockets looking for food. Joseph went to the cupboard and took out a small ball of aluminum foil, and fed it to the little creature that gobbled it up.

Dr. Xelco began rummaging around the storage compartments; every once in a while he tossed something out onto the counter.

"What are you looking for?" asked a puzzled Fragon.

"We were working on a special project when we had to abandon the ZX/2." Looking around Dr. Xelco continued, "You know, I never thought I would see this again. She sure is a beauty."

Returning to the search he said, "What I'm looking for are some components needed to activate the McMarian system. I'm not sure I can find everything I need, but it will help to pass the time."

"Can I help?" asked Fragon.

"Sure, take the parts I have already found and place them over on the workstation at the back of the craft so I can sort them," Dr. Xelco agreed.

Fragon and the other Bignols carefully picked the components off of the floor and the counter moving them to the desk.

Denise took a cold compress to Conrad and gently pressed it on the large bump on Conrad's forehead.

"Boy, that looks nasty," Denise said wincing her eyes.

"I'll live. Here let me hold that while you check on the others. Thanks Denise," Conrad looked up at Denise with a smile.

Mark continued to monitor the direction and speed of the Reidforcian ships as well as the speed and direction of the ZX/2.

"It seems as though they are slowing down. Perhaps they realize that we've given

them the slip,” Joseph turned to talk to Mark. “How much longer do we have the concealment device?”

“I don’t have any idea, why don’t we ask the CPU,” Mark responded irritated. “Computer, how much longer do we have the cover of the concealment device?” Mark asked.

“The concealment device is no longer functional. A failure in the cross sectional diaphragm has rendered the device ineffective,” the CPU responded.

“How long has the device been nonfunctional?” queried Mark.

“Approximately twenty minutes sixteen point seven seconds,” replied the CPU.

“CPU, how long did it work?” Mark began to get distressed.

“Two minutes two seconds,” responded the CPU.

“The impact of the power reversal probably caused the failure. That means they probably saw us as they went by!” Mark said with a surprised look on his face. “Nothing we can do about that now, we’ll just have to try and out run them,” Mark said as he checked and rechecked the control panel.

“Computer, how long before the Reidforcians have us in visual range?” Conrad asked the CPU.

“If they continue at their same course and speed, in approximately fourteen hours fifteen minutes twenty-seven point eight seconds,” The CPU’s monotone voice answered.

“What do we do now?” Mark questioned. “We can’t outrun them.”

“Keep your pants on Mark, we aren’t finished yet, you know,” Joseph responded that he had a plan up his sleeve. “We’ve got a lot of time to get things ready.

A schedule was set up for the passengers to use the showers and freshen up. For many of them it had been a very long time since they were able to bathe. It would also help to make the air fresher in the small ship.

Denise checked on Conrad again. His bump was bigger now so she convinced him to go to the galley and get some ice. She also wanted to make sure he didn’t have a concussion.

Yendor moved over to the pilot’s seat and took control.

The rest of the crew settled in for some much needed rest.

Joseph helped his father for a little while and then decided to join the others. He sat up looking around the ship. The little whittier found a comfortable place in Joseph's lap.

The Bignol's were asleep, bunched up in a heap. This is the normal sleeping arrangement for Bignols. They looked like a litter of puppies cuddling up against their mother.

Denise came to sit next to Joseph. As she began to fall asleep, her head drooped to the left onto Joseph's shoulder and she fell sound asleep. Joseph looked at her and caressed her hair. She looked so peaceful. Denise cuddled closer and sighed.

Conrad had taken a seat and was catching up on some much needed sleep as well. Fragon and Dr. Xelco were at the workstation sorting through the miscellaneous parts they had found on the ship. Yendor was still in the pilot's seat and was going over a checklist. He seemed to be tireless.

Joseph drifted off to sleep again happy to have the warmth of the whittier cuddled up in his lap, and Denise on his shoulder.