

SURPRISE

Chapter XVIII

Joseph just sat stunned, not believing what he had heard over the radio.

“PUT THIS ON THE SCREEN!” demanded Dr. Xelco.

“What now Dr. Xelco,” Denise asked with a look of concern on her face.

“He should be waking up soon but he’ll be feeling pretty weak. He should be just fine with rest and care. Bring his temperature back to normal,” Dr. Xelco directed Mrs. Wantis.

After raising his internal temperature to normal, Mrs. Wantis pulled the thermodilometer out of Joseph’s abdomen, then cleaned and disinfected the entry point. She covered the spot with the plastio paste to prevent further bleeding and scarring. The hot towels were put into the laundry chute. Denise brought him a blanket and made sure it was tucked in around him and wiped his forehead with a cool cloth.

“What I can’t understand is how Sunga fever could have gotten in that dingle. Those dingles come from Molteri and the disease has been completely contained on Bristus,” Dr. Xelco talked to himself out loud.

“What about us. Haven’t we been exposed to the fever as well?” Yendor jumped in.

“Not to worry, Yendor, the samples I put in those trays will provide us with enough serum so we can be inoculated against the disease.

Just then Joseph began to stir.

“Huh, what’s going on? What am I doing here?” Joseph asked as he looked around and saw all of the concerned faces.

He tried to sit up, but because of his weakness he fell flat on his back. “Wow, what’s wrong with me?” Joseph said as he felt the sweat falling from his brow.

“You had a little bout with Sunga fever, that’s all,” Denise told Joseph as she sat next to him wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“You had us scared there for a while, but your dad pulled you through. Just rest now, we’ll handle everything,” She continued as she took a cool cloth and placed it on his forehead.

Dr. Xelco began injecting the Sunga serum into the passengers so that an outbreak wouldn’t occur.

“I can’t lay here, I have to fly the ship and get us to Colonus so we can defeat the Reidforcians. We have to contact the CIG high command and let them know that the trap has been set,” Joseph began to get anxious as he tried to break loose from Denise’s grasp, which frustrated him, because he couldn’t. “Where are my clothes? I’ve got to get back at the controls.”

Denise pushed him back onto the table. She looked him in the eye. “You aren’t going anywhere until your father says you are,” Denise ordered Joseph in one of those ‘don’t even think about it’ voices.

“Yes ma’am,” is all he could say.

Joseph laid back and began to think. He got a curious look on his face that got Denise’s attention.

“What are you thinking about?” Denise finally asked.

“Where would I have gotten Sunga fever?” Joseph questioned not really expecting an answer. “From what I know is Sunga fever has been confined to Bristus for over a year now. This doesn’t make sense,” Joseph talked to himself out loud so Denise could help him figure out what had happened.

“We think the microbe was in the dingle,” Denise offered.

Not really listening to her he continued to think out loud, “I remember that Conrad Darnoc’s ship was going to Bristus with vaccines and cultures for research there. They must have saved them for a time like this,” Joseph surmised.

Joseph motioned for Denise to come closer. He whispered in her ear, “That means someone on the ship may be working for the Reidforcians. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Denise nodded her head in agreement.

Denise and Joseph just stared at each other, not believing that a traitor could still be among them.

“Get my dad so we can get an adult opinion on this,” Joseph recommended.

Denise hobbled over to Dr. Xelco and whispered in his ear. Dr. Xelco got up, and followed Denise to the back of the craft and approached Joseph.

“What do you need?” Joseph’s dad questioned.

Speaking in a soft voice because of his exhaustion, “We think that someone on board the ZX/2 is a traitor. It’s the only answer to how the Sunga fever microbe ended up in my dingle.”

Joseph began to explain to his father, “When we found out Yendor had the tracking device in his head we also tested you.”

“ME?!” Dr. Xelco reacted.

“Yes, we didn’t know if Lord Froth might have put a sensor in you as well, after all you were in the Processing Room. To finish, we didn’t test anyone else, because we didn’t think Lord Froth could have gotten to anyone else. It would appear that we might have been wrong. If you hadn’t discovered the fever when you did, the entire crew would now be infected with the microbe,” Joseph explained about what he was thinking.

“I know that Sunga was on Conrad Darnoc’s ship when it was captured by the Reidforcians. The only way that it could have gotten in the dingle, and then onto the ZX/2, is if a traitor from Sigmata put it there, and then arranged for it to get here,” Joseph surmised.

“What do you propose?” Dr. Xelco said now realizing that the threat to their plan was real.

“Take the QRE and test the others on the ship. Denise will show you the readings she got from Yendor,” Joseph laid out his plan.

Dr. Xelco and Denise went over the settings while Joseph attempted to get up off of

the observation table. He rolled or actually fell off the table, crawled over to the closet, and got out his clothes. He had managed to get his pants on when Denise noticed that he was sprawled on the floor.

“Joseph Xelco, what do you think you are doing?” Denise demanded.

“If we do have a traitor on the ship, I need to find out if the course we set is still accurate and if we are maintaining speed,” Joseph panted while still trying to get his clothes on.

“What am I going to do with you?” Denise commented as she bent down to help Joseph get his shirt over his shoulders.

As soon as he was dressed, Joseph pulled himself up against the counter, and with Denise’ help, he walked slowly to one of the recliners behind the pilot’s seat.

“Well Mr. Joseph, are we glad to see you survived the sickness,” Mr. Wantis turned and smiled at Joseph. “We’ve been monitoring the Reidforcians and it seems as though the trap you set is working. However, we haven’t heard a word from any CIG ships.”

“Maintaining double light speed. All inertia from McMarian Hyper-Warp has dissipated. Reidforcian crafts are approaching from the Solari sector, and the Gombini sector. Time of contact approximately One hour forty-nine minutes seventeen point nine seconds,” the CPU relayed its information. “Energy reserves approaching critical levels. Life support at seventy percent, light speed reserves at thirteen point six percent, sub-light reserves at twenty-seven point four percent, trazer power forty-one point eight percent, deflectors at eighty-two point one percent,.....” the CPU continued to give a status report.

“With this kind of power drain we will be lucky just to get to the Colonus sector, much less engage the enemy in battle,” Mr. Wantis expressed his concern. “I’m cutting our shields by half and reducing life support to sixty percent. At least this way we will be able to have a chance to run before we’re blown out of the galaxy,” he continued, not sounding exactly confident.

Dr. Xelco moved about the ship monitoring the QRE looking for any sign of a device that might match the one in Yendor’s head. As he moved closer to the front a disturbed look came over his face. Not wanting to create a scene Joseph watched his father

from the corner of his eye. Dr. Xelco finished by scanning both Fragon and Mr. Wantis, and then sat down next to Joseph with a blank look on his face.

“I didn’t get a single abnormal reading from anyone on the ship. I think you’re hypothesis was correct, but we can’t prove it.”

Denise, looking much better and moving about the ship, slid forward to find out the results of the testing.

“Negative,” Joseph said dejectedly as he looked up at Denise. “What do we do now?” he continued.

“Is it possible that the traitor is no longer on the ship?” Denise volunteered.

Joseph and Dr. Xelco looked at each other as if a light had gone on in their collective heads.

They decided to get the rest of the passengers in on the discussion. Since no one on the ship had a transmitter, it was felt it was safe to reveal what was going on, and to get their feedback.

“Oh my, that means that someone on board the *Burmi* is loyal to Lord Froth, and we have no way of contacting them,” Joseph exclaimed while thinking to himself. “Who do you think it could be?” Joseph asked not really expecting an answer.

“Let’s retrace our steps,” Joseph tried to remember the incidents back at Sigmata. “After we captured Lord Froth, Yendor picked up the orb. Denise warned him about how dangerous the thing was and he handed it off to one of the Molteri prisoners.”

“Come to think of it, a Molteri gave me the dingles just as I was leaving the *Burmi* with the medical supplies,” Regis thought back to his exit from the *Burmi*.

“That makes sense now that you mention it, but that is bad news for the people on the *Burmi*,” Dr. Xelco said thoughtfully.

“We need to figure out our situation before we can consider what happened on the *Burmi*. We have important things to do here first,” Mr. Wantis reminded the others.

Joseph turned to the CPU, “Computer, what is our estimated time of arrival at the Colonus sector?”

“Approximately Twenty-two minutes forty-seven point six seconds,” The CPU

responded in its monotone voice.

“Computer, please give us the distance and coordinates of all crafts within scanner range,” Joseph ordered to CPU.

“Twenty-eight enemy targets approaching from the Gombini sector; five Parrady class and twenty-three Donal class. Forty-seven enemy craft approaching from the Solari sector; forty-three Donal class, and four Parrady class. Time of initial contact, is one hour twenty-two minutes seven point eight seconds. Confederation ships approaching from the Krion sector, currently out of sensor range, but approaching at double light speed. Time of arrival, approximately thirty-five minutes forty-two seconds,” the CPU blurted out its news.

“The message I sent got through! I wonder how many ships are in the force that’s coming here.” Joseph wondered to himself.

“There are fifty-two Forodian class vessels headed towards the Colonus sector with full armaments,” the CPU responded to the indirect question.

A cheer went up from the passengers realizing that now they had a fighting chance for survival, and that they didn’t have to meet the Reidforcian threat alone.

“Computer, please describe a Parrady class Reidforcian vessel,” Dr. Xelco asked the CPU.

“The Parrady class vessel is the largest craft in the Reidforcian fleet. It has battlements equivalent to a battle station and can house up to twenty-seven Rondus class attack ships on each. Although it’s slow, it is a fully armored operations station capable of attacking and securing entire planets on its own.” the CPU described a craft that wasn’t expected to be in this quadrant.

A hush went over the formerly exuberant group. This was a total surprise. Maybe somehow the Reidforcians had found out that this was going to be a trap, and were now ready for an all-out battle. The CIG force and the tiny ZX/2 wouldn’t stand a chance.

“Joseph, there is an unidentified signal coming over the ultra-band frequency and they are asking for you,” Fragon turned and looked at Joseph quizzically.

Joseph took the head set and responded to the voice on the other end, “This is

Joseph Xelco, what can I do for you?”.

His face went absolutely white and all expression on his face was washed away as Joseph could not believe what he heard on the headset.

Dr. Xelco shook Joseph, “What is it, what’s wrong?”

Joseph just sat stunned, not believing what he had heard over the radio.

“PUT THIS ON THE SCREEN!” demanded Dr. Xelco.

Mr. Wantis threw the switch and before them in all his glory sat Lord Froth with all of his trappings, speaking directly to Joseph; behind him and to his right stood the Molteri, the suspected traitor.

“Joseph Xelco, you have been a thorn in my side since the first time we met. It would appear that you have all survived the Sunga fever. That was very clever of you. You are more resourceful than I could ever have given you credit for. Because you have caused such havoc throughout my Potentate, it is now time for you to pay. I want the *ZX/2* intact. If you follow my directions I will let you all survive. Then you will live out your days serving me on Reidforcia. One way or another I WILL have the *ZX/2* and all of its technology. YOU decide how. I will expect an answer within ten minutes. If you choose to ignore me, you will meet an untimely and terrible end.” Lord Froth looking more regal and formidable than ever, finished his speech, and then the screen went blank.

Everyone on the *ZX/2* went silent. Had their plan come to a complete and bitter end before it ever had a chance to begin?

If Lord Froth was now on board one of the Reidforcian ships, then what had happened to the *Burmi*?

How had Lord Froth managed to get off of the *Burmi*? It suddenly dawned on them that the Molteri was the one who had taken the staff away from Yendor back at the Sigmata colony. It became obvious that he had given it back to Lord Froth. With the blue orb they used it to transport themselves to the ship that was now approaching. The realization came over them that they were heading directly into a trap, that was originally meant for their enemies, but was now meant for them.

“Computer, chart a course for Lonturi in the Colonus sector and engage on my

command,” Joseph ordered the CPU as he pushed Mr. Wantis out of the pilot’s chair and took his place. Though still very weak, Joseph was taking over command, and everyone knew it.

“Upon your command,” the CPU replied.

“NOW!” Joseph gave the command and the little ship altered course.

“Computer, do we have any reserves for Greco-Light or concealment?” Joseph continued to question the CPU.

“Yes, but not enough to evade the approaching ships,” was the answer given by the CPU.

“I guess we’ll just have to make it on what we’ve got,” Joseph said under his breath as he guided the ship to their new location.

Turning to the communications seat he gave the order to Fragon, “Open a hailing frequency in the hyper frequency range so we can contact our sister ships.”

Joseph was again in control of the situation.

“Frequency open,” Fragon responded.

“Confederation of Interplanetary Governments ships, this is the *ZX/2* escape ship hailing any and all CIG ships in the Colonus sector. Be advised that a large contingency of Reidforcians ships is awaiting your arrival within this sector. Maintain speed and direction until you receive further information from us,” Joseph said using the deepest and most authoritative voice he could muster.

“*ZX/2*, we have received your message. We are aware of the size and types of ships approaching. We would advise you to vacate the sector. We will give you cover for as long as you need it,” came the response from the approaching CIG ships.

“That is impossible. We are low on fuel and cannot activate our Greco-Light drives. We have no armaments and only minimal life support. We are planning a crash landing on one of the planets in this solar system. We plan to destroy the *ZX/2* so the Reidforcians won’t acquire its technology,” Joseph continued to be as commanding as possible. Joseph then closed the communication.

“Are you crazy!” Dr Xelco blurted out. “How do you plan to destroy this thing?”

We'd be sitting ducks down there. Lonturi is only a way-station without any defensive abilities. What do you want down there?" Dr. Xelco chided Joseph.