

Chapter One.

The GalaxyNet starship *Ensenada* came out of warped space roughly three light weeks off target. Considering it would still be another eleven years before the first Centaurian pilots were regularly employed to eliminate this sort of error, 340 billion miles was an acceptable margin of error. In those days, roughly one starship in fifty would come out of warped space so far off course that it was never again seen in the Human Sector. Of course, some didn't come out of warped space at all; those ships were destined to remain forever trapped on an artificial event horizon created by the graviton engines that made interstellar travel possible.

Nevertheless, GalaxyNet, the giant multistellar corporation that employed Rhys and Karyn Ravenhest was offering major financial incentives to employees willing to help set up operations on planets orbiting distant stars. The move would effectively triple their combined income and get them off an Earth that was increasingly falling under the political control of theocrats and extremists. Finally, both of them would have been lying if they'd said that the potential romance and adventure of being pioneers didn't have some appeal.

All this was lost on Teice Ravenhest. He was nine years old and it was the first time he had ever been on a starship. With the exception of the annual family trips to the orbiting Disney resort, it was the first time he had ever even been off Earth. He had been excited as their shuttle approached and docked with the giant white starship in orbit around Jupiter, but the month it took to clear the solar system and the prospect of another month to reach their destination took some of the novelty off the experience. Sure, the ship was nice; it was like a fancy hotel, but it was geared more for the entertainment of grown-ups than kids. He missed his room and his toys and it was beginning to sink in that there was a good chance that he'd never see any of his friends again. His parents had promised him a bigger room and a dog when they arrived on the new planet. They had even let him choose the kind of dog he wanted -- a coyote-collie mix -- and the man at the pound had let him help pack the frozen puppy embryo for shipment. Then he had asked his father if that was where babies came from and his father answered by asking him if he'd like an ice cream cone.

Thinking about having a dog cheered Teice up and he asked the cabin computer for a list of good names for dogs. He had already chosen several names for his dog and wound up changing his mind each time. He had his current list narrowed down to a choice between Snoopy, Sirius and F'znark when all the lights in the stateroom turned red and the ship instructed all passengers to return to their cabins.

Moments later, the ship lurched and he heard a series of muffled thuds. Teice got up and went to the cabin door intending to look for his parents despite the ship's instructions that he stay where he was. He tried to remember where his parents said he'd be able to find him. There was some kind of special party or dinner or something going on; either a Renaissance Faire or a Star Trek

Convention. One or the other. In any event, he hadn't cared for his costume and had asked if he could stay in the cabin and maybe go to the arcade later.

Outside in the corridor, Teice could smell burnt plastic and people were shouting. He wished he had gone with his parents to the party or that they had stayed with him. He began to get scared.

There was a very loud thud and the air began to fill with smoke. This time, in addition to the burnt plastic smell, there was a stinky smell like somebody farted. Three crewmen armed with disruptors charged past Teice toward the source of the sound and smoke. One of them yelled at him and Teice started to cry.

Teice heard the electric zap of disruptors from around the corner ahead of him and some other kind of weapon answered in reply. He turned and ran as someone -- maybe one of the crewmen he'd just seen -- screamed. There were more screams and, underneath them, alien voices like an orchestra of loosely strung violins.

Teice found a stairwell and started up it toward the main decks. The smoke and stinky smell seemed to get thicker as he raced up the stairs. Then he saw the body on the stairs and froze. It was a woman lying face-down on the stairs, a bloody circular wound at her neck and shoulder. From right above his head, Teice heard a violin-with-loose-strings voice.

Teice had seen non-human aliens before. Not long ago, a Garnian diplomat-drone had even visited the house while her hive was negotiating a contract with his parents' company. She had been only a little taller than Teice and had a head like a giant bug. She had huge red eyes, antennae, jagged teeth and sharp pincers. Teice had been a little afraid of her first but, then saw that she ate only rotten fruit and spoiled meat. She was nice to him and gave him a model of a Garnian starship, which Teice later took to school for show-and-tell.

The being looking down at Teice was nothing like their gentle Garnian houseguest. This one crouched with two of its three feet adhering to the wall and the third adhering to the ceiling. Right side-up and standing up straight, it would have been taller than Teice's father. It wore no clothes except for a shoulder holster, utility belt and some sort of headgear. Its deeply wrinkled skin was grayish pink and glistened with something that reminded Teice of snot. It had deep black eyes and was making those broken violin noises through web-like membranes in its cheeks. The second most frightening thing about it was its mouth which was jawless and consisted of a single lip surrounding rings of bloody needle-like teeth. The blood smeared on its face and chest told Teice that the body at his feet was this creature's doing. The most frightening thing about the creature, however, was that it was reaching for Teice, suction cup-tipped fingers outstretched.

Teice knew what a Trilian was because he had once asked his mother what Trilcorpgate was. She had told him that Trilcorp-PhilMorse was a company that was in a lot of trouble because it traded weapons and starships to the Trilians. The Trilians, she had explained, were a species who didn't

know how to use advanced technology responsibly and were using it to steal things, hurt people and take over their planets. She hadn't mentioned anything about Trilians sticking to walls and drinking blood, however.

Teice was inhaling in preparation for the loudest scream he could muster up when he heard a loud zap and a lightning smell burned away the stinky smell. Blue-white electricity danced all across the Trilian's body as a blast from a disruptor burned out its nervous system. Its eyes popped and Teice saw a glob of smoking goo strike the stairs near his feet.

Teice's father stood at the top of the stairs. Beside him, Teice's mother crouched still aiming the disruptor she'd taken from a dead crewman. Karyn Ravenhest had served four years in the space marines and handled a neural disruptor better than anyone in her squadron.

Several things happened at once: Teice's parents both called his name and he ran toward them, but slipped on the blood on the stairs. At the same time, the dead-but-still-twitching Trilian fell from the ceiling directly in Teice's path. A split-second after that, the ship's artificial gravity failed. For a terrifying moment, Teice found himself staring into the scorched empty eye sockets of the dead alien. The boy and the Trilian bounced off of one another. The alien rebounded into its victim causing her to become airborne as well. The two corpses ricocheted limply in the stairwell in a grotesque dance.

Meanwhile, Teice hurtled backwards away from the stairs. Spinning through the air, head-over-heels, Teice glimpsed a squad of Trilians leaping at his parents from behind.

"Mom! Look...!" was as far as he got. The ship routed emergency power to a back-up system and restored the gravity in the stairwell. Teice plummeted to the bottom of the stairwell and landed with a painful crunch just as the gravity failed again. He bounced into an open storage locker. As he lost consciousness, he heard his mother's disruptor repeatedly firing on maximum setting. Then it stopped and he heard a triumphant chorus of broken violins. Then he heard nothing more.

When Teice awakened, his head and face were all sticky with drying blood. The door to the storage locker had closed while he was unconscious and the only light was a dim gray one from a vent near his head. The gravity was still off and he was rattling around inside the locker like a marble in a box. He felt as if he was hanging upside-down -- or maybe right-side up, who knew? -- and the walls were taking turns hitting him. The left rear corner punched him in the shoulder and retreated, then the right front corner hit him in the head and withdrew, then the back wall kicked him in the rear and so on.

Teice reached out with both hands and succeeded in holding the locker walls at bay. His feet dangled bit until he could brace himself spread-eagle against the walls of his hiding place.

Teice could smell burnt and stinky smells through the vent, but it was silent outside. There was no zap of disruptors, no screams, no unstrung violins. Nothing. "Mom?" he whispered.

That was all it took. Something large moved in the stairwell above (below?) him. Teice held his breath. The something stopped moving.

Slowly and silently, Teice exhaled. The something in the stairwell did not respond. Teice waited motionless. He craned his neck and tried to peer out through the vent.

Suddenly, something black blotted out the gray light shining through the vent. The locker slid open and Teice screamed.

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Teice Ravenhest did not wake up screaming. For what it was worth, that hadn't happened since he was an adolescent. It had been twenty-five years since his parents had died in space. Over those years, Teice dreamed of that day whenever he was feeling anxious or unhappy. "For everyone else, an anxiety dream is dreaming that they didn't study for the big exam," grumbled Teice to no one in particular. "I get bloodbath in space."

The dream always left Teice feeling emotionally hung over. A robotic cart carrying a pot of coffee, a plate of toast and clean clothes rolled into the room. Teice got dressed, ate breakfast and wondered what he was going to do.

It did not surprise him that he was having the anxiety dream, however. The e-mail notification from Galaxynet of his termination and the transfer of severance pay to his account was more than sufficient to promote that. The fact that he was stranded on Space Station Orca in the Kuiper Belt of the Tau Ceti System, halfway across the Human Sector from home, did not help matters. His free passage on any Galaxynet ship headed toward home (or anywhere, for that matter) was null and void.

For the last (Earth Standard) year, Teice had been checking cargo manifests of Galaxynet freighters and pearl necklace craft entering and leaving the Tau Ceti system. It was work that could have been handled by a medium-grade AI and a few fairly stupid robots and, for the most part, it was. Still, corporate headquarters liked having a living employee double-check everything. It gave them someone to blame in case anything went wrong. He performed inspections of the ships and did routine maintenance on company equipment. He had been expecting to be transferred back home or to Alpha Centauri as soon as they found someone lower on the totem pole to do the job. Getting canned suggested to Teice that he was much lower on the totem pole than he had previously suspected.

In any event, Teice had more immediate concerns. His lodging on Space Station Orca had been provided by the company and he was expected to be out within an Earth Standard week. He really had nowhere to go; the notification of termination had advised him that his personal belongings had been removed from his company-provided condominium back home and were being held in storage at his expense.

He accessed the *Orca Weekly Journal* and checked the want ads. No one was offering any

jobs for the simple fact that if one didn't have a job on a space station, there was no point in hanging around. Next, he checked for arriving and departing ships or shuttles to any of the Tau Ceti worlds. The second planet in the system was a tropical world ninety percent covered by ocean. Teice briefly indulged himself with a fantasy about retiring to one of the tens of thousands of tiny islands there and living on seafood and sweet Cetiian fist melons. Of course, the seal-like Selkies living in the warm shallow waters surrounding those islands had been known to come out at night and harpoon squatters. Since the introduction of dolphins into the Tau Cetiian waters, the natives had been even less tolerant of land-dwelling humanoids. The original idea had been that the dolphins would live in the deeper oceans and herd fish into the shallow waters where the Cetiians could catch them for their corporate sponsors. Apparently, the dolphins had let slip some of the less savory aspects of their shared history with humanity. They had declared Tau Ceti II a Dolphin Homesea and were currently suing to get out of their corporate contract. The dolphins were winning.

The other worlds in the Tau Ceti system were less interesting: Tau Ceti I was a Mercury-like ball of iron with lots of mining but not much else to recommend it. Most of the its residents were robots and cyborgs engineered for the harsh environment. Tau Ceti III and IV were Venus- and Mars-like worlds. Galaxynet had begun terraforming operations on them once it became apparent that they were going to lose Tau Ceti II. At this stage, terraforming consisted mostly of using giant mass drivers and pearl necklace craft to fling comets from the Kuiper Belt and crash them into the subject planets to -- in the case of the Mars-like world -- help build up an atmosphere or -- in the case of the Venusian world -- blast some of the excess atmosphere into space. Other than some spectacular fireworks shows, neither of these planets had much to offer either. The rest of the planets in the system consisted of a trio of gas giants each orbited by the usual moon-like and iceball wastelands. There was mining and some research, but the only jobs that had any openings were those with high fatality rates.

Discouraged, Teice got up and took himself for a walk around the station. When he returned to his apartment, he found he had eight messages waiting. He played the first one and an attractive blonde in her twenties appeared on the screen. "It has come to our attention that you no longer have access to your wArp™ corporate account," she said. "wArp™ values your business and we have prepared a customized individual account package for you. Call me at your convenience. I'm Chanda, your wArp™ customer service representative for the Tau Ceti System. Remember, when you need to reach across the stars, don't just call, wArp™."

The next message was from a silver sphere. "Microsoft/MCI-AT&T™ sympathizes with you on your recent loss of employment," soothed the sphere. "However, the loss of your corporate calling privileges does not mean you are cut off from the galaxy. Now, more than ever, you probably would like to talk to your foster parents in New New York or your Uncle Mike in Sydney." The sphere

expanded to show images of the people it mentioned. "Microsoft/MCI-AT&T™ will give you three free ultra-long-distance calls of up to fifteen minutes each when you confirm and activate the customized individual account we have prepared for you. Contact LaRue..." The sphere expanded to show a dark-complexioned forty-something gentleman of indeterminate ethnicity. "...your Microsoft/MCI-AT&T™ customer service representative for the Tau Ceti System. Remember Microsoft/MCI-AT&T™ ultra-long-distance is the next best thing to beaming there."

There were two more messages from ultra-long distance services and three from health insurance and legal services providers. The last message was from a petite black-haired woman in her fifties. "Good morning, Mr. Ravenhest. My name is Wu-Jen Johnson and I represent Governor Ontario Brace of Far Sequoia in the Ushas-B System. Please give me a call at our expense at your earliest convenience. I'd like to discuss a possible job opportunity with you."

Teice was startled. Someone offering to find him a job for a fee would not have been unexpected, but someone actually interested in hiring him amounted to a radical change in luck. Teice spent a few minutes settling down. There was no sense in getting his hopes up until he knew who these people were, what they wanted him to do and what they were willing to pay him for it. For that matter, he had never even heard of anyplace called Far Sequoia. He consulted the station's cyberlibrarian and learned that Far Sequoia was a new colony -- less than 30 standard years old -- at the edge of the Human Sector. A quick check of the atlas placed the planet halfway around the Human Sector from his current location.

He read through the rest of the entry. Far Sequoia was the second of two worlds orbiting a G5 type sun which, in turn, orbited an M6 giant at a distance of about three light months. The planet had just undergone intermediate terraforming procedures and most of its population of three million had come from the Sol and Alpha Centauri systems and from a third system he didn't recognize. Interestingly, no corporate ownership was listed for the system. That was almost unheard of in these days. Teice wondered how they managed. Other than the fact that Ushas-A might be a prime supernova candidate in as soon as a few tens of thousand or hundred thousand years, Far Sequoia was a piece of prime planetary real estate. Keeping it out of the hands of the multistellars would have amounted to a full-time job in itself. Despite this, they somehow had time for terraforming, population building, and locating him less than two standard days after he'd been terminated by GalaxyNet.

Teice combed his hair and put on a better suit. He also reviewed and updated his résumé and uploaded it into the Net. "Computer: Reply to Message 8. Collect call."

"Please wait," affirmed the AI.

Wu-Jen Johnson's face appeared on the screen. "Mr. Ravenhest," she said. "Thanks for calling back so promptly. I believe I have a proposition that will be of great mutual benefit to both you and Far Sequoia. We would very much like to hire your services as a consultant."

This caught Teice off-guard. "Uh, in what field of expertise do you need my services?" he stalled. As far as he knew, he was hardly well-versed enough in any field to be considered an expert. Certainly not an expert worthy of transporting almost 200 light years.

Wu-Jen laughed a bubbly laugh. "Why, Dragons, of course, Mr. Ravenhest."

Teice got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. All he knew about Dragons was what everyone else knew about Dragons, and what everyone else knew about Dragons was not very much. They were an intimidating looking species, more massive than humans and standing seven or eight feet tall. They were covered from hooked beak to long reptilian tail with jet-black scales as tough as starship hulls. They had great bat-like wings which they used -- in defiance of physics and common sense both -- to fly unaided through interstellar space at very close to the speed of light. They also breathed fire.

Nobody knew if the Dragons had a home planet or, if so, where it was. They traveled singly or in small bands. Dragons never spoke and, if they communicated telepathically, it was on a frequency known only to themselves. When they visited among humans or other races, they made their desires known through simple gestures. No one knew the reasons for their visits, but sometimes they would offer gems, precious metals or alien artifacts of unknown origin as barter. Dragons arriving from space were voracious eaters favoring live or raw meat and gallons and gallons of water, fresh or salt made no difference to them. Dragons leaving for space were sometimes seen gliding in the upper atmospheres of gas giants as if somehow fueling up for the long trip.

Nothing was known of their life cycle. No one had ever examined a dead Dragon and their armored bodies resisted most even the most powerful sensor scans. It was not known how long they lived or how they survived in space or whether they had any sort of history or culture.

Teice certainly could not afford to miss out on this job opportunity that had dropped in his lap. On the other hand, he debated the wisdom of trying to pass himself off as an expert on Dragons based on what he had read in the *Encyclopedia Galactica*. "I'm sorry," he confessed. "You must have the wrong man. I don't know anything about Dragons."

Wu-Jen looked slightly taken aback. "You are Teice Dan Ravenhest?"

Teice nodded. "Yes, but..."

"Our records here show that you are exactly the man we're looking for then."

"I don't see how that can be," Teice tried to explain.

"Look," said Wu-Jen, "Governor Brace has authorized me to arrange transport for you from Space Station Orca to Far Sequoia. We're prepared to offer you the same salary and benefits you had with Galaxynet if you will come lend us your expertise."

"But I have no expertise," insisted Teice.

"My file on you says otherwise," said the woman.

"Then your file is..."

Wu-Jen held up a hand to shush him. "We would like to interview you in person anyway. If it turns out that my information is wrong, we can still use you anyway. Far Sequoia is a relatively young colony and we can use every sharp mind and strong back we can lay hands on. You'll have much better luck finding a job and a home here than anywhere else. You've got nothing to lose by taking us up on this offer."

That certainly rang true. "All right," said Teice slowly, "But consider yourselves fairly warned. I don't want to hear any accusations that I misrepresented myself."

Wu-Jen winked at him. "I'll even agree to that in writing. I'll e-mail you a contract for you to review at your leisure. I've also uploaded a copy of your flight itinerary for you. You'll be leaving for Space Station Quayle in the Sol system Kuiper Belt on the freighter *Heimdall* in two days. There, you'll have a six week layover before you board the passenger liner *Forbin* bound for..."