



# CHAPTER 1

## *The Siege of Concordant*

# Russ Morrissey

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[illegible]

Annalist Willem turned the page, grunting as a drop of foul-smelling water landed on the ancient text. He glanced up at the rusted pipes, part of a centuries-old coolant system. The lower chambers of Trissic Avn University were hundreds of feet below the surface of Lambda U, far from the gilded libraries above. These texts hadn't been read by human eyes in a thousand years.

The annalist's finger traced the antique script, penned by chroniclers long-forgotten. He muttered aloud under his breath, struggling to make sense of the unusual calligraphy. It was written in an old dialect, as far from Cauldron Cant as could be.

"Sapphire... Star..." His eyes widened. Hurriedly he reread the paragraph he had just finished. Yes, he'd read it correctly.

Slamming the book shut, Willem stood, almost frantically. He glanced around, and hurried out of the room, the book clutched to his chest with both arms. Down the old hallway he ran, up the steep, metallic, quarter-mile staircase, stumbling and almost falling to his death at least twice. Up, higher, into the light, where rusted coolant pipes did not drip.

He burst into the Chief Annalist's elegant study, slamming the ancient tome down. Dust flew everywhere, and the Chief Annalist coughed, stepping back. Sunlight filtered through the holoblinds, creating long beams of floating radiance.

"Willem", the man said, frowning. He looked down at the book on his desk. "Is that from the archives? I thought you were assigned to 73rd Millenium Durasian agriculture?"

"Yes, my lord," replied Willem. He cleared his throat. "I came across this while researching the ... never mind. Look!"

He stabbed his finger down at the page. The Chief Annalist peered downward, then balanced a pair of vintage spectacles on his nose. An affectation.

"What is it, Willem... oh."

There was silence for a while.

"My lord, this changes everything", Willem stated.

"Yes, yes. I suppose it does. Unfortunate."

Willem stared at his superior and frowned.

"Unfortunate?"

"Unfortunate that you saw it."

"What do you mean?"

The Chief Annalist touched an intercom toggle. "Gentlemen, you'd better come in."

Willem looked around, confused. "What's going on? Who was that?"

The heavy door slid open, and two Ministers of the Sapphire Star entered, their long robes trailing.

"Huh? Ministers? What are they doing so far from Minotaur?" Willem asked, confused, stepping back nervously. Ministers had a reputation.

One of the Ministers looked at the Chief Annalist, who nodded his head. The holy man made a gesture with his hand, and suddenly Willem was struck by a wave of intense fatigue.

"I don't feel so..." he managed to mumble, before crashing, unconscious, to the ground.

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The small, worn-out freighter rocked violently as a missile exploded nearby. Perias grimaced, and shouted over his shoulder.

"Aaric! If you don't patch up that coolant leak in the next 30 seconds, we'll be Ogron chow - if we're lucky!"

"They're not going to eat us," Enna retorted smoothly from the co-pilot's seat as she punched in some new co-ordinates. "They're slavers, not cannibals."

"Does it count as cannibalism if an Ogron eats a Human?" he shot back. "Hold on!"

The *Pride of Scorpio* swung into a tight arc, narrowly evading a steam of ion particles from the massive pursuing ship. The Ogron slaveship was a giant slab, a hundred times or more the size of the *Scorpio*, which fled before it like an insect escaping a giant sandworm.

"We can't outrun them. Octanis is five days away. We need another plan" called Kasnir from behind them. The medic was looking haggard, the stress of the relentless Ogron pursuit wearing on him. "I have an idea."

"Well, don't keep it to yourself!" Perias yelled. "They're only two beats behind us! We're within grappling range!"

Even as he spoke, a massive harpoon shot out from the giant Ogron vessel, attached to a nigh-unbreakable tritanium chain. A couple of those embedded in the hull would allow no escape.

Kasnir cleared his throat. "Well... I was thinking about Murray's Folly."

Perias snorted. "In the Burn? Are you suicidal? When I said I wanted to escape, I didn't mean I wanted to escape this life."

"Wait," Enna said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "They won't be able to scan us in there. I think he's on to something."

"I think he's *on* something," Perias muttered back.

"I mean it. The Ogrons will never chase us into the Burn."

"That's because they have sense! Which bit did you forget - the massive black hole, the zero visibility, the deadly radiation, or the ghosts?"

Kasnir called from the rear of the cabin. "It's that or life on an Ogron slaveship. Besides, Aruga did it last year when he won the Cross Burn."

Perias sighed. "Aruga's a Bragi. We're not. But fine." He yanked the ship onto a new course, throwing Kasnir into a supporting strut. "But when it goes wrong, I'm blaming you."

The *Pride of Scorpio* entered a wide arc towards the Burn, that multi-parsec area of intense radiation which surrounded the black hole of the same name. The ship's alarms all started pinging as the hull was assaulted by deadly cosmic waves, and Kasnir rushed to a wall cabinet.

"These injections will stave off the worst of the radiation... for a bit." He pulled out a syringe. "Hold out your arm."

Perias grimaced. "Quick, then. I can't fly this thing one-handed."

Kasnir quickly administered the drug to everybody on the flight deck, before disappearing below to do the same for the others. The small ship slowly penetrated the Burn, its scanners bleeping warnings.

As they pushed through the nebula, the gases obscured anything beyond a few hundred beats. The ship was eerily quiet; as if by some unspoken agreement the crew lowered their voices and kept communication to a minimum. Everybody could sense the presence of that monstrous black hole, just waiting to devour them forever.

"We're blind. But so are they," Enna said. "Now, to find Murray's Folly. If I got our

vector right, it should be visible.... right about.... now!"

Ahead of the *Pride of Scorpio*, a large, metallic structure loomed out of the nebula. Murray's Folly, an ancient, abandoned space station. Once it had been tasked with a massive mining operation in the rich gases of the Burn, but it had lain empty for decades.

"No need to go on," Perias muttered. "Just moor up alongside and we'll wait the Ogrons out."

"Agreed," Enna replied. "I've heard enough about the ghosts of the Folly."

A sudden commotion came from behind them; a scream and a crash. Enna stood up, startled.

"What the kruk was that?"

Aaric appeared in the doorway, his overalls ripped, blood running down from a cut on his head.

"It's Kasnir! He...." his voice faltered. "Sannah... he...."

"What about her?" Perias demanded. "Where's Kasnir?"

"She... he.... Kasnir had a knife and he...."

Perias leapt to his feet and flung himself through the doorway, sliding down the ladder to the cargo hold below. He emerged in a scene from a nightmare. Sannah, the Chanter's 'acquisitions expert' lay on the deck in a pool of blood which welled from a gash across her throat. Kasnir crouched in a corner, a wild look in his eyes, a knife brandished before him.

"They call... they call! They demand sacrifice!" he whimpered.

Perias looked in horror at the scene and reached for his pistol. It wasn't there; he'd left it in his cabin. As Kasnir slowly stood and advanced with the dipping blade ahead of him, Perias fumbled about and grabbed a crowbar, his gaze never leaving the crazed medic. He was sure he could see the image of a black hole in the crazed man's eyes.

"Kasnir... what have you done?" he whispered.

"You don't understand... they made me do it. They demanded blood!"

"Who did? Who made you do it?"

"They're here. They're here!"

Kasnir lunged forward with the knife and Perias stumbled back, tripping over a thick cable which snaked across the untidy hold.

Kasnir gave out a cry somewhere between anguish and triumph and leapt at the pilot, the knife stabbing down.

A sudden flash of blue light, and Kasnir was flung back, as electricity crackled around him. He slumped to the floor, unmoving. Enna stood in the doorway, an electro-arc in her outstretched hand.

"Quick! He'll only be out for a minute. Get him somewhere secure!"

Perias climbed to his feet.

"Secure? We don't have anywhere like that."

"The airlock!" Aaric called out. The mechanic pulled a heavy lever, and the interior airlock door swung open. "Quick, drag him in here!"

The three of them manhandled the unconscious medic, and laid him unceremoniously on the floor of the airlock. Aaric swung the door shut with a heavy clang, and pulled the level down into the "locked" position. Perias ran to Sannah.

"She's still breathing, but she's bleeding out. What do we do?"

Enna glanced around.

"Well, our medic's gone insane, and we're five days from civilization. Put her in a cryopod. That'll keep her alive until we can get help."

"And what about him?" Aaric asked, gesturing towards the medic, who was beginning to stir.

"The ghosts have him. There's no hope for him. He's one of the Burned now."

The *Pride of Scorpio* sat motionless in the Burn, attached to the massive space station, it's crew silent.

Far outside the nebula, the massive Ogron slaveship slid off into the night, in search of easier prey.

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Tartarus rotated slowly in the void, far above the lush, green Clarke's World. The biggest space station in the Cauldron, and home to seven million souls, on Tartarus anything could be bought, anyone could be hired, and no cargo was off-limits. Great starscrapers jutted out above and below the main docking ring, each dozens to hundreds of floors tall,

and able to house tens of thousands of inhabitants.

Din Scarra, the first son of of the crime lord Bilda Scarra, looked out through the great circular window which adorned the wall of one of the exclusive nightclubs high up in the luxurious Nanxiong starscraper, known for its casinos, restaurants, and lounges. His expensive suit and exquisite taste in wine marked him as dilettante playboy; but Din was a fiendishly clever young man with high ambitions.

The view was magnificent. Hundreds of ships could be seen approaching or leaving the station; ships as small as shuttles and tiny freighters, and ships as large as the great *Trailblazer Heavy* vessels which carved out trade routes throughout the Cauldron.

Not far from him sat Mion, his younger sister. A jagged scar ran across her face, and knives festooned her. Mion was a psychotic and vicious woman who spoke very little and was rarely far from her brother's side.

"She did *what*?" demanded Din, turning away from the window and angrily throwing a holosheet down on the table. The face of Jaine 'Jackhammer' Devries, unofficial Cauldron heavyweight champion, stared back at him from the holo. Gromov, the besuited henchman standing in front of Din, shook slightly.

"She took him down in three rounds. I'm sorry, Din."

"I thought I told you to make sure she went down in six. What happened?"

"I did. I mean... errr...."

"You clearly *didn't*. And now how much have I lost?"

"Two million jots, Din. I'm sorry... I ...."

"You just cost me two million jots. You useless piece of..."

Mion stirred; Gromov stammered, and backed away nervously.

"And where is she now?" Din asked.

"Umm... well... that's kind of the problem. She... uhh... she's missing."

"Of course she is."

"I can find her, Din. I promise!"

"You will. Or you'll be answering to Mion."

Mion moved again, a hand resting on a blade, her eyes locked on Gromov's. The henchman gulped, the fear apparent on his face.

"Twenty-four hours. I want Jackhammer Devries here in twenty-four hours, or Mion gets to have her fun. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Din. I'm on it. Right away. I'll find her, you'll see."

Gromov fled the club, disappearing into the crowd. Mion sighed in disappointment.

"Don't worry, sister. If Devries has any sense, she's left the station by now. She's too well-known to hide. You'll get to have your fun with poor Gromov. Then maybe you can find that insolent fighter for me."

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The ex-Navy frigate slowly approached the lonely asteroid through. The word "UNDERDOG" was stencilled along the ship's austere, grey hull.

"*Underdog to Dawn Station*, approaching. Transmitting codes now."

"*Underdog*, this is *Dawn Station*. Codes have been cleared. Final approach at vector delta."

"Vector delta, acknowledged *Dawn Station*. You have control."

"Welcome home, Caitlin."

"Thanks, *Dawn Station*. Good to be back."

Caitlin Larsson, captain of the *Underdog*, put her feet up on the console, and cracked open a bottle. The frigate continued its slow approach, now controlled by *Dawn Station's* docking computers."

"Last one to the Nest buys the first round," Manny declared as he unbuckled himself from his seat and stretched. Manny Dors was a huge man, with a foot of black beard and scar across his face, a souvenir from his days as a soldier.

"You've never bought a round in your life!" Caitlin protested!

"I'm a cracking *pirate*! What do you expect?"

"We're all pirates, you krack. Well, some of us are smugglers. I like the term 'corsair'."

The *Underdog* slid into the asteroid's shadow, one of several mooring platforms up ahead. The automated docking clamps did their job, the loud clanging sounds echoing through the ship. Manny disappeared below.

Emerging from the *Underdog*, then minutes later, bottle in hand, Caitlin surveys the crowded docking area. Cables and

generators lay everywhere; the huge cavern, hewn out of the side of an asteroid, was a cacophony of chaos and noise. Technicians scurried about, and announcements arrived like a torrent over the speakers. Members of every alien species known to humankind could be seen - Bragi pilots, Houseki engineers, Hellions, Betrux, Kithik, and Pajak. The plant-like Treem, and winged Adraxi, and the amphibious Garga. If The Cauldron was a melting pot, this was its secret heart.

Manny clapped her on the shoulder, almost knocking her flying. He towered over her by more than a foot, near seven feet, his long coat hiding his prodigious waistline.

"There's Jialef. She'll want to see you." He gestured towards a middle-aged, tall woman standing on a platform above the chaos.

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Duras's 7th Fleet is blockading Concordant at the behest of the Brothers of the Sapphire Star. The fleet is commanded by BARON MAGHA, accompanied by GRAVE PIKE, a Minister. Like WotBS, notice on door saying somebody has been taken into custody by Ministers. On the planet, the city Aninem is surrounded by Duras forces. A pair of teenagers JARNE and ALIVIA are trying to escape, disguised as enemy troops and manage to slip out. Aninem is destroyed behind them, and the planet occupied by Duras forces, as they stow away on an Ivvin Tor support vessel leaving the region.

Screams filled the acrid, pungent air. Visibility was low; Jarne could only see about twenty steps in front of him. Overhead the whine of incoming missiles was accompanied by earth-shattering explosions. He stumbled onwards, dodging the falling rubble.

"Jarne!" he heard, from somewhere ahead. It was Aliva - the two of them had escaped the Poisoned Apple bar before it was destroyed by artillery. He could see Aliva now; she was standing on a fallen pillar, waving him forward.

"Jarne, this way!" Aliva called. She slipped into a doorway, and he followed, hoping the structure would remain standing. Inside was

a mess - clearly a store of some kind, shelving strewn across the floor. Aliva sat astride a broken chair as Jarne staggered in and collapsed against a wall, breathing hard.

"They're going to destroy the whole of Anihem!" he exclaimed, between ragged breaths. "We have to get out of the city."

"Good thinking, mate. Now how do you suggest we do that?"

"I dunno.... can we get out through the sewers?"

"They'll all be collapsed by now. And the streets are too dangerous to walk. I heard the 8th Brigade is putting up a last stand to give citizens chance to flee, but there's nowhere to flee to."

"Why are they doing this? I mean, Duras has never been friendly, but *this*?"

"The Minsters command, the Houses do. That's just how it is."

Shouts came from outside. The staccato of gunfire, screams. Shadows rushed past the shrouded window. Somebody tried the door.

"Quick, come here!", Aliva extended her hand. "Take my hand."

"What? Why?"

"Just do it!"

Jarne grasped Aliva's hand, noticing the large signet ring on her finger, which bore the emblem of House Jervasos.

"What the cru...? A house ring?"

"Sssh!" she whispered. And then, suddenly, somehow, the pair of them faded from view, disappearing like mist.

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The two guards at the city gate stood watch, tasked to ensure that nobody left Anihem. Neither saw Aliva and Jarne as they slipped invisibly through the darkness and out into the wastelands beyond.

Great crawlers mood slowly towards the city, and bombers streaked overhead. Looking up, they could see the massive silhouette of a Durasian destroyer eclipsing the stars. Shuttles and transports flowed to and from the giant starship in continuous streams.

"There!" Aliva said. "That's where we're going!"

"Who are you?" Jarne asked in amazement.

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The Durasian 7th Fleet, of House Brotharian, hung in the void above Concordant, its mighty command ship, *Retribution*, attended by dozens of escorts and transports. Flashes of light could be seen on the planet's surface, far below, evidence of the ground battle still raging. Archduke Perius Brotharian paced the command deck, stopping before a massive window overlooking the scene. His dark red cloak, emblazoned with the coat of Brotharian, struck an imposing silhouette against the starfield.

"Any news?" he demanded, impatiently. A technician seated nearby shook his head.

"No, sir. No sign of the Count."

Brotharian cursed inwardly. Count Garo Jervasos, the heretical ruler of Concordant, and herald of House Jervasos, had gone missing, fled into hiding since the Durasian arrival. Despite the near complete occupation of the planet's capital, their prey had somehow escaped.

"Wait, my lord... I'm picking something up."

The archduke hurried the technician's side, and gazed at the screen.

"Well, what is it?"

"An energy signature, my lord... it's...."

"It's a House Ring". The rasping voice came from the pale, robed Grave Pike, Minister of the Sapphire Star. "House Jervasos' House Ring. Somebody down there has just used it. They mean to escape."

"Minister," Brotharian inclined his head slightly in respect, and not a little apprehension. "What does the Ministry advise?"

"It may be Jervasos himself", mused the leather-clad Minister. His face was white as the grave, his eyes tinged with red, his cloak black, with curved shoulder pads which looked almost like horns; he looked more like a corpse than a living man. "Only blood can use a House Ring."

"My lord, do you want me to task a team to it?" asked the technician, looking up at the archduke. Brotharian nodded.

“Send someone to pick him up, if that’s who it is.”

“No,” Grave Pike interrupted. “It’s too late for that. Let’s bring this to an end. Bombard the city. The rest of the planet will surrender. If he’s down there, they’ll hand him over. Heresy cannot be allowed to pass.”

The technician gasped.

“What? You can’t do that? You’ll kill millions! Our own troops are down there! The treaty forbids...”

“Do you question the Ministry?” asked Grave Pike, softly, his voice carrying a hint of menace. The technician gulped.

“No, your worship...” he looked up at the archduke, his eyes pleading for help.

“Notify the fleet,” ordered Brotharion curtly. “Do as the Minister advises.”

The command deck was silent. Dozens of officers and crewmen looked on as the technician issued instructions to the Durasian fleet; all could hear him repeatedly confirming the order to confused ship captains. Grave Pike stood over him, watching dispassionately.

“Sir?” asked the technician, keying in the final coordinates. “The fleet is ready on your command.”

There was a pause. The Minister looked at the archduke.

“Is there something you’re waiting for, my lord?” he asked softly. Brotharion shook his head.

“No... no. Issue the order.”

Dozens of ships began to bombard the city below; missiles streaked down to Concordant, silent flashes of light, almost too small, far below, were all that signified the destruction of an entire city.

“The Ministry appreciates your cooperation, my lord”, whispered Grave Pike. “The Matriarch will be pleased.”

Archduke Brotharion bowed his head to hide his face.

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The colossal starship plowed slowly through the dense nebula, bullying its way through the soup. *Trailblazer 9 Heavy* was one of the oldest, most venerable, dilapidated, and important spacecraft in the Cauldron. *Trailblazer Heavies* were gigantic mile-long

ships tasked to open up secure and safe routes for trade and travel between worlds; they were icebreakers, messengers, freighters, and explorers all rolled into one.

They were also a really good place to disappear.

The seemingly-identical twins worked side-by-side at the Maw controls — the gigantic opening at the front of the ship which directed asteroids down the central assembly line along the massive vessel’s spine. The two deck hands were rarely seen apart, and both dressed and spoke in ways which made them indistinguishable from each other, often finishing each others’ sentences. They didn’t even have individual names - at least not to anybody’s knowledge - and they were referred to by the rest of the crew simply as *Double*.

Captain Romano’s head appeared through the hatchway in the floor, her usual cap emblazoned with the words “BORN THIS GOOD”.

“Double, we need ya down the in the mess. There’s a Rise comin’.”

“Aye Captain,” one of the Doubles’ replied, “we’ll be — “

“— down in a moment,” finished the other.

Romano rolled her eyes, as her head disappeared down the hatch. She climbed down a long ladder; as she reached the bottom, she could hear the deep, rumbling voice of Polk, the Houseki engineer, singing as he worked. She swept past the large crystalline creature, patting him on the shoulder (or at least as near to his shoulder as she could reach); his vest read “I KNOW I’M PRETTY”.

“To the mess, Polk! Rise is comin’!”

“Yes.... Captain...” Polk intoned slowly. The Houseki were massive, resilient, and loyal, but incredibly ponderous.

Romano continued on her way, sticking her head into a cabin.

“Scorch! Rise!”

The small man, his arms and hands covered in a network of burn marks and scars, gave a jaunty salute in reply.

Romano finally reached the mess, having called in on each of the six crew on the way. Tank was already there, his exoframe enabling his tall, slender form to move in

normal gravity, as was the new deck hand, Jax.

"Where's Delancey?" she asked, looking around.

"On her way, Cap'n," replied Tank. "She was on the outside. Welding something, I expect."

"Right," Romano said, as the rest of the crew filed in. "We're all here. Rise is comin'. Make sure everything is secure. All shutters down, Jax?"

"Err... yes, Captain. All shutters down." The new deck hand was a powerfully built, athletic woman, over six feet tall. She was quiet, and kept herself to herself. Romano wondered what she was running from; the woman seemed familiar, but she couldn't place her. No matter. Not her business.

"Cargo sealed?" Romano directed this question at Yana Delancey, the cargo chief. A small, precise woman in her late 50s, Yana moved with the unconscious grace of someone born in zero-g.

"Sealed, tied down, bolted in place, that stuff ain't goin' anywhere, Cap'n!"

"Radiation shields up?" This time she looked at Scorch, the ship's navigator.

"Aye, radiation shields up, autopilot locked in. We're good and steady, boss!"

"Right. We'll all hole up in here until the Rise is over."

The vast ship rumbled slightly. The Rise was the one thing that even TBH crews feared. The Cauldron was never quiet and, periodically, a region would ignite, with gasses and other material cooking off as nuclear reactions started and a new star began to be born. This process took centuries but the first stage was instantaneous. Massive waves rippled through the Cauldron's gasses, and radiation spikes and firestorms broke out across the area. Smart ships ran; unlucky ships were never heard from again.

Yana peered at Tank. A bead of sweat ran down his face.

"Uh, Tank, you feeling a bit warm?"

"Now you mention it," Scorch said, "it is getting a bit toasty in here."

The temperature was rising. All except Polk were sweating. A red light near the door started blinking.

"Scorch? Are you sure the radiation shields are up?"

"Yes, Cap'n. Did it myself. Used those new modules we picked up at Tartarus."

"Then why am I krukking melting?" demanded Romano. "Where's the nearest diagnostic station?"

"Down the hall.... cargo bay three," called Double, as always one finishing the sentence of the other.

Polk stood slowly to his feet.

"I go," he said, ponderously. "The heat don't bother me." Romano nodded, and the giant Houseki lumbered out of the mess hall.

"Hey, new gal... what's your story?"

Scorch called out to Jax, who was sitting stride a metal chair, her arms folded on the back. She shrugged.

"Not much to tell. I needed some space and some cash."

"That old story!" laughed Scorch. "You remind me of somebody. Have we met before?"

"I don't think so," Jax replied. "I like to keep myself to myself."

Polk returned, his massive frame filling the doorway.

"Radiation shield is krukked. Bad motivator," he rumbled. Romano frowned.

"Scorch, if you used Wrigley's again, I swear I'll..."

"It was a good price, boss." Romano cursed and turned to Polk.

"Can you fix it, Polk?"

"I can fix it, boss. Will have to go outside."

"Into the soup? During the Rise? Are you insane?" demanded Scorch.

"Polk doesn't fear radiation" rumbled the Houseki.

"What about fire? Do you fear fire?"

"I fear fire," replied the crystalline giant. "I must be quick."

The room erupted into laughter. The idea of a quick Houseki was so absurd that they all managed to forget the very real danger they were currently in.

"Jax, you go with him. Take a THUG suit" ordered Romano.

"The new gal? Really?" Scorch asked incredulously.

"You volunteering instead?" asked Romano.

"Kruk that. Good luck, new gal!"



Jax got to her feet, and stood besides the Houseki. She was over 6-feet tall, but he still towered over her, a mass of blue crystal.

"I'm ready. Let's go!"

The two hurried down the corridor.

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The Pirate's Nest was heaving. Countless smugglers, refugees, aliens, and criminals crowded the joint, drinking, gambling, arm-wrestling, and more. Caitlin and Manny sat in a booth, across from Jialef, each nursing a drink.

"I'm telling you," Manny said, downing his glass. "There's something going on out there. I can feel it. Everybody is tense and afraid. They know something's coming."

"Something like what?" asked Jialef. The nominal commander of Dawn Station, Jialef was a serious woman, grey-hair and stoic, her face worn and hard from years of strife.

"I don't know. But you mark my words, something is going to happen soon."

The room suddenly went quiet. All three looked around in surprise. The large vid screen over the bar showed a scene, words scrolling across the bottom. A city on fire.

"Is that.... Concordant?" Caitlin asked.

"Somebody turn that screen up!" a voice yelled from the crowd. The bartender obliged, and the newscasts words filled the room.

".... has destroyed the capital city of Concordant by means of orbital bombardment. The planet has surrendered to House Brotharion, who are establishing an occupation...."

"What?" Manny exclaimed.

"Bombardment? That's forbidden!"

"Yeah, what about the treaty?" somebody in the bar called out.

"They can't do that!" somebody else's voice exclaimed.

"It's the Crinner Massacre all over again!"

The mutterings in the crowd were quiet; the room was cowed. Manny looked at Jialef.

"Told you..." you said.

Jialef frowned.

"This changes everything. If the treaty is no longer being honored, the whole Cauldron is

in danger. What could make the Durasians break the treaty?"

"They're puppets of the Ministry, just like everybody else," Manny growled. "The tail wags the dog."

Caitlin buried her head in her hands.

"My mother lives on Concordant," she whispered. Manny reached out a hand.

"I'm so sorry, Cait. Maybe she got out."

"I'm going to rip out Perius Brotharion's heart from his body with my bare hands," she whispered, her hands trembling. Some of the red liquid from her cup spilled onto the table.

"I believe you, Cait," Manny whispered back. His big hand squeezed her shoulder.

"You were there, weren't you?" asked Jialef, looking at Manny. "At Fortuna?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "I was there. I saw the massacre. That's when I left."

"Deserted, you mean?"

"If you say so."

The newscast continued. "Nearly twenty years ago, Duke Crinner Kryomer of Ivvin Torr ordered the orbital bombardment of Fortuna, in an act which came to be known as the Crinner Massacre. His successor, Duke Godefroy Kryomer, along with the other four major houses, signed the Fortuna Treaty at the neutral planet of Junction, in the demilitarized zone. Planetary bombardment has since been strictly forbidden."

"This means war," Manny said, softly. Jialef nodded, gravely.

"I fear so. May the Sapphire Star help us all."