

Dark Empire Book One
Chapter One

Captain Kila's spyship

Specialist Hope Nath hid a yawn behind her hand. She peeked at the spyship's bridge crew to make sure no one noticed her boredom during an operation classified as dangerous.

She smirked as she tucked a wayward brunette lock of hair behind her ear. The planet Bi'is hadn't been a threat since the Kalquorian Empire had devastated the hostile race's invading space fleet five years prior. Its danger was long past. She couldn't be the only one who found their assignment tedious.

As if to reprimand her for her careless attitude, Captain Kila growled, "What the hell is that?"

Admiral Piras was at his shoulder in an instant. "Main vid screen, enlarge."

The hum of quiet conversation on the bridge snapped into silence. Hope's eyes widened in concert with her Kalquorian shipmates.

Barely aware she was doing so, she echoed her commanding officer and Nobek clanmate's question. "What is that?"

The semi-circle bridge's entire forward section was dominated by the vid screen. It depicted the upper curve of Bi'is, an orange-tinged blue planet the phased spyship orbited. Beyond it, stars gleamed in their multitudes, constellations of scattered bits of glitter Hope had grown familiar with after five years of sentry duty.

Several of the well-known star patterns had been eclipsed. Inky darkness spread before her gaze, blotting them from existence. Hope watched as several more stars appeared to wink out.

She'd already noted what Kila had: the stars weren't going out. Something was approaching the ship, eclipsing their view of distant suns and planets. Whatever it was, it was huge.

Admiral Piras, who was also Hope's clanmate, frowned. No alarm registered on his delicate features, offset by a surprisingly strong jaw. He hadn't recognized it as an enemy. "Computer, scan the oncoming object and identify."

"Scans identify no object approaching the ship," the masculine electronic voice answered.

"I'm looking directly at it. There's an object in Sector Beta-Seven-Seven-Five." Even his shoulder-length black hair bristled to be contradicted. Piras had little patience when it came to ignorance of the obvious.

"Visual evidence confirmed. However, scans do not recognize the existence of any object in the indicated sector."

"We're fucked." Com officer Veko's whisper, probably unintended for anyone's hearing, reached Hope. She gazed at the long mop of black hair hovering over the com station. Kila's longest-serving crewmember's face was rarely seen, and his opinions typically assumed the worst.

Kila scowled at his own station's computer readouts. His usual smirk was nowhere in evidence within his black beard. "No signal, no power emissions, nothing. It's as if it isn't there."

"Except I see it. Or at least, a hint of it." Piras glanced at Hope, his brows drawn together.

"No details. Just...black." She hurried to the engineering station, obeying his unspoken command. Her readings suggested less than what physical vision offered. She enabled tracking on the object and thumbed the automatic communications frequency. "Chief Engineer Lokmi to the bridge."

“On my way.” Her third clanmate’s tone was excited, so he was already aware of the situation.

“Unknown object entering Sector Alpha. It has assumed orbit, fifty-four point sixty-eight kilometers off our bow, matching our speed,” she reported to Kila. She kept her tone clipped, not admitting her relief the shadow hadn’t attacked them.

“Computer, give me an outline of the unidentified object.” Piras had apparently tired of squinting at it.

A bright blue border traced the unfathomable black. Hope blinked. “It looks like a squid.”

“A what?” Kila and Piras glanced at her.

“A sea creature on Earth. It had tentacles extending from an oblong body, sort of how that thing appears.” She warmed and shrugged. “Which has nothing to do with what we’re looking at. Apologies, Captain, Admiral.”

“Keep observations to what’s helpful, Specialist Nath.” Piras winked at her before returning his attention to the ‘space squid.’

Hope suppressed a smile. Any other member of the crew would have had his ears blistered to have offered such a useless statement. Being a woman and a clanmate to the commanding officers had its privileges.

Kila narrowed his gaze. “Helm, alter orbit so we can see the target against the planet.”

“Altering orbit, Captain, by forty-five degrees.”

The angle of Bi’is changed on the screen, bringing the odd object into silhouette against the orb. Its edges were crisp against the shining planet. It definitely seemed to have tentacles, which waved and curled lazily for no discernable reason. It displayed no other details. The shape might have been cut out from space, a bizarre hole in the fabric of reality.

“If we weren’t phased, I’d put a light on it. It can’t be just a black blank,” Kila said. His muscled frame, obvious despite the armored padding of his black fleet uniform, thrummed with energy.

Despite his readiness to engage a potential enemy, he and Piras still displayed only concerned curiosity. No alarm. Because the ship was phased, occupying a space between their dimension and a supposed second dimension, it would be invisible to the visitor and in no danger from any attack.

Small black dots issued from the object, falling from its underside between the wavering tentacles. They fell toward the planet.

“Interesting. Computer, give me a closeup of one of those...emissions,” Kila ordered.

Hope tapped on her computer, trying to get a reading on them. Again, scans picked up no signs of entities of any sort. Their results were as empty as the large shadow.

“They’re miniatures of the parent vessel.” Piras’ mutter brought her attention back to the main vid. It showed one of the descending objects. “How large are they?”

“I still can’t get readings on them. I’m calculating size by comparing them to other measurable objects,” Hope answered as her fingers flew over the podium interface. “The smaller objects are about twelve meters in length.” The size of a city bus on old Earth, she estimated. “You could fit around fifty Kalquorians on board.”

“Hold on. It’s happening again.” Kila’s voice held a growl as he glared at the supposed vessel.

Hope gaped. Smaller versions were spewing from the bus-sized object the vid had zoomed in on and racing twice as fast to the planet. A widened view showed the rest were also ejecting miniature versions of themselves, which collected together and descended as a group.

Suspicion bloomed, and she flew through additional calculations. Her stomach dropped as she confirmed her hunch.

“Captain, they’re zeroing in on the location where our away team is.”

The chief engineer and her Imdiko clanmate Lokmi was suddenly at her side. “That can’t be good,” he muttered. His strong but handsome features were set in piercing intentness, framed by wavy black hair.

“We’re fucked,” mop-haired Veko agreed in another whisper.

Hope moved over to give Lokmi room at the console. “You’ve been following what’s going on?”

“Everything but the pictures.” He eyed the vid briefly before checking the readings.

“Open frequency to the away team, Veko.” Kila’s attention was riveted on his own console.

“Frequency open, Captain.”

“Subcommander Selt, respond.”

Silence answered. Kila shot a look at the waterfall of hair hovering over the com station.

“I can’t confirm they’re receiving us, Captain. There’s no sign of frequency disruption, but the weapons subcommander isn’t answering.”

“Use all frequencies. Away team, this is Captain Kila. Respond.”

Nothing.

Weapons Commander Jado’s lips had drawn into a snarl, but his voice was calm. “They’re operating phased, Captain. They should remain undetected by whatever those are.”

“I know, but I don’t like the situation. What are the odds the alien objects would head straight to where they are? I want to talk to them.”

“I’m giving you a power boost, Veko. If that thing is jamming us, maybe it’s as impossible to read as the scans.” Lokmi tossed a glance over his shoulder. “Any luck?”

The hair swayed a negative. “I’m issuing the alert signal, and there’s still no sign of interference, but they aren’t responding.”

Hope had continued her calculations. “Based on the rate of descent, the smallest objects should have reached the planet’s surface by now, Captain.”

Kila leveled what Hope thought of as his evil smile on her, Lokmi, and Veko, betraying his patience was fast failing. “Half a dozen of our best men are down there. Get me a com connection *immediately*.”

Hope checked the helm, where the first officer, Dramok Deram, piloted the spyship. It was impossible to see his model-perfect face; he was almost directly in front of her, facing the vid. She thought the set of his shoulders appeared tense, but his fingers ran smoothly over his console. He never uttered a word except to direct the navigator to his right.

Weapons Subcommander Nobek Selt was Deram’s clanmate, and a damned good officer. He was also a good man, unfailingly upbeat. Almost civilized, for a Nobek.

It was her worry for Selt’s and the away team’s safety, more than Kila’s growing frustration, that kept her trying every avenue to forge a com link. She tried them again when they failed.

As the minutes stretched and she continued to search for an answer, she was aware Lokmi wasn’t merely trying to find a path to restore the coms. He ran computations, which appeared to have nothing to do with the communications issue. No surprise; his engineering brilliance allowed him to work on multiple issues at once. Under normal circumstances, Hope would have asked him what he was up to, but her energy was focused on confirming the away team’s safety.

Kila snarled, “I’ve waited long enough. Weapons Commander Jado, put together another away team to find our guys—”

“Captain.” Lokmi spoke at a normal level, but his tone got everyone’s attention. “I believe the alien objects are phased.”

Piras took a step toward him, his elegant frame floating in unconscious grace. “How can you tell without any readings?”

“We’ve been tied into Bi’is’ alert system since we began monitoring the planet five years ago. Anything that doesn’t burn up in the atmosphere sets it off, unless it’s phased as we are.”

“The alarms aren’t going off?”

“No, Admiral. The objects are passing through the grid as if they’re not there.”

“Based on rate of descent, the larger twelve-meter objects should be reaching the ground now,” Hope grimly reported.

Kila rounded on Jado. “Get the second team to the planet.”

“Yes, Captain. Captain!” Jado pointed at the vid.

The massive inscrutable alien craft was moving out of orbit. It abruptly shrank and blinked out of sight.

The bridge crew chorused gasps. It took a couple of seconds for Hope to realize the tentacled vessel hadn’t shrunk. It had raced away at a velocity impossible to fathom.

“It left its invasion team behind?” Piras gaped.

“It would appear so.” A member of the Nobek warrior breed, Kila appeared less shocked, but his gaze remained on the screen, as if he hadn’t quite grasped what had just happened.

“Do you think it was an invasion?” Hope broke protocol by questioning the senior officers, but she was willing to take advantage of her privilege.

“Most likely reconnaissance,” Kila muttered. “What I want to know is who...what they were.”

“I have the away team on com, Captain,” Veko said. “Subcommander Selt confirms his group is fine and awaits your instructions.”

“They saw nothing? No little dark creatures with tentacles dashing around?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Nath, you were certain they were homing on the away team’s location.”

Hope squared her shoulders. “For as long as the ship was able to keep a visual on them, it was their trajectory.”

“Confirmed.” Lokmi winked at her. “I’m certain they were phased.”

“As is the team, Chief.” Kila pointed out. “If they’d shown up, our guys would have seen them. The unidentified objects might have veered off course once they were beyond visual range.”

“I agree, Captain.”

Kila scowled, making his crooked nose seem more so. He and Piras exchanged a glance. “I trust Selt to handle any trouble coming his way. But leaving his team down there when we don’t understand what we’re dealing with—”

“It doesn’t sit right with me either, Captain.”

“Veko, tell them to get their asses back to the ship now. Chief, Nath, go over what information we gathered. I know it’s only visual, but before we confront the minions of whatever that was, I want as much intel as possible.”

“The Bi’isils don’t have phasing tech,” Hope pointed out. “They won’t realize there’s something alien on their planet.”

Kila’s devious smirk gleamed. “Yeah, well, since they’ve tried to obliterate my people for the past few centuries, that’s their tough luck. Your space squids are welcome to them.”

* * * *

Nobek Selt stepped off his shuttle ahead of the rest of his team to find his Imdiko clanmate waiting for him in the spyship's bay. "A welcoming party for me, Doc? You're too kind."

Hadlez chuckled, rendering a beautiful, boyish face more so. "Command staff has been called in for a meeting. The shuttle bay was on my way, so I thought I'd swing by. We can walk together."

Selt felt a warmth he wouldn't show in front of his fellow Nobeks, just as Hadlez wouldn't embarrass him by saying out loud he'd missed him during his mission. So much so, he'd shown up to grab an extra minute or two of reunion. "It was only five days."

"Was that all? I guess it's as Nath says: time flies when you're having fun."

Hadlez's joke brought an instant of tension. Ever alert, the ship's head doctor caught it. "Selt?"

"No, it's nothing. I'm tired is all. Come on, Doc, put the scanner away." He tried to fend off the instrument Hadlez waved in front of him.

"Talk, or I'll send you to Medical for a full workup."

"I just had a lightheaded moment shortly before we were called back to the ship."

"Lightheaded?"

"Like walking in a dream?" A member of the team waiting to be dismissed, Dramok Ridret, spoke up.

"Yeah. Kind of hazy and disconnected," Selt agreed. "Sorry, team. I didn't mean to keep you hanging around. Dismissed."

"Not so fast." Hadlez's scanner inspected Ridret, then each man in turn. He frowned, shaking back waist-length black hair. "Did everyone have this issue?"

The five men glanced at each other, answering in the affirmative.

"We were in Bi'isil labs. We might have been exposed to something odd. What's your scanner say?" Selt asked.

"Little of note. You all have lower-than-usual blood sugar. You can go, but eat within the hour." Hadlez put his scanner in its pouch on his belt as the team bowed and hurried away.

"You've been skipping meals?"

"Like you said, time flies when you're having fun. Let's get to the meeting before the captain comes looking for us." Selt made it a priority to not piss Kila off. His infamous grin hid a brute of a Nobek. He was almost as terrifying as Piras.

"The order to eat applies to you too."

"Got it covered." Selt pulled a ration pouch from his belt and squeezed its bland contents into his mouth as they strode from the bay.

"Anything interesting to report?" His duty done as far as treating crewmen, Hadlez was eager for gossip. He loved hearing the latest intel ahead of anyone else. The serious doctor transformed to a mischievous boy when good chatter was to be had.

"We saw some anomalous reports coming in from Sector C again. Unreadable to me, no doubt coded messages."

"Ah, the mysterious Sector C lab. I take it the scientists erased these reports as soon as they read them?"

"Naturally. But we have copies of the notes and our targets' replies. Also coded." Selt sighed as they traveled the beige-walled corridor and its banks of computers. "It was a given they'd

restart covert experiments and studies. Erasing the entirety their former research and them having to endure regular Galactic Council inspections was merely an obstacle. They're taking up their evil ways again."

"The sort of evil that puts the rest of the known universe in danger." Hadlez offered him a sympathetic wince. "It isn't Bi'is attempting to misbehave putting a frown on your face."

Selt chuckled and combed his fingers through his shoulder-length curls. He wished he'd had an opportunity to clean up before reporting to Admiral Piras and Captain Kila. He was a rough, tough Nobek, but even a warrior wanted a shower and clean uniform after five days. "I'll be glad to hand over what's usually a boring posting to another crew, but yeah, I'm kind of miffed we won't be the ones to catch the little gray bastards up to no good."

"Think of the compensation, though. Our next deployment promises to be exciting, in another fashion."

Selt's good humor was restored in an instant. "The new Earth. Hopefully soon to be heavily populated by lonely Earther Mataras."

"Worth giving up stringing up Bi'isils?"

"Most definitely."

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Earth II

Stacy Nichols did her best to disembark from her shuttle in a dignified fashion, fighting the urge to bounce down the stairs. *Come on, woman, you're a thirty-eight-year-old governor, tasked with the start of a new planet. Decorum, please.*

Between excitement and a rush of fear, she felt like a giddy child. She faced the unknown and the unbelievable. It took everything she had to keep from leaping to the floor of the spaceport.

Security Head Kuran awaited her, his half-smile hinting perhaps he recognized her rush of adrenaline. Or maybe it was just the natural lift of his lips, which always made him appear amused. The majority of Kalquor's warrior breed didn't look so friendly, in Stacy's experience. Kuran had admitted would-be enemies found his pleasant features confusing, especially when he decided the time had come to kick ass.

Stacy wasn't confused when it came to Nobek Kuran, a handsome man who sported a seemingly permanent five o'clock shadow on his rugged features. She was all too aware of a spark of attraction when in his presence.

He bowed at her approach. "Welcome to Earth Two, Governor Nichols."

"Thanks, Kuran. I take it this the official welcome, since I've visited on nearly a dozen occasions already."

His purple eyes, which seemed locked in a squint, twinkled at her. "This is your welcome home greeting. Arriving to take the reins for an indeterminable time period demands a special reception."

"I suppose it does." She let the grin wanting to burst forth do so. Kuran answered in kind. "Speaking of receptions?"

"Dignitaries await you at the Government Hall." His real smile answered her.

Her pulse sped up. His wavy hair, as black as hers, fell past his shoulders in a flood. The gray uniform of a Kalquorian Fleet contract worker hugged his body in a positively sinful manner.

Chill out. This is Earth, not Haven. There are those who wouldn't be enthralled by your infatuation for a Kalquorian.

To underscore the issue to herself, she lowered the voltage of her joy and asked, "Has Kenneth Bryant arrived?"

"An hour ago." Kuran's tone went from warm to careful in an instant. "The lieutenant governor is waiting for you to arrive before he makes his appearance before the guests."

Stacy managed to avoid rolling her eyes. "Excellent. Shall we join the party?"

He swept an arm to indicate the path through the space port to its exit. "Your shuttle awaits, Governor."

They strode side by side, Kuran's usual long steps slowed to keep him from outdistancing her. He was more than a foot taller than her five-foot-five height, tall even for a Kalquorian. The swelling muscles made him a veritable giant.

Despite him accommodating her, she had to maintain a quick pace. Fortunately, Stacy preferred flats to heels, crisp blouses and comfortable trousers to dresses. Haven, the Earther-Kalquorian colony she'd lived on for the past six years, was, for the most part, a farming community. As lieutenant governor there, she'd regularly visited constituents. One dressed for plowed fields and cow patties if she were smart.

She beamed at the industry around her. Earth was still in preparation, aiming to be up and running in a few weeks, but the spaceport had been bustling for nearly two years. At the start, supplies and crews to establish the infrastructure of shuttle traffic lanes, public transportation, hospitals, and society's basic needs had been the majority of shipments. Now businesses, services, entertainments, and schools were readying to open. Supplies for an inhabited planet were pouring in. Cargo ships from every known world jockeyed for space, their crews and dockmasters shouting directions to each other.

Earth had been reborn and was on the brink of opening its proverbial doors. The excitement was electric.

Especially when she looked at Kuran.