

Dark Empire Book Three
Secret War

Chapter One

Galactic Council space, planet Jedver

Dramok Mereta, secretary-general of the Galactic Council of Planets, caught a glimmer of light and welcomed it. As it grew larger and brighter, he sent waves of calming bliss to the mind that had invaded his.

The alien presence was heavy, suffocating as Mereta's Kalquorian consciousness emerged. He felt his opponent stir, reacting to the soft blurring of focus he fed it. It knew something was wrong, but it had no idea what.

Mereta found its ache, its loneliness, its separation. He fed it warmth and a sense of belonging. It submerged into the sensation, hungry to be one with the alien All again, from which it had sprung.

Having successfully distracted it for a few precious moments, Mereta looked out onto the world he knew only in bits and snatches nowadays.

He was in his office, seated at his desk. His computer was on, a holographic screen hovering over it. He read it over quickly, knowing control of his body was brief, counted in minutes. Perhaps seconds.

It was a disturbing message to the heads of member planets, not only from himself but from many members on the council, urging them to relax sanctions against the planet Trag. The Tragooms were a troublesome species, mere children in a spiritual sense but destructive. Experience had taught most sentients the Tragooms were best kept to their own area of space.

There was little Mereta could do to keep such nonsense from being sent. Doing so would awaken the creature riding him to the fact he was overcoming it on occasion. He marveled for an instant at how the tone and speech of the message it had composed sounded just as he would...if he'd indeed supported such nonsense. How could anyone believe he'd want to ease the boundaries keeping the Tragooms a part of the rest of the galaxy's society without allowing them to do too much damage?

He had no time to ruminate on the matter. He opened a new document and typed a hurried message, the latest in several. He noted the date as he did so. Had he really been locked away in his own mind for so long? Apparently none of his earlier attempts to communicate had been discovered by the recipients.

Then again, his activities had yet to be discovered by the creature running his body, so there was still hope. More hope since Kalquor had yet to be overcome.

"Send via com route labeled *Mereta Home Path*," he told the device when he was done. "Recipient, Nobek Emperor Bevau."

The com beeped its compliance in the nick of time. The room was fading from Mereta's vision, his dark passenger waking from the mists that turned their attention to Mereta's consciousness.

He returned to the quiet deep, where the true All awaited him instead of the territorial other-dimensional being his rider had emerged from. Mereta drifted in peace, waiting for the light to beckon him to his next chance to warn the galaxy it had come under attack.

* * * *

Captain Kila's spyship

Ilid opened his eyes, grateful to escape sleep and its horrors. He discovered greater terror awaiting him in the waking world.

The Darks were everywhere, surrounding the sleeping mat in his quarters aboard Captain Kila's spyship. Their shadow tentacles slithered across the sheets covering him, reaching for him.

How do you see us? We will open your skull. We will cut your brain to pieces to find out, slice it and dice it until we know the secret.

Ilid screamed, pushing at tentacles his hands passed through, kicking at and through them as well. He screamed as they crawled onto the mat, as they scuttled toward his head where they'd claim control and hurt him...

He screamed and woke up for real, flailing violently to escape the tangle of sweat-drenched sheets. He fell off the bed, landing on his ass on the narrow strip of floor between sleeping mat and wall.

His gaze flew over the room, which he kept fully illuminated as he slept, so when he woke there wouldn't be shadows to frighten him. Unfortunately, his nightmares provided plenty of darkness.

The instant Ilid recognized there were no Darks in his stark, undecorated room, it was safe to let tears blur his vision. It was safe to cry the tears he should have been ashamed of, he, an adult Dramok.

He consoled himself no one was there to witness his shame, Darks or Kalquorians. He hadn't admitted to the nightly bouts of childish weeping to the psychologist on board the spyship. Only the nightmares, which refused to grant him peace.

He was beginning to believe the hell in his mind would never be over. He hadn't escaped the Darks. Not truly.

Once the storm of sobbing ended, Ilid dragged himself to his feet and dressed in his black fleet uniform. He had given the time a cursory glance and knew it was early yet, but he'd never get back to sleep. He didn't want to, though he'd been forbidden stim tabs to combat the two or three hours he was unable to avoid succumbing to each night...more when his exhaustion caught up to him after a week of sleep denial.

Being fully dressed helped his mindset. It meant facing his nightmares was over for a little while. Coffee, the weak but still lovely Earther drink he used in place of stim tabs, would complete the transition. Until his daily therapy session, he'd be able to pretend he was recovering from his ill-fated trip to the planet Bi'is.

Glancing outside the ship, viewing the vast panorama of constellations on an endless field of black space, also helped. Ilid found comfort in no sign of Bi'is, a world now as dead as those on the ship he'd served aboard. He hadn't yet really thought about an entire society being erased in a matter of days. His mind was already buckling under the strain of nearly being eradicated too. Adding the deaths of billions of others was more than he could cope with, so his brain, in a supreme act of self-preservation, refused to truly note the event.

The psychologist on board the ship that had rescued him, the sole survivor of its twin vessel, told him it was perfectly normal to do so. “They’re beyond saving, Iliid. You aren’t. You have to concentrate on yourself and not feel guilty for doing so.”

He looked at the metal frame on the wall. He could have left it on to spot space at a glance, but its comfort often turned to another source of terror. Yes, it was wonderful to no longer see he was in orbit around Bi’is, but it was awful when he thought of what lurked among the stars. Out there existed an unbelievable entity. It had sent its emissaries to torture him, take over his shipmates, and kill the residents of an entire planet.

It was out there. Somewhere.

But not here. “Vid, show exterior view.”

He very nearly screamed at the planet that appeared, filling the vid transmission. Iliid staggered back several steps before he realized it wasn’t Bi’is.

It was Kalquor and its green-tinged seas and greener lands. Kalquor and its five orbiting moons. Kalquor, where Captain Kila was dropping him off before the spyship moved on to its next destination.

Iliid was home at last. Safe at last.

He reached a trembling hand to the vid, as if he could stroke the beautiful world itself.

* * * *

Kalquor

“But sir—” Tranis began a protest.

Rear Admiral Hobato held his hand up for silence. “I know how it appeared, but there have been no reports of trouble from our station orbiting Earth. No sign these Darks arrived there on Captain Kila’s vessel. I see no cause for alarm.”

He didn’t bother looking at Tranis as he spoke. The younger officer fought off a wave of anger to be summarily dismissed. It wasn’t as if Hobato spoke condescendingly. He simply wasn’t taking the situation seriously.

“I showed the same signs of those who’d been overcome by the Darks. The low blood sugar, absence of memory for a certain amount of time. Identical symptoms.”

“They are also symptoms of inadequate rest and eating.” Hobato finally gazed at him, his purple, slit-pupiled eyes meeting Tranis’. It was a friendly look, perhaps even paternal, but there was a flatness behind it, devoid of warmth. Tranis had witnessed too much of the emptiness there as of late.

Hobato’s lack of real concern when it came to the Darks baffled Tranis. Bi’is had been wiped out. Tranis had little sympathy for a race determined to destroy the Kalquorian Empire in its not-so-distant past, but it was still a horrifying final chapter. Bi’isils had been technologically advanced, a culture existing for nearly a million years. That they’d been eradicated so suddenly was terrifying.

“We have to know for sure,” he insisted through gritted teeth.

“How do you propose to do so? You’ve been subjected to every test the fleet can think of. Your Matara, a biogeneticist, acknowledged as among the best by her peers, has also run tests. Did she find anything amiss?”

“No, but it doesn’t mean—”

“We can’t cause a panic in the empire over a possibility for which we have no evidence, Admiral Tranis. If we do, we’ll be inundated by those promoting conspiracy and invasion theories. We’ll be accused of promoting them ourselves. The fleet needs to present hard facts rather than theories. Right now, theories are all we have.”

“The extermination of the entire Bi’isil population isn’t a theory, sir.”

“What proof do we have these ‘Darks’ did it? We only have the brief appearance of an unknown species and a traumatized ensign’s confused account of alien takeovers.” Hobato shook his head. “Bi’is was cut off from the rest of the Galactic Council of Planets after their attempt to destroy the Kalquorian Empire. They suffered horribly for their crime, deservedly so, but given how rigid and ritualistic their society was, would it be out of the question they’d decide to self-destruct?”

“Every last one of them? It’s impossible.” Tranis couldn’t believe he’d suggest it.

“It’s what we have proof of, however. Mass destruction, wholesale murder, then suicide by the perpetrators. How different is it from the course the original Earth’s leaders took?”

Tranis couldn’t find a clear argument for him, despite the two worlds Kalquor had warred against on separate occasions having taken different courses to annihilation.

“We have to be sure. A Galactic Council inspection team was on Bi’is just prior to its people dying.”

“I spoke to Secretary-General Mereta this morning. I’ve known him for decades, and he was the same as ever. If he’d noticed anything off, he would have told me.” Hobato continued to give Tranis his kind but blank regard. “We’ll continue to monitor the situation. If something comes up warranting real concern, we’ll act at once. For now, it’s all we can do. Dismissed, Admiral.”

“Sir—”

“Dismissed.”

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Tranis’ teeth were grinding hours later when he straightened his desk in preparation for leaving for the day. He shut off his computer by pounding his fingers on the keyboard rather than ordering it off.

“How many keyboards have you gone through in the last week? At least half a dozen, if you’ve treated them the way you’re treating this one.”

Tension drained from Tranis in an instant as his Nobek clanmate walked in. The admiral hurried around his desk to fling his arms around Lidon. “You’re back! Thank the ancestors.”

“Was there doubt I’d return? Unless you feared I’d die of boredom while I was on my mission.” Lidon chuckled at the enthusiastic greeting.

His feral features were handsome in a very Nobek fashion, framed by shoulder-brushing black hair. Lidon was thirty years older than Tranis, but they were well matched.

Tranis gazed at him, his affection undisguised. “I’m glad it was boring. Piras was the same as ever? No sign of anything off from him or anyone else?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. Everything seemed well in hand.” Lidon’s smile lessened in voltage. “I understand word has leaked he and his clan are assigned to the space station.”

“It was inevitable. You know we’re trying to make it so he can return home someday. He’s still beyond empire borders.”

“But closer than he was...and now his location is public.” A muscle twitched in Lidon’s jaw.

Tranis tried to ignore a jab of jealousy. Piras had been Lidon's promised clanmate prior to clanning with Tranis. The pair had a long history.

I trust Lidon. Otherwise, Tranis wouldn't have sent him to play Piras' bodyguard while the other man's Nobek was off on a mission. Still...

"No threats to the Terror of the Fleet while you were there. Good. Captain Kila will be back in time to deal with the fallout of Piras' presence being leaked." Tranis finished shutting his computer down.

"I battled only the threat of overwork and Earther drama. I'm dying to hear the latest about the Bi'is situation."

They started for the door, and Tranis huffed a depressed snort. "Good, because I'm ready to give you an earful as soon as we leave headquarters."

* * * *

Cassidy was hanging out with her Imdiko clanmate Degorsk, who was cooking dinner in the clan's roomy kitchen, when her other clanmates came in.

Both of them. Cassidy shrieked in delight and leapt in Lidon's arms. "My Nobek! When did you get in?"

He beamed at her enthusiastic welcome. "Less than an hour ago. I went straight to Tranis' office, hoping to catch him before he came home. How are you? How is our little one?"

He caressed her belly, the evidence of the baby just beginning to curve its surface.

"We're fine."

"She's tired," Degorsk grouched. He squeezed Lidon's arm in greeting. He flipped his waist-length braid over his shoulder as his handsome face skewered her with a glare. "I had to threaten to fetch her from the lab to get her to come home."

"I'm not tired. I told you the tests I was running might go late." Cassidy's eyes rolled, but her irritation was slight. She'd known her clanmates, particularly Degorsk, might become overly cautious when she'd decided to continue her pregnancy rather than freeze the embryo. Kalquorian men were notorious for becoming mother hens in such situations.

"You were at work for ten hours today. You have to be tired." He scowled and returned to basting the ronka ribs on the kitchen island.

She shook her head. Her position as a microbiologist was exhilarating, far from tiring. "You won't be happy unless you can keep me in bed all day."

"That would make me happy." Lidon's brows wiggled to show her the scenario he had in mind was lascivious. He sniffed the air appreciatively. "After dinner."

Cassidy laughed and pressed a kiss to her warrior clanmate's lips. "I might actually be tempted to spend less time in the lab in such a case."

Tranis stood apart watching them, his expression lit by a slight smile. Cassidy detected the darker emotions beneath his pleasure to have his entire clan home, however. He always carried a tinge of regret like a second skin. It was stronger than usual despite Lidon's return.

"You didn't bring bad news?" She asked the question of their Nobek, casting a significant look at Tranis.

"On the contrary. Our clan leader has had a difficult day at headquarters, however."

"Top secret fleet stuff," Tranis sighed as Degorsk turned from the oven where he'd stuck the ribs in to look him over.

"Which I'm cleared to hear about as one of the fleet's on-call psychologists."

“You’re no longer officially a fleet operative. Particularly when it comes to the spy department.”

“No, but I was informed I might be tapped to help a young ensign who went through a nasty experience in the field.” Their Imdiko popped a small salt potato in his mouth, eyeing Tranis. He sidled closer.

“Should I leave the room?” Cassidy was willing to step away if it meant Tranis could lessen his burden. He assumed responsibility too easily, including for matters he had no control over.

Besides, she could sneak a peek at her remote reports on her latest lab tests beyond Degorsk’s sight.

“Maybe you shouldn’t.” Tranis’ answer surprised her. “It might be helpful to get your professional opinion on the scientific end of what’s confronting me. You’ll have to sign a note of confidentiality, on pain of prosecution if you discuss this outside of us.”

“Oh, sounds so clandestine. Give me the contract and tell me more.” She beamed, curious about what was going on.

He did so but waited until they were seated at the table for dinner to talk.

The dining room was as snug as the kitchen, where Degorsk and Lidon cooked amazing meals when they weren’t too busy to settle for ordering in. Cassidy thought it was wonderful Lidon had been able to return to a homecooked meal. It almost felt like a celebration, which she believed the occasion warranted. Two months of her Nobek’s absence had been a trial, the small polished table for four feeling empty without his presence.

Tranis’ worry took some of the festiveness from their reunion, however. He told her what little he deemed necessary to gain her opinion. “There’s evidence a lifeform from another dimension has crossed partially over into ours. You’ve heard rumors of phasing technology?”

“They’re true? Have you done it? I’ll have to run tests on cellular samples.”

“I haven’t, but Lidon has as part of his latest mission. There are plenty of studies done on those who’ve phased, short and long term. I’ll get you the particulars.” Tranis offered her a bite of ribs.

Cassidy was practically dancing on her floor cushion and talked between chewing. “This is amazing. So this new lifeform, it’s noticed when you phase? Because you’re looking in another dimension?”

“It’s unclear what exactly is going on. Sometimes we can see them. Most the time we can’t, except for a few who catch them in their peripheral vision. One of our operatives believes there’s a sort of ‘between’ place separating dimensions, and that’s where most of our encounters are taking place. From there, these Darks, as most have taken to calling them, can affect our side of things.”

“Is it natural to them, or do they need the use of devices as we do?” Questions were arriving faster than Cassidy could catalog them.

“Unknown. My biggest question for you is what sort of lifeform can live in the vacuum of space?”

“It was observed doing so?” She pushed aside the forkful of potatoes Degorsk waved in front of her face. The Kalquorian tradition of the men feeding their female mate was occasionally a pain in the ass.

“A huge entity, bigger than our spyship, was indeed living in space, as did the miniature versions of itself that left its body. It seems to procreate by releasing smaller, identical pieces of itself. The smaller pieces can do the same, until they’re around the size of my fist.” He clenched his hand to demonstrate.

“Wow. That’s...that’s astonishing. Did anyone get samples?” She grabbed Degorsk’s wrist to keep the potatoes at bay.

“You have to eat. Can’t this wait?” he grouched to Tranis.

Their Dramok ignored him. “No samples, but we do have video footage.”

Video. She could barely breathe. “I have to see it.”

Tranis nodded. “I’ll show you after dinner. You’d better eat before Degorsk has a heart attack.”

“Apparently I’m the only one who recognizes she’s feeding two. Does anyone else care she’s pregnant and already overworking herself? Now you’re bringing her in on this?” Degorsk looked ready to fling his plate at someone.

“My Imdiko, this is a matter of great urgency,” Lidon soothed.

“Do the entities constitute a danger to the empire?” Cassidy asked, her excitement quieting. “They do, don’t they? Are they here?”

Tranis gazed at his half-eaten meal. “Maybe. They could be a threat to the entire galaxy.”

Degorsk stilled, his irritation shifting to concern. “How sure of that are you?”

Tranis looked at his clanmates, and ice stabbed Cassidy’s heart at his expression of open fear. “They already wiped out Bi’is.”

“What do you mean, ‘wiped out’?”

“Everyone on the planet is dead. Admiral Hobato doesn’t seem to care.”