

Dark Empire Book Five
Desperate Measures

Chapter One

Gateway Station, orbiting Earth II

“We were always planning to move from Galactic Council space, but we had hoped to do it in our own time.” Joe Allen spoke to the doctor on the small space station orbiting Earth II. Not the massive Kalquorian Alpha Space Station, though he would have liked to have been invited on board it for a look. It was impressive, dwarfing its Earther sibling, Gateway.

The man who’d introduced himself as Dr. Fazir clucked sympathetically as he adjusted the medical scanner’s parameters. “The business between the GC and Kalquor is disrupting a large number of people. Were you living on Jedver?”

“No, Akdesh Colony on the moon Atoc. We had a population of several races, including enough Kalquorians to rival Haven, I bet. Even after the GC tossed them all out after the supposed footage of Copeland leaked, there were a lot of GC troops patrolling the colony.” Joe frowned. Things had gotten weird in a hurry on Atoc. Kalquor had lobbed its share of accusations at the Galactic Council of Planets, foremost of which was the assertion its leaders had been taken over by an interdimensional alien force they’d called the Darks.

He didn’t know what to believe. The secretary-general, a Kalquorian himself, had decried his home empire for its “attempt to redirect attention from the criminal detainment of the first Earth’s former Holy Leader.” All Joe knew was the sight of armed soldiers prowling the neighborhood where he and his wife were raising their three young daughters was too much. Especially in light of the rumors that a number of planets, stations, and moons in Galactic Council space had come under martial law after a series of riots.

The Allen family had applied to Earth II for emergency refugee status, and it had been granted. His family had left behind their home, jobs, schools, and most of their belongings to escape a steadily darkening Galactic Council atmosphere.

A couple of Joe’s friends had ridiculed him for running off and dragging his family to an uncertain future. Maybe he was being dumb, depending on meager savings and six months of government funding while he started from scratch. But his wife Randi had agreed the situation felt bad, so they’d fled a seemingly secure footing for the unknown.

Better to goof up and end up scratching for a few years than be caught in the middle of another war. Joe had been a teenager when the original Earth had been rendered lifeless from a series of nuclear blasts. He had no idea how bad it could turn in Galactic Council space, and he didn’t want his daughters to find out because he’d failed to bring them to a safe place.

“All right. Scans and bloodwork look excellent.” Dr. Fazir smiled at him. “I’ll check on your wife and daughters, then you’ll be cleared to go on to Earth. Hopefully—”

“What’s that?” Joe interrupted. His gaze swung to where he’d thought he saw a shadow, a glimpse of moving darkness at the corner of his eye.

Then all was quiet.

The entity who’d grabbed control of Joe watched unfeelingly as the human doctor jerked to see what had attracted its mount’s attention a split second before Fazir was also taken.

The two motes of the All had no need to speak. They'd begun performing their task once the refugee ship they'd been aboard had docked. Their mandate was simple: hiding, coming out and puppeting the human men who seldom had the ability to detect them until it was too late, doing their work for the few seconds it took, then hiding again until the next male patient.

No speech was needed. It was good to be together, though their companionship couldn't approach the natural belonging when they were fused with the All. Still, other motes were isolated alone, so they claimed what scant pleasure they could in having each other near.

Dr. Fazir went to the closet as he had dozens of times since the first refugee had dropped off the All's supplies taken from Bi'is. From the back of the tallest shelf, he claimed an ampule and loaded it into an injector.

The entity controlling the unaware Joe Allen held his mount still as the injector was held against the human's neck. A click as the trigger was pulled, a soft hiss, and the job was done.

The injector was put away, and Dr. Fazir resumed the position Joe had last seen him in. The Darks withdrew at the same instant.

Dr. Fazir blinked at his patient. "I'm sorry. Did you say something?"

Joe gazed at him, then looked around the room. "I thought I saw..." He stopped and laughed. "Jumping at shadows. Or the idea of them. You know, I glimpsed one of the damned things on the news vid where they showed the Kalquorian admiral being used by a Dark. It's given me nightmares."

"The ability is noted in your file. You may be able to train for a security detail on Earth. They're calling for people who can spot the aliens. You should check into it. Your wife too. She no doubt hears the doubled voices of the Dark-ridden."

"We will. Thanks." Joe appeared brighter at the suggestion. Many of the refugees streaming to Earth II were frightened and depressed at having to leave the lives they'd built elsewhere. Having the opportunity to hit the ground running gave the approximately five percent who could spot Darks badly needed hope.

"Make sure to get some rest, nightmares or not. Okay, let's evaluate your wife and girls and send you on to Earth."

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Yentwa Space Station, Galactic Council Space

Captain Wotref's Kalquorian transport had just docked on a space station orbiting the planet Jedver. The massive vessel had started life shuttling Kalquor's ground troops from battlefield to battlefield, but it had lately been ordered to evacuate Kalquorians and empire-sympathetic Earthers from Galactic Council space. The crew, which had more than its usual complement of Nobeks, was on edge. Theirs was the last Kalquorian transport allowed in Galactic Council space to carry out such evacuations. The border would slam shut behind them once they'd left.

Over a decade prior, the transport had taken Earther women from their dying planet to Kalquor to join clans eager for female lifebringers. One of those women had hilariously dubbed MT-118, the ship's official designation, the *Pussy Porter*. Some of its crew from those days still referred to it as such, chuckling at fond memories of the long-ago journey.

One of the liaisons responsible for the care of the latest Earther passengers was on edge too, but his was of an anticipatory nature. Imdiko Beta had just learned there'd be a layover of a couple weeks on Kalquor. He'd visit his family, always a plus.

He'd also be able to see the woman he loved.

He checked the time. The three people who'd been granted late clearance to join the trip weren't due to board for half an hour. It would take that long for them to jump through the hoops of the suddenly hostile Galactic Council's departing protocols. He eyed his Dramok clanmate Resan, whom he was helping to clean equipment in the transport's gym. Head trainer for the fleet troops assigned to the transport, Resan was as exacting of himself as those he pushed to sweating exhaustion. Metal parts gleaming a mirror finish showed the man's determined scowl as he wiped them down. The expression failed to mask the man's striking looks, framed by shoulder-length black hair.

Betra had nowhere to be until the evacuating Earthers arrived, and Resan knew it. Hence, the request he'd made for the Imdiko to assist him. Beta fought to keep his excitement over the upcoming shore leave to himself. If Resan were given any clue of Beta's hopes to visit a certain Earther female for an extended period, a female the Dramok had no liking for, he'd hit the roof.

Their Nobek clanmate Oses, the transport's weapons commander, chose that moment to join them in the gym. "I was sent to tell you Dr. Tep would like a word, my Dramok."

Resan slowly swiveled to face him. His brow was raised, and his gaze was cool, but a smirk played on his lips. "Since when are you Medical's messenger boy, Oses?"

The Nobek's craggy but attractive features were stone-like. It was at such times Beta was grateful Oses was so much older than his clanmates. He had the stoic reserves to draw on a younger Nobek wouldn't possess. Resan's occasional barely veiled insult, a knee-jerk reaction when he was upset or anxious, failed to elicit the warrior's temper.

His tone even, Oses said, "I was on my way here and passed the department. Tep saw me and requested I tell you to 'get your ass to Medical' to meet him right away."

"Because of Lieutenant Yulg, no doubt." Resan's eyes rolled.

"I didn't ask. Tep seemed rather irate and apparently decided against comming you for fear of what he might say. Was Yulg's injury worsened by his physical therapy? It would be his second setback."

"He was, and it was his own damned fault both times. If Tep wants a shouting match because the asshole won't do his exercises properly, I'm more than happy to give it to him." Resan flung his cleaning cloth aside and started for the door.

"Actually, his anger appeared not to be for you. Perhaps he believes both of you shouting at Yulg at once will set the lieutenant on the proper path to full recovery." Oses' expression remained stoic, but Beta was certain there was amusement dancing in his purple eyes.

Resan stopped and huffed, planting his hands on his hips. "I'm doing it again, aren't I? Assuming the worst of a situation before I learn what it is."

"You could always discuss the matter with Dr. Feru," Beta said in his most helpful tone. When Resan turned on him, his face darkening in anger at the intimation he required emotional therapy, the Imdiko smiled. "Just joking."

Resan growled and shook a finger, but a grin erupted. "Damn it, why won't you let me have my grouchy morning? I was in such a fine temper."

"I'm sure you'll recover it when you and Tep speak to Yulg. I doubt I can keep you from wallowing in grumpiness for long. You're too mean to be affected by the likes of an Imdiko made of sunshine."

Resan laughed, his handsome features enhanced by outright humor. “Sunshine! In your dreams, angsty one. Ah, what would I do without you two?” Still chuckling, he left.

Oses gave Betra a smile. “I’ll tell Tep he owes you. Whether he’s mad at Resan or not, you’ve at least spared him being skinned alive the moment our clan leader walks in Medical.”

“Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut. If Resan unloads on someone else, he’ll have less for me.”

“Because? Ah, the shore leave on Kalquor. You’re hoping we can visit Shalia.”

Betra managed to keep from cringing under his Nobek’s sharp and disapproving gaze. “The kids too. We always take our nieces and nephews somewhere.”

Oses roused to anger was the fiercest man Betra had ever encountered. He was more brutal than Resan in a bad mood, but he could be shockingly gentle when he wished it. “She’s Matara Shalia of Clan Seot. What we had with her ten years ago was incredible...but it’s over, Betra. We’re lucky to have any part of her life now.”

“I know.” Irritability akin to his Dramok’s rose to have to face the truth. “Just as I understand I’d never have made her a proper clanmate. And Resan...”

“Respects but hates her. As she respects but hates him. Even if she left her clan, which would be wrong because they’re perfect for her, it would be impossible for us to claim her. Resan’s the ideal Dramok for us, but those two together?”

“One would die, and the other would be in prison for the murder before a month was out.” Betra sighed. “Is it so wrong I still care for her? That I can’t wait to be near her?”

“You know I feel the same. But she’s our friend now, Betra. She can’t be more.”

Betra marveled at Oses’ understanding and patience. “I’m stupidly excited to see her every time. Why can’t I let go? Why do I want what isn’t right for any of us?”

“Because love has no use for good sense. As we’re well aware.” Oses, who’d loved Betra long before the strictly heterosexual Imdiko had realized he could negotiate a clanship including men, wore a wistful smile. It sat strangely on his strong features. “Who would have thought Resan, you, and I could make a relationship work? Somehow, we do. But you must bow to the impossible, my Imdiko. Shalia isn’t for us. She never will be.”

“Yeah.” The voice of experience and reason was right, but Betra’s heart stubbornly refused to hear it.

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“There’s nobody on board to talk to. To hang out with. Am I really supposed to keep to myself all the way to Alpha Space Station?”

Charity Nath heard her voice rising, but she couldn’t seem to rein it in. First, she’d been forced to take leave from her university classes on Jedver. Now she was being compelled to run from the planet she’d called home for the last six years. She wasn’t even allowed to go to Earth II.

Heaven forbid she be allowed to enjoy the world terraformed specifically for her fellow humans in the wake of the original Earth’s demise. Instead, she was to be shoved onto the cold, dark space station orbiting it.

She was twenty, but she had the urge to throw a toddler-worthy tantrum. Her whole life was being upended because she bore the last name Nath. It wasn’t fair. No one knew her actual name, so why should she have to worry about her identity being discovered?

She had nobody she could truly blame either. It wasn't her father's fault, despite there being those among the Earthers who'd branded him a traitor. It wasn't her sister Hope's fault, though she'd clanned Kalquorians equally despised on their home world.

It most certainly wasn't the handsome Kalquorian liaison's fault. He'd delivered the bad news she and Aunt Ruth and Uncle George would be kept secluded from fellow Earthers running from the Galactic Council while it and the Kalquorian Empire had their spat. Liaison Beta was a really good-looking guy, worth a serious flirtation if Charity hadn't felt so put-upon. If he hadn't been the person to tell her she was to be isolated from everyone else.

"It's a necessary precaution," Beta soothed. "We're under orders to keep you safe, since your fellow Earthers might be upset over the allegations my people and your father are supposedly holding the former leader of old Earth as a prisoner."

"About that. Why didn't you execute the old tyrant? Or let his former wives do so?" *Or his would-be wife.* It had been a fate Charity had nearly been damned to at the age of fifteen.

"Copeland died in the battle at Haven, despite the Galactic Council's allegations," Beta said. "The vid footage was faked."

He'd think so. Beta hadn't been on the battlecruiser running for his life during its final seconds, alongside Charity and the rest hauling Copeland to a Kalquorian spyship so the bastard could face real justice.

Justice that hadn't come to pass, as far as Charity was concerned.

"Of course he died," Uncle George said, his wide grin beaming in his trademark friendly fashion at Beta. "We drink a toast to it on the anniversary each year."

"Sweetie, this is for the best." Aunt Ruth was pleasant, but there was a warning in her soft brown eyes for Charity.

"We don't want any Earthiques who might be on board recognizing you. Borey Nath's youngest needs to keep her presence quiet." George was equally kind and just as insistent.

"No one knows I'm a Nath," she protested. She'd used her aunt and uncle's surname after moving in with them.

"I'm sorry, Matara." Beta's tone was unfailingly kind, but there was a steel beneath it that said he wouldn't be swayed. "I have my orders. You can't mix among the rest of the Earthers on this transport. Perhaps the matter will be different on Alpha Space Station."

He took his leave soon afterward, having given them the tour of their quarters on board the transport...which were admittedly nice considering it had once been used to ferry troops who weren't afforded many luxuries.

Charity flounced on the lounge in the sitting room. "All I can say is Hope better not think I'm staying isolated on the space station for any length of time. It's bad enough to have to pull a disappearing act."

"The station is Kalquorian. Few Earthers visit, I'm told. I'm sure you'll be allowed to move about it freely," her aunt said gently as she inspected the kitchenette. She brushed her dark hair, showing its first strands of gray, from her eyes as she examined the automatic cooker.

"Why shouldn't you? After all, Clan Piras lives there, and they're unpopular with their own people. We haven't been called to a funeral yet, so it must be okay." Uncle George grinned as he ogled the entertainment system a few feet away.

Charity hoped he was right. She was a firm believer in living for today. She'd learned the hard way tomorrow wasn't guaranteed.

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Mymah, moon in Galactic Council Space

Former nun Cheryl Taupin began the meeting she'd called. "The orphanage continues to be beneath the notice of the Galactic Council, thank God. Unfortunately, we can't continue to count on it."

Her husband Nobek Besral glanced around the conference table at the four others who'd joined them: two human women and two fellow Nobeks. He concentrated on Ocri and Norev, next in line in the security hierarchy of the small defense force employed by Open Arms Orphanage. "No doubt the GC would leave this moon alone if it weren't for our presence. But we're needed here more than ever, especially now when it seems the ruling council has lost its collective senses."

"They said they'd arrest any Kalquorians unaffiliated with the council who remain in GC space," Cheryl needlessly reminded them.

"I don't plan to budge unless the children leave too," Ocri snarled. "They've been my responsibility for ten years. I've watched thousands grow and embark on successful lives thanks to our care. I refuse to walk away."

"As do we all." Besral offered a grim smile.

The Kalquorian men were impressive muscled beasts despite their heads full of gray hair and advanced years. Discounting Besral, none of the dozen remaining to guard the orphanage was a day under the age of one hundred ninety. Besral was one hundred sixty himself. He wasn't old, but he was well into middle age for a Kalquorian.

Their official function was to guard the orphans of Armageddon, as the parentless children who'd survived in the wake of the Earth-Kalquorian War were often referred to. The Nobeks would have long retired if they'd remained in the empire's fleet or ground troops.

They typically had little to do as far as actually protecting the mere five hundred children left from the original thousands who'd sought refuge after losing their families and world. The space belonging to the Galactic Council of Planets had historically been as safe a haven as could be found in the galaxy. Besral's men were more apt to teach math, science, meditation, or physical exercise classes than challenge unknown crafts veering too close to the moon facility.

Still, their mandate was to keep the children safe above all else. They'd become de facto father figures for those who hadn't been adopted or attained adulthood yet. When the Galactic Council had ordered all Kalquorians out of its space subsequent to dubious revelations of wrongdoing, those who'd made the orphanage their lives had been besieged by demands from their charges to stay. When days, then weeks slipped by and no one enforced the eviction, the atmosphere of grief and fear had lessened.

The orphanage's first headmistress had tearfully left when her clan had been assigned elsewhere by their military supervisors. Cheryl had successfully headed the orphanage for the past three years. When trouble erupted between the Galactic Council and the Kalquorian Empire but no one demanded the Kalquorians at Open Arms leave, she'd agreed with Besral their being overlooked would be brief. Sooner or later, the GC would remember its small orphanage colony and those who staffed it.

"There are reports some planets, stations, and moons in the GC's system have come under martial law following protests against recent rulings," she told the two young women on her staff.

“I heard there’ve been riots.” Marci Soames, the younger of the pair, held Cheryl’s gaze. She exuded a forthright directness, challenging her supervisor to not sugarcoat the situation. Bold and mature beyond her twenty years, she could be trusted to speak her mind.

Her sister Darci looked like her twin rather than an elder sibling. Only two years separated the Soames. Neither wore makeup, nor did they need it. Theirs were lovely, proud features, left bare thanks to their black curls cut close to their heads “Homes are being searched on Shiwin and Taheg, according to a couple of news reports on the secret channels,” she added. “Neither were known to have Kalquorian residents, so no one is sure what the reason is.”

“No one’s suggesting the secretary-general be booted, and he’s Kalquorian.”

“He’s been seen less and less in these past weeks,” Besral mused. “It makes me wonder.”

“He probably knows you guys might show up to kick his butt. Didn’t he ask for leniency toward the Tragooms a few weeks ago?” Marci’s tone was sharp. Most sentients were no fans of the aggressive race from Trag. She in particular loathed them utterly after they’d attacked their old orphanage on Europa when she was ten.

Cheryl often mourned the Soames sisters had elected to remain at the orphanage rather than pursue the successful careers she knew they’d have elsewhere. Dedicated to their fellow refugees, they’d vowed to remain until the last orphan of Armageddon left. The youngest of the residents were ten, having been infants when the original Earth had been rendered unlivable. Darci would be thirty and still part of the orphanage if those didn’t find homes prior to reaching legal adulthood.

However, the sense of an emergency descending upon them made Cheryl grateful to have her most dedicated assistants at her side. She appreciated them almost as much as she did Besral.

“Neither Secretary-General Dramok Mereta nor the Tragooms are the issue where we’re concerned,” she said to re-direct the discussion to where it needed to be. “I believe we’re in imminent danger, and we should evacuate before the GC remembers our tiny population here.”

The rest murmured their agreement with her assessment. Having established they were likeminded on the issue, Besral spoke up in his gruff voice. “I can send a message through secret channels to Kalquor’s Fleet Command. They may not be able to send help, but perhaps our allies can do so.”

“Why not alert Earth? They’re most likely to have a place for us to set up a new facility,” Darci said.

“Except for a few thousand independent operators, Earth has no military ships. They haven’t yet established the infrastructure to support a fleet. Kalquor is in charge of keeping your new home planet safe.”

“Funny to call it a home planet when I’ve never been there. You’re right; we need the empire to figure this out,” Marci said. She grinned at Besral in obvious appreciation. “As they’ve done for us time and time again.”

“We’ll continue to shore up defenses ourselves,” Besral told Ocri and Norev. “I have some ideas on how we might conceal our presence here in case the GC decides to remember we exist.”

“Let’s get to work.” Norev grinned, as if they planned a fun outing rather than courting death.