



BRIGHT SWORD

A Tale of Exploring Our Future

Everyone always wonders how they can fit in. We each start out innocent, or so we think. Then we get a little experience. This is when the trouble starts. Still, a journey is a journey... and we all have to start somewhere.

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Suliton was calm and serene. A gentleness flowed from him like the ripples of water on a lake. His calming effect was universal, you couldn't help but feel it. Suliton projected it as if it were a ray of coherent light. But for all his calm, he had fears. Fears for his people, fears for the universe as a whole. He saw it as his mission to wipe away all the things which caused uncertainty... but most especially all the things which produced fear.

His Hall of Meditation was barren. Suliton would have been disturbed if he knew the others referred to it as his throne room. He found such terms... inappropriate. The walls were a ghostly white, without windows, lights, or any form of decoration. The room glowed all on its own. Lighted seemed to come from all directions and from nowhere at the same time. For Suliton, it was perfect for meditation. At his command, the room would go dark. A pure blackness where it wasn't possible to know if your eyelids were open or closed. It all looked the same.

Harmon Bloodthorne entered the sanctum. He didn't use a door, of course, because there weren't any. He simply passed through the walls as everyone else did. Suliton enjoyed the fact most petitioners were awed by the technology. It put them in the right frame of mind. Bloodthorne cleared his throat. "One of the ships has reached Sector 131."

Suliton's face turned an ugly shade of purple as if he'd been holding his breath too long. "Didn't I order all the ships destroyed?"

"Yes, Meager Guardian, you did."

Suliton waved his hand and the walls were filled with a massive star chart. The images seemed to come from an unseen projector. On one side a line was drawn. At its end was a blinking yellow dot. "Then why is one of them arriving in Sector 131?"

Bloodthorne covered his mouth with his hand as he coughed. "It's an uncivilized sector, but it is not unpopulated."

"So, there is a danger?"

"Yes, Meager Guardian, there is."

Suliton folded his arms across his chest. "What must I do to protect the universe? Why must I beg and plead with our squadrons to do their duty? To protect the universe?"

"Meager Guardian, I... I... I don't know what to tell you."

"Send an Eradicator Squad at once."

"Yes, Meager Guardian, of course."

Harmon Bloodthorne bowed down to his knees and started walking backward to exit the Meager Guardian of Thought's presence, but he halted at the sound of his voice. "Oh, and Harmon, you'd better hope that it doesn't meet any sentient races. In fact, if I were you, I start praying right now."

President Ariadne entered the situation room. Inside sat the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They looked nervous, and these were people who were never supposed to look unnerved. They uniformly stood as she entered the room. Ariadne had a no-nonsense presence she spent years developing at the UN. She could crush a person with only a glance or simply with a determined tone. Few people could imagine crossing her without being utterly destroyed. “How big is it?”

General Oleian took in a deep breath. “It roughly 100 miles long and about 10 miles wide.”

“Where is it now?”

Oleian brought up a projection of the solar system on the display screen. “Just inside the orbit of Neptune.”

“How fast is it moving?”

“It’ll be here in six days.”

“That seemed to be moving rather fast. We don’t have anything which moves that fast.”

Professor Mandarev crossed his hands. “Actually, it’s only moving at about two percent of the speed of light.”

“Who the hell is this?”

General Oleian interrupted. “This is Professor Gideon Mandarev, he’s our expert on this phenomenon from JPL, at least for now.” He gave the professor a disconcerting smile.

“As I was saying, yes, it’s fast. And to answer your question Madam President, at least faster than anything we have at the moment.”

“Haven’t we seen this kind of thing before? Don’t we get visitors from outer space all the time? I think in my day, we called them comets or maybe meteorites. Why are we bring this to the attention of the White House?”

“This is different,” Oleian reported.

“Because it’s headed straight here?”

Oleian practically saluted as he spoke. “Yes, Madam President.”

“But that’s not what worries us,” Mandarev reported. The brass all gave Gideon the eye. There was a line you didn’t cross in the situation room and this was definitely it. You didn’t offer up information without being asked. Mandarev didn’t even notice. “It’s slowing down.”

“Is that supposed to mean something?”

“A natural object of this type doesn’t change speed and it certainly doesn’t slow down.”

“When you say a natural object, what do you mean?”

"I mean, Madam President, this object was artificially constructed, and it came from outside our solar system."

"So now we have to decide if this is a matter for the Air Force or the State Department?"

Oleian leaned back in his chair. "Yes, Madam President."

"What have we got?"

Dixon Oleian blinked. "Excuse me?"

"What have we got to go investigate?" Ariadne explained. "The space shuttle is out of the question. Besides it's only good for low earth orbit, I assume we don't want to wait that long before we get someone to investigate?"

"We've got the Orion 2 spacecraft. It was scheduled to go to the moon this October, but the new lander isn't ready yet."

"So, we launch it without the lander?"

"Yes."

Professor Mandarev looked grave. "If we launch later this afternoon, we can meet it before it crosses the orbit of the moon."

Oleian seemed disappointed. "Can't we do any better? I'd like to greet our new friends at a considerable distance if it's all the same to the rest of the chiefs."

"Well, somebody send a letter to Congress," President Ariadne declared, "Telling them they should get NASA some better funding. In the meantime, General let's get this mission going. It seems we don't have a lot of time. Dick," The president stood and turned to address the Chief of Staff. "I want updates every twenty minutes. That's all gentlemen."

The officers all stood as the president left the room.



The lights in the Orion 2 command capsule blinked like a Christmas tree gone berserk. Rickard Allen Brant tried to get a handle on the situation. They were approaching the object rapidly. Fortunately, it had slowed down considerably after crossing the orbit of Mars. Otherwise, Brant realized this would have been a very short trip. The object was clearly constructed by someone... or something. He could tell it had been built even this far away. The surface was covered with smooth plates of various colors. The design seemed to resemble a very elongated oval, like an uncut Cuban cigar. He couldn't make out any windows, but they were still a ways off. Rickard spent some time staring at it through the viewing port and the telescope, marking down his observations. In all his years at NASA, he never imagined he'd be this close to something from another world. Something this alien. Ten days ago, the whole idea would have been preposterous. But here they were, alive and in the flesh... and it was out there... waiting. "We better get our suits on."

“Suits?” Marcellus Winston asked. The cyberneticist had been anxious about the entire trip since he had exactly zero astronaut training. They’d given him a quick rundown on the suit while he was on the ground, getting ready for launch, but actual use in space was an entirely different matter.

Rickard’s wit was dry and sarcastic. “You didn’t think they have a door all ready for us to fit our hatch into, did you?”

“I don’t know what I thought,” he replied, wiping the sweat off his brow with his sleeve.

“Don’t worry,” Nicole Garrett tried to calm him down, “You’ll be tethered to Rick. It’s perfectly safe,” she lied.

“Yeah,” Ken Martin added jokingly, “If we all go flying off into space, then we’ll all do it together.”

Ken had been a booster engine designer for JPL for several years, but Marcellus was a bit surprised by how well Nicole was taking this. After all, she was only a mathematician from JPL. She seemed far too calm for his tastes. She, of all people, should have realized the one constant about space was it clashed with all life on planet Earth. Brant handed him a suit. “You just put it on one leg at a time, like normal,” the ground technician had informed him. The comment didn’t instill a lot of confidence in Marcellus. A mere kid, he looked way too young to be involved in the space program with any acceptable level of expertise.

Brant pulled a Browning BDA .45 ACP pistol out of a supply box, cocked a round into the chamber and stuffed the pistol into a pocket on his suit’s right leg.

“Please tell me you don’t think that is necessary?” Marcellus asked, even more nervous than he was before.

Rick smiled. “Serious diplomatic activity.”

The capsule shuddered violently.

“What was that?” Marcellus complained.

Rick looked over at the controls. The RCS thrusters were going off like mad. Everyone could hear the jets of gas escaping from the reaction thrusters. They were struggling against something. The gyro was off by at least ten degrees. Numbers on the NAV computers were changing faster than you could blink.

“Something is dragging us off course.”

Ken was busy looking out the window. His face was pale. “You might want to take a look at this.” In the small place of the capsule, there was some struggle for Ken and Rick to change places. In this weightless environment, arms and legs tended to get in the way. Out of the only window, Brant saw the first kink in the object’s surface. Along the dorsal surface, there appeared a round whole. Rickard would have sworn it had not been there a few minutes ago. The capsule seemed to be headed directly for it.

The color still hadn’t returned to Ken Martin’s face. “You think it’s a tractor beam?”

“Well, I never heard of a tractor beam outside of science-fiction, but then I’ve never seen anybody build anything this big.” Brant wiped his brow. “Yeah, I’ll wager it’s a tractor beam.”

Marcellus' agitation had boiled over to a fever pitch. "A what?"

"Marcellus," Rick tapped him on the shoulder, "I don't think you need to worry about your first spacewalk. It looks like someone has issued us a personal invitation." Dr. Winston muscled his way over to the window. What he was seeing terrified his soul. It was as if he was looking down the maw of a great white shark. And this one seemed hungry.

Brant turned off the reaction thrusters. The inside of the capsule returned to silence, except everyone could hear their own heart beating. The rest of the ride in was one capable of raising a man's blood pressure to the point where one's head was likely to pop off. The crew had finished putting their suits on and they were back sitting in their seats, except for Ken. The rocket designer couldn't tear his eyes away from the object, growing constantly closer in the window. No one spoke about the images dancing around in their minds. It was a moment of wondrous adventure and at the same time, abject terror. They were about to make history. Only as many of the passengers of the Titanic could have told you, making history isn't always something which turns out well for everyone.

"I've seen this movie," Nicole remarked with a shaky voice, trying to break the tension. "It doesn't end well."

The light inside the capsule changed as if a shadow was blocking out the sun. Ken looked back from the window. "We're inside."

Brant glanced over at the rocket designer. "You might want to sit down."

"Why's that?"

The capsule vibrated and shuddered with a loud thud. It knocked Ken right off his feet. He landed right smack in Nicole's lap. "It might get bumpy," Brant announced with unusually calm dignity.

Ken picked himself up and took another look outside the window. "They're closing the opening."

"Doesn't surprise me."

Marcellus didn't seem to appreciate the event. "What?"

"Best to close doors in space. Tends to keep the atmosphere inside where it belongs."

The crew felt a sudden shift as the capsule finally settled to the deck. Brant felt a sudden surge of pressure on his chest. His body sunk into the crash couch. "Gravity," he murmured.

Ken's face was full of admiration. "I expected some form of gravity," he announced, "after all, it's at least as large as an asteroid."

Rickard stretched out his arms. "Seems closer to 1G to me than even moon gravity."

"Agreed."

Brant unbuckled this safety harness. "What are you doing?" Marcellus asked with an almost hostile intensity.

"I don't know about you, Dr. Winston, but I'm not going to wait around strapped to my seat to see what is going to happen. Besides, we were sent up here to find out who was on this thing. Can't investigate sitting in here." He rose from his seat.

Nicole grabbed his arm before he could proceed. "We're not getting any telemetry from Huston."

Now Ken looked shaken. "What does that mean?"

Rickard looked down at him. "It means we've lost communication with Earth. We'll have to find some other way of letting them know what is going on up here." He reached for the hatch handle.

Marcellus nearly panicked. "You not still going out there?"

"You have a better idea?" The hatch opened without a sound and Rickard Brant climbed out onto the open deck. In a few moments, he was joined by the others. Dr. Winston got out of the capsule last. It wasn't due to any innate desire to explore; it was more of a reluctance to be left alone.

Glancing around they seemed to be in some form of large chamber. Looking up, Brant noticed it was now impossible to make out the door through which they had entered. Ken noticed Rick was opening the slide locks on his helmet.

Ken grappled with Rickard's arm. "What do you think you are doing."

Brant seemed completely calm. "There was no sound of the air escaping when I opened the hatch."

Marcellus joined Ken. "So?"

"It means there is an atmosphere in here."

Marcellus wasn't convinced. "Still there is no indication the atmosphere is breathable."

"You're the pilot. If something happens to you, there will be no one to fly us out of here."

Rick almost laughed. "The RCS thrusters won't be able to do anything in a 1G environment. There were designed only for operation in space. We're stuck here until we can locate who is on board this ship."

"Still, dying in the first few minutes doesn't seem like a good response."

"True." He stared directly at Marcellus while he continued to open his helmet. "It's called a risk. You should try it sometime. It gets the blood pumping." He pushed the bottom of the helmet up, creating the tiniest gap between the helmet and the suit. He snapped it shut with a rapid click. "Okay," he related cheerfully. "Not dead. Good first step. Promising." He unlocked the helmet and removed it completely, setting it on the floor.

Nicole and Ken followed suit. "Now it's your turn, Dr. Winston."

Marcellus shook his head violently. Nicole gave him a wink. "Okay, but you'll miss all the fun."

The cyberneticist finally relented and unlocked the helmet. Ken and Nicole had to help him to get it off, as his shaky fingers demonstrated he having difficulty adjusting to the idea of breathing in an alien spacecraft.

Gentlemen... and lady... Welcome aboard the Bright Sword.

Brant glanced around the bay, but he couldn't see anyone. "My compliments on your knowledge of our language. Your English is excellent."

мой русский тоже

Ken tapped Rickard on the shoulder. "What was that?"

"He said his Russian is pretty good too." Brant continued to glance around the area, but he still didn't see anyone. "Would you mind showing yourself. We'd like to make your acquaintance."

But I'm right here.

"But we can't see you."

Really? Well, such a serious case of limited vision will be a problem.

Marcellus seemed to perk up. His hands were no longer shaking. "Are you the ship's computer?"

Well not exactly. I'm much more than the ship's memory storage. I'm her engines, her hull, her... well, everything to put it bluntly.

"I don't understand."

Where I come from death is simply another stage in life. You have several options as you shuffle off the mortal coil, so to speak. I choose running a starship. The life of exploration. It seemed like a good fit for me.

Nicole glanced around still unsure they were not being tricked. "So, you were once a..."

Biological once, yes.

"Did you have a name?"

Oh, yes. I'd love to teach you my language sometime. Lots of clicks, trills, and sub-syllables. I think you'll find it fascinating. But perhaps We should start with a tour. On the far side of the room, a door opened. It seemed to appear out of nowhere. As soon as it opened, Ken, Nicole, and Rickard headed straight for it.

"WAIT A MINUTE," yelled Marcellus, "where are you going?"

Brant gave him a dry chuckle. "Why we're going to take the tour, what did you think?"

Marcellus hurried after them. The only thing he could imagine worse than walking blindly around an alien spacecraft was standing there alone. The next room was filled with machinery. Each piece seemed to hum with a life of its own.

The first thing you need to learn is I don't have any hallways. Nor doors for that matter. If you want to go to another room, just head for a wall. I'll make a doorway for you.

Ken seemed fascinated. "What do all these machines do?"

Oh, I can teach you about all these devices over time. Right now, if you keep going forward, I can show you the observation lounge. I think you'll find it interesting.

The group started walking. The deck plates seemed to vibrate from the machinery. It reminded Dr. Martin of the massive alien machine in the film *Forbidden Planet*. As promised, a doorway appeared as soon as they were within reach of the far wall. "While we are walking, perhaps you could explain to us the reason for your trip here?" Brant asked.

Well, I'd heard about a humanoid species in Section 131. And it appears the rumors were true.

The group stepped into the next room and stood, stunned. The room's walls were completely transparent. Starlight floated into the room as is drifting down from a stately dome. The interior was filled with soft, comfortable-looking couches. Scattered about were what appeared to be plain boxes. The couches all appeared to be made of some form of leather or vinyl, while the boxes seemed molded from various colored plastics. Everything as scattered about the room in what looked to be a random pattern. Although each sitting position seemed to have one box associated with it. Brant walked forward and gingerly touched a star. His finger ran smack dab into a solid surface. The wall was still there, although touching it didn't even make the star twinkle.

"Very impressive."

I thought you might like the view.

Nicole walked toward one of the couches. "You said you came here to see if there were humanoids present."

Yes.

"So, would you say your mission was purely scientific?"

Oh, no, Bright Sword said ominously, I here to find a crew.

The four stood with their mouths agape. Part of it was the astounding view, but another part of it was the sound of the ship's revelation.

"You don't say," Brant answered nonchalantly. "Do you have a selection process to pick volunteers?"

Well, I was hoping I could get you four to sign on. After all, you were adventurous enough to come all the way out here. It seems to bode well for our compatibility.

Marcellus scoffed. "Some of us didn't come here of our own free will. We were assigned."

I'm sorry to hear that Dr. Winston. The invitation is purely voluntary, I assure you. You can go home at any time.

The cyberneticist seemed intrigued. "How do you know my name?"

Oh, I monitored all your communication with the man you call Houston.

"It's a place actually," Nicole corrected the ship.

How odd. I stand corrected. Am I using the right expression?

“Yes,” Brant commented. “You’ve master idiom quite well. How long have you been studying our language?”

Well, I’m pleased I am doing so well. I only started learning the language yesterday.

Nicole hadn’t quite adjusted to the increase in gravity after being weightless. She found a couch and plopped herself into it. Instantly, the box next to her seemed to melt into a series of controls and screens. She glanced down at the box. “It’s Houston,” she whispered, “They are trying to get in touch with us.”

Of course. The control boxes will morph to accommodate your needs at any time. In any design, you can imagine. It sensed you wanted to report your status, so the console made the appropriate controls to accommodate your desires. Please feel free to communicate.

As Nicole started chatting with mission control, Brant continued the conversation. “You seem quite capable. Why is it you are seeking a crew?”

I can do most things. I can certainly fly the ship, but I do have a problem with visiting worlds. Landing on planets can be rather difficult. A ship like me must live vicariously through its crew. Plus, I must say, exploring the universe on one’s own can get a bit lonely. No one to share the sights with. I hope this doesn’t make you feel less about me.

“On the contrary,” Brant commented, “It makes you more... how shall I put this? Human.”

Oh, speaking of being biological. I do have to show you the dining room. I think you’ll find it... enjoyable.

There was only one wall in the room which wasn’t covered in stars. A door opened in the center of the wall, beckoning them to enter. The room flooded at once with a wave of the most delightful smells. The long chamber on the other side seemed more suited to a bistro in Paris than to a spaceship a million miles away from any familiar eating territory. The roof seemed supported by stone pillared arches, graceful enough to fit in the cathedral of Notre Dame. There were even windows with what appeared to be traffic on the outside.

“Hey,” Brant sounded pleased, “I know this place, it’s off the Rue Du Nil in the Montorgueil Saint-Denis Quarter.”

This is one of the things I can do with a crew. I can use your own experiences to recreate anything you have experienced. I can make your quarters look like anything you desire.

There was an unmistakable air of pride in the ship’s voice. In the center of the room was a long table surrounded by chairs. It was filled with plates of steaming food. Brussel Sprouts Tempura, Pickled Cauliflower, Taramasalata, and Nardín Anchovy. Grelot Onion, Smoked Eel, Potato Emulsion, and Hazelnut Crumble. Duck Foie Gras Pressé, Forced Rhubarb and Sorrel. Smoked Short Rib Ragù Pappardelle. Goat’s Curd Agnolotti, Broccoli, Tamarind, Kalamata Olive and Almond Smoked Trout, Finger Lime and Kumquat. Venison Leg, Jerusalem Artichoke, Quince and Trompette. Bitter leaves, Blood Orange, Candied Walnut and Fourme d’Ambert. Grilled Hispi Cabbage, Yuzu, Miso and Parmesan. Coombeshead Sourdough bread and Salted Butter.

This didn't even take into account the magnificent smell of the coffee. Rickard Brant displayed a pleasant smile. "Well, this is certainly... unexpectedly gracious of you."

It was certainly too much for a group of untrained NASA astronauts who'd been eating freeze-dried food for the last four days. Nicole, Ken, and even Marcellus didn't have any problem finding a seat at the table and digging in. They were hardly past the first few bites when there was a disturbing ringing in their ears. Klaxons blared and red lights flashed on the walls.

Ken spoke up first. "Do those sounds mean the same thing on your world as they do on ours?"

I'm afraid so. Another ship has entered the system.

Everyone's napkin was quickly on the table and they had risen from their seats. The doorway back to the Observation Lounge had already appeared and the group passed through it quickly. On the far wall was a small white box. Inside it, obviously enlarged, there was another ship. It was impossible to measure its size as there was nothing for comparison. Brant had the feeling its presence was not a good sign.

"Do you recognize it?" Ken asked.

Yes. It is a warship of the Order.

Marcellus' voice sounded a little shaky. "Okay, a warship. That doesn't sound good."

I'm afraid the Order is less than friendly.

Rickard Brant crossed his arms. It was the classic stance of a military man faced with an insurmountable problem... or a horde of angry opponents. "How so?"

The Order occupied worlds that have exhausted their resources and they provide assistance as long as the population swears allegiance to the Order.

"That doesn't sound so bad," Nicole commented.

All opposition is instantly eradicated. They make sure the population is kept poor enough so as not to be able to offer any effective resistance. The population is kept as virtual slaves to the Order. Sector 131 is technically within the boundaries claimed by the Order. They haven't approached your world because you still have enough resources to offer resistance.

Ken swallowed hard. "Yeah, not so nice."

Brant sat down on a couch. "Can we talk to them?"

I wouldn't advise it.

"I didn't ask if it was advisable. I want to know if it is possible."

You are my guests. All my systems are at your disposal.

The box next to Brant's seat turned into controls. Normally, he would have no idea how to operate alien technology. Somehow though he seemed to intuitively know how each dial and button was used. It was as if the controls were laid out exactly as he would have designed them. He pressed a button he

instinctively knew would open a channel. "This is Commander Rickard A. Brant to the unidentified ship entering our solar system. Please respond."

He released the button with a grin. "Actually, I've always wanted to do that."

Another white outlined box appeared on the screen. Inside it was a man... well, at least he appeared human. He was wearing a sort of sackcloth and ashes attire which would have felt right at home on the back of any Benedictine monk. "I am Strailmae, Arch-Devine of the Order of Thought. You will evacuate that ship at once. It is under the sentence of death. We will be destroying the ship shortly. I take no responsibility for your lives if you remain on board."

Brant's answer was calm and deliberated. "Well, Strailmae, now we have a problem. You see we've broken bread on this ship. On my world, we have this custom, no one you broken bread with can be turned over for summary execution without an extradition hearing."

Strailmae looked displeased at the response. "I do not have the time for verbal sparring with creatures who have no jurisdiction in this sector. Leave now." The white box shrunk with Strailmae inside it until it receded to a single point and then disappeared altogether.

I'm afraid the Order has arrived sooner than I had anticipated. You should probably leave as he says. You can take your ship back or I can provide you with a faster one if you prefer.

Rickard Brant had a slightly haunted look on his face. "I think we'll need to get back as soon as possible."

Very well then. Please proceed through the door.

A doorway opened in the wall behind them. The group glanced at each other and then proceeded to the door. Ken halted about halfway to the exit and turned around. Marcellus Winston hadn't moved. "Are you coming with us. You don't want to miss the next flight."

"I'm not going."

Brant practically choked. "What do you mean? You've been wanting to get away from here from before we came on board."

"That's because I didn't know what I was dealing with. Now I do."

Nicole shrugged her shoulders. "Why should knowing what you are dealing with make any difference?"

"It makes all the difference in the world." He adjusted his stance. He now looked determined. His arms crossed, his feet firmly planted on the deck. It was clear his comrades would have to drag him out of the room. "Everyone needs a place to fit in. Someplace to belong. Well, I belong here. Who better than a cyberneticist to work with a ship that is part being and part machine?"

The other all glared at him, expecting him to change his mind any moment.

"Besides," Marcellus added, "His bunch sounds like oblivious, extremist types... I never liked those. Ignorant savages. So, if you think I'm leaving the first cybernetic organism we've ever met to be destroyed out of hand... well, you all can all just kiss my ass."

Ken threw up his hands. Then he walked back over to where Marcellus was standing.

Nicole glowered at the two of them. “What are you doing, He’s not coming. Let’s go.”

“He’s got a point,” The rocket designer announced. “I could go back home and work for a lifetime and never learn as much as I can learn right here. I want to know how this thing works. Besides I never much cared for ignorant assholes myself. I guess I belong here too.”

Once again Nicole Garrett shrugged her shoulders... and walked over to the other end of the room.

Rickard Brant stood, staring back at the rest of the group. “Are you sure?”

Nicole’s eyes looked directly into his. “Everybody has to belong somewhere. Right now, I can’t think of a better place to be.” She looked at the other two she was standing with. Besides, I think I like the company.

“Good,” Brant sounded relieved. “I did want to be the first one to insist we stay and help our buddy out. I wasn’t kidding. Rickard Brant doesn’t run out on the folks he’s broken bread with.” He turned his head up to the stars as if directing his voice to the ship. Can you get us out of here?”

Yes, but it might not be advisable.

“How so?”

The order will assume you’ve had contact with me. They will also presume you now know of their less than noble objectives. They will have no other choice but to sterilize your world.”

“Cheeky bastards,” Marcellus spat.

“We can’t allow them to do to commit wanton genocide,” Nicole added.

“Agreed,” Brant’s face seemed to be pondering outcomes. “How big is the Order’s ship?”

About a third the size of this vessel.

“Good,” Rickard rubbed his hands together. “Turn this ship about. We’re heading straight for them.”

Nicole was already sitting down and getting one of the boxes to form a console. “Do you have a plan?”

The pilot broke into a broad-face grin. “I do. We’re going to use an old Greek tactic.”

Ken snickered. “You have a Trojan Horse hidden up your sleeve somewhere?”

“No,” Brant answered, “Not that plan. I was thinking of ancient Greek naval tactics. We’re going to ram them.”

“Oh, *that* plan...” Marcellus replied. When he turned around everyone was looking at him. “What? I have a sarcastic voice. Everything I say sounds sarcastic.”



They spent the next day and a half learning everything they could about their new ship. Frankly, it was more time than most of them had to learn about the Orion 2 capsule. This ship, however, was slightly larger. But at least they didn’t have to spend time cramming themselves into four narrow seats in a spacecraft designed to hold only three.

There is something approaching us from behind.

“Can you show us?”

Another white box appeared on the screen. Inside it appeared to be several pencil-thin objects approaching. Rickard Brant squinted at the screen. “Good, it’s what I was hoping for.”

Ken couldn’t make them out. “What are they?”

“Trident missiles. I asked Space Defense Command for them yesterday.”

Marcellus grunted. “Please tell me they are not aiming at us.” He turned around and noticed everyone was staring at him with dagger-like eyes. “What? I have a sarcastic voice. Okay?”

“No,” Brant agreed, “I asked SDF to target our friends out there. Nicole, any luck getting them back on the line?”

“No, they seem to be ignoring us.”

“Okay, let’s see if they can ignore a couple of million mega-tons of nasty.”

They are passing us at a safe distance.

“Good. Can you show us the Order’s ship?”

The white block on the screen shrank back into a dot, but then reopened to show the Order’s ship. Instead of having a smooth surface like the Bright Sword, it looked like a plumber’s nightmare. Extensions and odd pieces seemed to be forced into the structure wherever they would fit. It was almost as if several smaller ships had been pulled together in a gravity well. It was hard to see, or even guess what each part of the ship was intended to do. Ken shook his head. Design-wise it was a terrible concoction.

As they watched several beams of light reached out from the Order’s ship. They struck out like lances against the night sky. Bright white lines, as if they were the beams of a searchlight. At the end of one of the lances was a bright flash. Then another, followed by at least a dozen more.

The crew had to shield their eyes as the brilliant light filled the chamber. Brant stared back at the now mostly black screen. The Order’s ship was still there. “Might as well be throwing rocks,” he muttered. “Can you give us any more speed?”

“More speed,” Ken’s hands ran across his console, “Coming up.”

More arcs of white light left from the Order’s ship. Only this time they were clustered together and shorter. Brant’s hands squeezed his armrests as he realized the difference. They were heading straight for them. “Ken make sure that any remaining pieces of us head straight for them if we get blown up.”

“I’m on it.”

The Bright Sword shook as the screen flashed before them. Everyone was thrown around pretty violently. The group got to its feet and they all looked around. “Everybody okay?”

“I could skip a repeat performance,” Nicole spat.

“Dr. Winston, how’s our ship doing?”

I am intact, thank you. However, I will not remain in this condition indefinitely.

“Sorry,” Brant sounded remorseful, “I’m not used to asking my spacecraft how it feels.”

More white lines emanated from the Order’s ship. This set seemed larger and more numerous, but Brant realized it could have been an illusion brought on by nervous fatigue. “Better get ready for another bumpy ride.”

As the screen flashed brightly, the crew was again jostled about viciously. Ken rose, rubbing his arm. “I never going to laugh at another Science-Fiction movie where the characters get thrown around again.” He had a hard time regaining his feet. More white lines appeared on the screen. For a third time, the crew was tossed around like stir-fried shrimp in a wok.

Brant exhaled deeply. “Is there any way we can fire back.”

Yes, all you have to do is issue an order for it.

“Then it is so ordered. Please fire back.”

Another burst of white light appeared on the screen. Only this thing was headed away from them. It appeared like a giant white tube, flying through space. Beams of light shot forth from the Order ship. Only this time they were aimed at the giant white snake approaching them like a freight train on steroids. The Order ship seemed to be making a turn, preparing to make a run for the far heavens.

It didn’t make it. The beam struck the ship broadside. The result was spectacular. The Order ship shook, vibrated for a moment, and then simply disintegrated into a cloud of debris. A series of bright red flashes filled the cloud briefly, evidence of smaller volatile components igniting. The red jets fanned out like daisy flower peddles and then wilted to a charcoal black.

Rickard Brant crossed his arms. “Why didn’t you do this before?” This tone was one of a lawyer in a courtroom.

I am not permitted. It’s one of the reasons I require a crew. The Bright Sword is also a warship. It was built to fight a war that has been over for eons. But the safeguards remain in place. This ship cannot fire, even to defend itself, unless it is protecting a crew.

Ken sounded indignant. “Now you tell us?”

“So, I assume the order will now sent out more ships?” Rickard asked.

No doubt. But it will take them a while to respond. They were hoping to get here before I had a crew.

“Well, I suppose we’ll be sticking around, close to home then.”

Not necessary. I can detect any presence in this sector. We can be back before any threat materializes.

“How’s that?” Ken asked.

I can fold space.

Ken choked back the next few words. “You fold space?”

Yes, where would you like to go?