PLOT THICKENS

Chapter XVI

"Burmi, this is the ZX/2, please change frequency to hyper range, over," Joseph radioed the Burmi. "See you there!" replied Conrad who was now on the radio.

Once off the ground the *ZX/2* then moved gracefully toward the exit pulling the giant *Burmi* behind it. As the two escape vehicles moved beyond the confines of the hanger, a sense of relief overcame everyone. The directional lights on the base began to dim as the distance between them grew.

"Computer, what is our status?" Joseph asked the CPU while monitoring the dials and lights in front of him.

"All systems on both ships check out above nominal ranges. Power drain to the *ZX/2* is at one percent per minute. Estimated time to light speed five minutes forty-two point seven seconds," the CPU rattled off in its monotone voice.

"Computer, what is the status of our defensive systems?" Joseph continued to draw information from the CPU.

"Concealment device estimated at twenty-four point six percent, energy levels at ninety-seven point six percent and falling, Krolon Power canons at ninety-five point one percent charged, and five Ralston torpedoes fully operational. Light speed capabilities in tact so long as enough energy reserves are left after release of the *Burmi*. Greco-Light drive system, doubtful," the CPU finished its analysis of the situation.

"Computer, what do you mean by 'doubtful'?" Dr. Xelco asked.

"The reserve power banks are outside specified limits for Greco-Light speed on both

ships. If the triangulation fields are reversed, then the systems will be operational, but only for about eight point two seconds. The inertia of the thrust will allow the both vehicles to remain at speed for approximately two hours seventeen point two seconds, assuming estimated energy levels," the CPU relayed the request information.

"Joseph, call over to the *Burmi* and let the Bignols know about the triangulation fields or else they won't have Greco-Light speed capability," Dr. Xelco urged Joseph.

"*Burmi*, this is the *ZX/2*. We've got information for the Bignols," Joseph called to the other craft.

"This is the *Burmi*, hold on I'll get one of them for you," another voice came over Joseph's headset.

"This is Szyegis, what do you need?" the Bignol asked.

"Our CPU has told us the triangulation field on the *Burmi* is reversed, and it needs to be repaired before the *Burmi* can achieve Greco-Light speed. Can you take care of it?" Joseph asked.

"No problem, we will have it fixed in two seconds flat," Szyegis replied.

Meanwhile, Dr. Xelco repaired the triangulation field on the *ZX/2*, getting it ready for operation.

The two CIG ships began to increase speed.

"We've reached half-light speed and we are continuing to accelerate," Joseph read the dials and reported to his father.

"Good, everything is progressing well," Dr. Xelco responded while his eyes darted from one side of the console to the other reading all of the information and recording it as fast as he could.

"Look at all of the dots on the monitor screen, and look at how fast they're moving!" Joseph let out a panicked yell. "Those are the ships that chased us off of Reidforcia."

"Computer, please identify incoming traffic." Dr. Xelco quickly asked the CPU.

"Reidforcian attack craft are moving at double light speed. There are seven Rondus class (small and very maneuverable two person fighters) and ten Donal class (mid-sized transport vehicles with heavy armaments). Each has full battle compliments and they are

headed directly for us," the CPU answered unemotionally.

"Computer, how long before we engage them?" Joseph asked.

"Approximately nine minutes fifty-seven point three seconds," the CPU replied.

"Computer, how much longer before we reach Greco-Light potential," Joseph continued with an urgency about him.

"Light speed will be attained in three minutes seven point six seconds. The McMarian Hyper-Warp will be available after disconnection of trailer energy," the CPU replied.

"Computer, if we lay in a new course of forty-five degrees from our present course will it affect the time we reach light speed," Joseph asked the CPU, obviously reaching for straws.

"Yes, by approximately fifteen point one percent," the CPU complied.

"That's too much variance Joseph. They'll be on us like fleas on a dog before we can reach any kind of speed. We don't have the armament to fight them. Once we attain Greco-Light speed, we'll just have to go right down their proverbial throats, and then just blow right on by them," Dr. Xelco explained, not really sure of himself.

"What do you mean by that?" Joseph queried his father.

"Once we attain speed, we can engage the concealment device. They won't be able to see us, assuming the device works," Dr. Xelco said trying to be optimistic. "The *Burmi* can follow us using their less efficient Greco-Light drives."

Mr. Wantis had wandered out of the medical area to the front of the craft to take a break. He was curious about what was transpiring so he took a seat behind Joseph and looked over the information on the control panel.

Jesse Wantis was a reserve pilot. His job on the Lambdata colony was Manager of Acquisitions. His wife Jane was in the nursing section. Jesse was also a certified traffic controller and had helped out in the tower on Lamdata. While working in the tower he monitored the traffic on the screens, and controlled landings and take-offs. He was very familiar with handling ships in tight airspace..

As he was leaning forward to survey the panel's information he noticed that there

was something wrong. He brought up some important information.

"I don't want to be a buttinsky, but if we aren't careful, and time this thing exactly right, the *Burmi* could run up our backside and smash us into little pieces," Mr. Wantis warned. "The velocity of the *Burmi*, based on its size and weight, will make it a formidable piece of hardware hurtling right at us when we disconnect."

"You know, you're right." Joseph agreed. "What do you suggest?"

"Have the CPU delay the engagement of the Greco-Light drives on the Burmi to allow ample time to accelerate in front of her," Mr. Wantis suggested.

Joseph turned to the CPU. "Computer, set light speed and Greco-Light drives on the *Burmi* to avoid them overrunning our position," Joseph quickly reported to the CPU.

"Running evasive programs now," the CPU responded.

"Thanks Mr. Wantis. It helps to have another set of eyes looking out for us," Joseph continued as he looked back at Mr. Wantis and smiled.

The crew sighed a bit of relief that the threat of being run over was resolved.

Mr. Wantis returned to the galley. Just then a loud scream came from the back of the small craft.

"What was that!?" Joseph turned and asked nobody in particular.

Mrs. Wantis pulled back the screen and said, "Denise just came to. She's in a lot of pain, but she's responding to the treatments. We should have her up and around soon. She's a quick healer so we won't miss her for long."

Joseph looked to see if he could get a peek at Denise. "I thought she was dying the way she screamed," Joseph said turning to his father.

"Get back to the controls, Joseph!" ordered Dr. Xelco.

"I have an idea," he continued. "If we arm the Ralston torpedoes and set a different target for each one of them, we can create a diversion that may help us get out of here."

Then speaking to himself, "It would probably be better to target the larger Donal Class vessels because of their heavier compliment of attack weapons. We are going to need the concealment device in order to pull this off."

Dr. Xelco said to Joseph, "Call over to Mark to find out how to turn on the

concealment device, I can't figure out what he has done here. We're going to have to move fast and in unison in order for this to work. Also while you have the *Burmi*, ask them what kind of defensive equipment they have." Dr. Xelco was talking as fast as he could trying to cover all of the variables he could think of.

"*Burmi*, this is the *ZX/2*, please change frequency to hyper range," Joseph radioed the *Burmi*.

"See you there!" replied Conrad who was now on the radio again.

Joseph changed the setting to the secured channel with the scrambler knowing that the Reidforcians would be trying to monitor the transmissions. Joseph wanted the maximum security. The reason they had not used the hyper range before is that the descrambler delays the conversations, and the transmission range is reduced.

"*Burmi*, do you read me?" Joseph called the *Burmi* once again.

"We're here, what's up," Conrad's voice came over the radio after a short pause.

"In case you haven't seen, there are seventeen Reidforcian fighters in front of us. They are armed and ready to do battle. The CPU says we will engage them in less than six minutes. What kind of defensive systems do you have on your ship?" Joseph queried.

"Hold on, let me check," Conrad replied. A pause on the airwaves passed, and then Conrad returned, "We have four trazer cannons and two conventional torpedoes. We don't have a lot of weapons. The *Burmi* used them before the Reidforcians captured it. Our shields are operational, but we have limited power to them. One or two hits are all we can stand. What's your plan?"

Joseph shared his plan with the crew of the *Burmi*, and after a short discussion the two ships decided on a strategy that they felt would give them the best chance of survival.

The plan went like this. The *ZX/2* would release the *Burmi* and engage the Greco-Light engines. Once at light speed the McMarian Hyper-Warp thrusters would kick in. Just before encountering the Reidforcian ships, the Ralston torpedoes would release. The *Burmi*, following behind, on a signal from the *ZX/2,* would activate their Greco-Light drives and begin firing all of their weapons at the approaching ships. If the plan worked right the *Burmi* would pass the Reidforcian force just before the Ralston torpedoes

detonated.

Mark got on the line and explained to Dr. Xelco how to activate the concealment device. He told him that he had moved all of the controls to the console, so he wouldn't have to go into the lower section anymore. Dr. Xelco was relieved to hear that.

"Everyone put on your safety belts. This is going to get exciting," Joseph turned his head towards the passengers. "We've got to do some radical things to get out of this," he continued.

After making sure that everything was in order below, Dr. Xelco emerged from the lower compartment. He scanned the control panel to make sure all of the readings corresponded with the information the CPU had given them. He armed the five Ralston torpedoes and engaged their tracking systems. He set each one to track a different Donal class ship. Dr. Xelco also checked the Krolon Power canons to make sure of their functionality and accuracy. Once he was satisfied that all of the systems were in operational condition, he nodded over to Joseph who responded with a grin.

"I have a bit of a surprise for you," Dr. Xelco smiled at Joseph.

"What would that be?" Joseph asked.

"Listen to the communications device. You might hear something unexpected," Dr. Xelco chided Joseph.

Just then he heard chatter on the radio. It was the Reidforcians sending messages. He could understand everything that they were saying.

"How did you do that?" Joseph asked.

"While I was down there it came to me that we might be able to enhance the CPU's language interpretation by connecting the helmet we brought on board. We can now monitor the communications of the Reidforcians and they won't know it," Dr. Xelco said feeling very proud of himself.

"That is so cool!" Joseph responded.

"Computer, how long before we reach light speed?" Joseph asked the CPU.

"Approximately one minute seven point eight seconds," the CPU responded.

"It sure takes a long time to get to light speed with us dragging all this weight

behind us," Joseph commented

"Computer, how long before we are in trazer range?" Dr. Xelco added.

"Approximately three minutes fifty-six point two seconds," the now familiar voice answered.

"Boy, that's cutting it real close," Joseph commented.

"A margin of error of one minute forty-nine point eight seconds," the CPU offered.

"I'm beginning to see what Mark meant about the CPU," Joseph said in a sarcastic manner to himself

"*Burmi*, be prepared to engage Greco-Light drive on our signal. We should be at light speed in less than one minute," Joseph broadcast over the microphone.

"That would be...."

"Knock it off computer!" Joseph interrupted the CPU.

Turning his attention to the plan he ordered, "Computer give us a ten second countdown to light speed."

"As you command," the CPU replied.

Joseph switched off all but the essential power from the craft. Life support was put on minimal, and all but the emergency lights were shut off. Mrs. Wantis and Fragon put on headlamps from the atmosphere suits so they could continue working on Denise, who was now conscious and communicating with her mother.

"*Burmi*, we will be entering the danger zone soon. Make sure all of your weapons are in good working order and ready to fire," Joseph warned the crew.

Calling over to the Burmi, Joseph reminded them, "Be ready to increase the power to your forward shields and engage your concealment device on our CPU's command.

"We are all set over here," Admiral Verondi replied. "We've got your back! I hope this plan of yours works. We've checked everything twice and all systems are a go."

"Ten.. nine.. eight.. seven.. six.. five.. four.. three.. two.. one.." The CPU counted down.

"HOLD ON! " Joseph yelled out. "We are about to play the biggest game of chicken ever! Let's see who blinks first."

At that moment the trailer energy released the *Burmi* and the little craft lurched forward making everything around it turn into a blur.

"Concealment device operational, all torpedoes are off, and the McMarian Hyper-Warp drive is engaged on the *ZX/2*," the CPU relayed. "All systems on the *Burmi* are functional as well," the good news from the CPU rang out.

Joseph reported. "We will be passing the Reidforcian troops in exactly fifteen seconds, after which the Ralston torpedoes should detonate."

"Krolon Power canons are firing on target. Damage assessment not available at this time," the CPU continued to unfold the series of events that were taking place.

"This is great! We've hit them with everything we've got and they won't even know where it came from," Joseph blurted out. "I think we caught them totally by surprise."

Joseph called over to the *Burmi*. "*Burmi*, this is the *ZX/2*. We will be leaving you shortly. Good luck, and keep the stars to your backs. See ya at Confederation Central, after we take care of some urgent business in the Colonus sector. Keep your concealment device activated as long as you can. You will soon have full control of your vessel."

"Colonus sector? What do you have planned now?" Dr. Xelco asked Joseph surprised at his change in destinations.

"Not now dad, I will explain later," Joseph answered, as he was concentrating on the battle ahead.

Suddenly the Reidforcian ships came into view, and almost as quickly they blurred past the forward observation windows while the *ZX/2* flashed past.

Dr. Xelco monitored the known Reidforcian frequencies. He reported over the speakers for everyone to hear, "From the radio transmissions I'm getting over the headset the Reidforcians are totally confused. According to what they are saying, we just disappeared."

"Out of the five Donal class ships we targeted with our Ralston torpedoes, four are destroyed, and one of them is disabled. Our trazer fire had minimal effect. The *Burmi*'s Trazer cannons took out two of the Rondus class fighters, and its torpedoes had direct hits on two of the larger ships."

"They know we've captured Lord Froth," Dr. Xelco relayed the information he was receiving. "When we come out from under the concealment cover they are going to want revenge,"