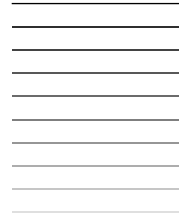


PROLOGUE

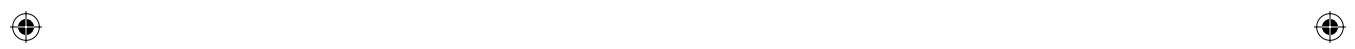


We have followed the fortunes of Merral D'Avanos and his friends on Farholme in the first battles between the Assembly of Worlds and the Dominion of Lord-Emperor Nezhuala and have glimpsed how, in very different ways, both sides are preparing for all-out conflict. As we pick up the story again, the key parties in the tale are widely scattered.

On Earth, Dr. Ethan Malunal, Chairman of the Council of High Stewards, is trying to hold increasingly fractious groups together and prepare the Assembly for a war against unknown forces.

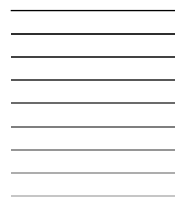
Over three hundred light-years away, in the Farholme system, two ships are accelerating in opposite directions. One, the former Dominion vessel *Dove of Dawn*, bearing former Advisor Lucian Clemant, Prebendant Delastro, and others, is heading earthward with all the speed that its inexperienced crew can muster. The other vessel, the *Nanmaxat's Comet*, with Commander Lezaroth and the thirty hostages that are the only spoils of the disastrous assault on Farholme, is speeding back to the Dominion worlds. On Farholme itself, Merral is urgently preparing to recover the hidden ship of Sarudar Azeras and use it to try to rescue the hostages.

But let us turn first to Lord-Emperor Nezhuala, ruler of the Freeborn and master of all in the realms of the Dominion.





I



The lord-emperor Nezhuala stared at the Blade of Night through the porthole of the tiny autoshuttle.

“It is finished,” he said, his words barely audible above the vibrating rumble that enveloped him. He found himself held spellbound by the scale of the structure. Even riding at four hundred kilometers an hour, it would take him nearly sixty minutes to travel from the facilities at the summit to Way Station Nine, the lowest level the craft could safely reach. From there he would take the elevator to the base.

*I need to make this journey. There are issues I have to raise with the powers. I do not trust the high priests, and my commanders are little better. He heard himself give a small groan. And I need advice on the war. I have to be sure that the powers will act on our side. They all need to put forth their strength, and especially the One.*

He looked out of the porthole again. It was not just the scale of the Blade that overpowered him; it was also its complexity. While at a distance it looked like a smooth needle, this close—barely a kilometer above it—he could see that the surface was interrupted by a varied array of immense struts, tensioning devices, and thrusters. Far from being a static structure, the Blade of Night was a dynamic construction. He passed over a vast towing point. *And, when the time is right, it will be moved.*

“And I built it,” he whispered. A bridge between the realms! One of the greatest achievements of mankind—greater than the mausoleums of the Worlds of the Dead, greater than any fleet of starships ever assembled. As great as the Assembly Gate network—but that had taken them millennia and incalculable armies of men and machines. *And this was made by me!*

Suddenly, Nezhuala felt tired, and he realized that his head hurt again.



*The old, old wound.* In his mind, he flicked on the metabolic monitoring circuits and scanned the dozen different readings that appeared before him. All the values were within normal limits.

*No, it is simply the stress of these encounters. This is my second visit down to the depths in three days, and every meeting with the powers takes its toll.* The last time, all the fury and turmoil over the loss of the baziliarch on Farholme had left him stunned. *Today, though, I must come here. Events come to their climax; the war has begun, and the conflict will be won or lost within half a year. My destiny is to be fulfilled.*

Low chimes sounded and warnings flashed on the screen announcing deceleration. They were approaching Way Station Nine. The autoshuttle slowed and changed direction. As he sat down, Nezhuala glanced at the Blade to see the first glimmerings of blue electric light playing on the struts. *We are close to the boundary between the realms.*

A few minutes later, the autoshuttle stopped. After waiting for the seals to slide into place, Nezhuala ordered the doors open and walked through into the chamber.

Two figures stood before him—hairless, fat travesties of human form with translucent skin that allowed their internal organs to be seen. The Wielders of the Powers were expecting him and bowed clumsily, murmuring their loyalty with twisted, bulging lips. Nezhuala walked past them without acknowledging them. *They revolt me. They serve me and are deformed in the process, but they disgust me all the same.*

He passed into the elevator chamber and, ignoring the warnings—they were for lesser men—sat down and accessed the control through the communications augment interwoven with his brain. In a moment the chamber was accelerating downward.

Only another hundred kilometers to go.

Now, as he had expected, the extra-physical effects began to appear. The colors began to fade into dingy grays, and in the shadows something seemed to coalesce into a smooth mass the size of his foot. *A ghost slug.*

Finally the elevator chamber began to slow and came to rest.

*Of all living men, only I have been to this depth on the Blade.*

As the lord-emperor rose to his feet, he sensed something different. Normally, down here he felt the presence of several powers, often as not raging against each other. But today there was none of that. He hesitated, listening.

There was a silence.

He could hear noises: the hum of electrics, the creaking of cooling components, and the faint vibration that was inevitable in such a vast structure. But that was all. Nothing else; not even the whispering that he often heard in the hall of Kal-na-Tanamuz. There was only a profound, leaden hush.

Nezhuala tapped the screen, checking the air, temperature, and gravity

on the strange gray readouts. One could take nothing for granted down here, least of all the created gravity. But the values were acceptable, and he pressed a button. He heard the sound of pistons as the platform was extruded.

The elevator door opened to reveal the dully gleaming shaft that was at the core of the Blade. The silence continued. He saw no figures, no shimmering steely flames; nothing. The air was heavy and still, as if it had become dense as oil.

*Have they all gone?* He realized the idea almost made him relieved.

Nezhuala walked forward onto the platform, his gloved hands holding the guide rails on each side. He dared not look down properly but, out of the corner of his eye, glimpsed depths filled with stacked and swirling sheets of mist. He glanced up, but the view of the shaft walls stretching upward to apparent infinity gave him an almost terrifying sensation of vertigo. *As though I can feel the billions of tons of metal hanging above me.*

Trying to stabilize his mind, he looked away, concentrating instead on the pipes and girders twenty meters away on the other side of the shaft.

The heavy, sullen quiet continued. *I am expected.*

He reached the end of the platform in the exact center of the great shaft. There he paused and took a deep breath.

“My master, I am here!” he cried out.

For a second the thick stillness continued; then suddenly a wind blew around him, playing with his hair. As the mists swirled and shifted below, he sensed something coiling and writhing. He was jolted by an emotion in which recognition and fear were mingled.

*I am in the presence of the One, the great serpent himself.*

As he bent his knee in homage, Nezhuala felt a mind slowly merging with his. He sensed many things: an immense age, a measureless power, a mighty intellect, a terrible frustration, and a seething malice. It was so overwhelming that he felt his death was imminent. Then he realized that the malice was not against him; it was for the Assembly and its Lord, and it merely flowed over him.

The intruding mind seemed to coil about him like an enormous crushing weight and utterly overwhelm him.

He heard words—words that seemed to be pounded into his brain as if by hammers. **“I am pleased with you. You have served me well. You are mine.”**

A pause came, but it brought no relief from the constricting presence.

**“There have been others who have served me. But the time was not right. They were not the ones to achieve my desire. Now the time has come.”**

Another silence.

**“I have long had purposes for you. I have guided you in many ways.**

**I now speak directly. The time has come for you to serve me in greater ways.”**

Nezhuala realized that these were statements to which no answer was required. He existed only to serve. *What did I expect?*

**“The hour has come. The Assembly—”** a pulse of utter hatred seemed to boil around him —**“must be defeated. They must learn to fear and hate you.”**

“My lord, the forces are ready to be launched.”

**“My powers and my guidance will go with you. Now listen.”**

“I listen and obey.”

**“The Gates must be seized intact.”**

“I understand.”

Something seemed to turn and twist in the mind that enveloped Nezhuala; it was as if the coils around him tightened.

**“You must send me a man. Soon. A man of intellect, a man who understands the realms and the Gates. I will train him.”**

The image of the being who had designed the Blade came to Nezhuala. The man-machine so heavily augmented with circuits that he was only questionably human. The being who had no name—or at least none that any remembered. The one who answered simply to the name Ape. *Ape understands transdimensional surfaces and how they can be manipulated.* His thought was heard. **“Ape will do. Send him here.”**

The silence was renewed.

**“Now you will strike a first blow at their defenses. I want them to fear you. I will equip you and empower you. You are now the most high over men.”**

Something flexed and writhed in Nezhuala’s brain, as though chunks of his mind were being moved around. *Like furniture being rearranged.*

**“The uniting of the realms will be achieved.”**

The silence was heavy and brooding.

**“Go!”** The word was like a blow.

Clutching his head in agony, Nezhuala reeled back.

As the pain ebbed, he realized the awesome presence had gone. He was alone.

Then a rustling noise began and rose into weird, intense whispers and flapping hubbub. As it grew louder—it was an appalling babble of sound now—he sensed the presence of *things*, dark and thin, darting and twisting around him. The noise grew and shifted into a deafening, toneless clamor of howls and screams in which jubilation and hatred were mixed.

*The powers are celebrating.*

He was aware that shapes—dark, writhing, slithering—were manifesting themselves in a most dreadful manner.

Not daring to look, Nezhuala stared down at the floor of the platform and, physically buffeted by the uproar, crawled on toward the elevator chamber door. It opened; he staggered in and closed the door behind him.

The uproar was less now, but he could hear things striking the door behind him.

He wanted to be sick.

“Way Station Nine!” he gasped.

He felt the elevator begin to move, and then he passed out.



Unknown hours later, Nezhuala awoke. He stared upward, recognizing with a sluggishness of mind that he was lying on the couch in the low-roofed, private room that he kept at the summit of the Blade. The Wielders of the Powers must have had him brought here.

He gazed at the ribbed ceiling, trying to recall what had happened. Slowly he wove together fragments of memory. With rising dread and excitement he realized that, somehow, he had been connected with the One who reigned below. Indeed, as he probed his bruised mind, he realized that the link was still there.

*I and he are . . . a unity.*

Implications flooded in. *I have changed. I am no longer who I was. I am more than I was. I am the most high over men.*

His questions had been answered. He was to attack the Assembly as he had planned, and it would be supported by the powers. Yet his master was plain on one thing: the Gates had to be preserved at all cost. He knew now that a purpose existed for them in the uniting of the realms; but that purpose was, so far, unclear.

*I must send Ape down to the base of the Blade.*

Carefully, Nezhuala rose to his feet, expecting the sense of being drained that had always been the result of his previous encounters. To his surprise, there was no tiredness. Marveling, he flexed his limbs. He felt good, indeed *better* than he had for a very long time.

A mirror stood in a corner of the room, and he walked over to it and stared at himself. He didn't look drained either. In fact, he saw a new authority in his face.

Something came to him that was more a revelation than a thought. *With the added circuits of my augmentation and this linkage to the chief of the powers, I am now more than a man.* He paused and stared again at himself in the mirror.

*I transcend humanity. Flesh, circuitry, and spirit, I am the prototype of the*

*new creation. I am the most high over men, the most high beyond men. What is now outside my grasp?*

“Behold the man!” he said aloud.

A moment later, Nezhuala realized that he was looking *beyond* the mirror into the Vault of the Final Emblem, the domed and fluted chamber that lay at the very top of the Blade. His first thought was that the mirror was somehow transparent. Then he moved to one side and realized he could now see beyond the solid, bare gray wall. *It is I, not the mirror, that has the ability!*

He was considering this when a command struck him. *I must go to the throne. I have work to do and there is the place to do it.*

He donned new robes and walked along the hidden passage that curved around the capping point of the Blade to the small, marble-walled room where the high chair of burnished titanium tubing had been placed. There were thrones elsewhere in his realms, but he had always known that he must have one here in the great Vault of the Final Emblem. The sliding doors in front of the throne were open, and for a moment Nezhuala peered out. His gaze ranged over the mysterious gray glassy disk that capped the summit of the shaft and then swung up, past the hanging cylinders to the complex curves of the ceiling a hundred meters above. A near-silence reigned. The great cylinders, tuned to echo changes in the depths, now barely hummed.

Nezhuala had the doors slide closed and then sat on the throne. He ordered the lighting down so that he was surrounded by gloom.

*I have been given new powers, and I must test them.* He peered into the darkness with mounting excitement.

Acting on instinct, he somehow manipulated his consciousness—it was as if he were twisting his mind into a ball and throwing it outward. In a bewildering instant, he was somehow out there.

He gasped.

Distance had been vanquished. Below him was the Blade of Night with the smooth dome of the Vault of the Final Emblem glowing red in the rays from the burning orb of Sarata. Beyond, he could see the four Worlds of the Living: Khamajaja nearby; farther away, Buza-Mernaq with its burning sands; still farther, Farzicol and its endless plains of salt and dust; and finally Yeggarant-Mal, with its gleaming ice sheets. Around the worlds, he could make out the great armada of ships in orbit readying themselves for their orders to launch, the vast array of orbiting factories, the zero-G dockyards, the Krallen assembly plants, the supply and fueling stations, and the shuttle bases. He realized that, with the least effort, he could see details. He could see the two artificial planets, Nazhamal and Gharnadoul—the Worlds of the Dead—and as he focused on the nearer of the two, he could make out the gigantic gray, multistoried stone tombs, the mausoleums and towering sepulchres that marked where the dead of the noble houses were gathered.

Nezhuala withdrew his focus, assessing with wonderment the extent of his power. *It is as if I stand on some high mountain peak and all lies open before me.*

As he gazed around, he realized that he had the power not only to see distant places but also to move toward them at will. Again he threw his consciousness out, and his mind and senses soared outward into the Sarata system. His vision focused on Buza-Mernaq, and—somehow—he flowed out to it. In seconds, he was plunging down through dirty, tattered clouds. He hastily paused his descent so that he hung over a blasted landscape of orange sand dunes dotted with sparse, wiry plants. There, just meters above the ground, he stayed immobile for some time, pivoting around and taking in the vast desolation, hearing the ceaseless whisper of the wind, sensing that he was no more visible than a swirling column of dust.

Then just below he saw a long-tailed reptile with reddish skin, moving with clumsy steps between tufts of forlorn vegetation.

Nezhuala realized in a moment of revelation that he could do more than just watch; he could take on physical form. Indeed, to do anything worth doing, he had to become solid.

He twisted his mind again, this time becoming denser and sinking lower. He saw his distorted shadow appear on the ground, then bent down, pushed a finger into the soft, gritty sand, and saw it move away. *I have a physical form!*

Suddenly the reptile, perhaps a meter long, seemed to sense his presence. It swung its head toward him and, snuffling as though puzzled, waddled over. It opened its jaws wide, displaying a pink tongue and curves of sharp teeth.

Exulting in his new powers, Nezhuala waited until the creature had come within a pace of him. Then he leaned down and, seizing the snout with one hand and the base of the tail with the other, effortlessly picked up the creature. He held the squirming beast high in the air for a moment and then, in a single sharp movement, snapped its spine in two.

As he cast the limp form away, he laughed aloud.

*I can be wherever I want to be. I can be whatever I want to be. I have exceeded humanity. I am the new man. The prototype of they-who-are-to-come. I transcend space now. One day I will transcend time.*

Driven by a strange sudden urgency, he withdrew himself to the summit of the Blade of Night.

*My powers are proven. Now I have a task to do.*

In a flash he was back on the throne, in the darkness, feeling the hard, bare metal around him and sensing beads of sweat on his face. *I feel tired.* The realization that his abilities were not limitless irritated him. *I remain beholden to the powers.*

He focused his mind. *Where am I to act? Here? No, not here; not even in this system. Elsewhere. But where?*

The answer—or was it an order?—came to him. *Bannermene.*

The lord-emperor hurled out his mind again. The room vanished and he flew, gliding through space as if borne along by some cosmic wave of energy. He slid between stars, their planets and comets flashing silently below him.

A star loomed, and before it hung a blue and green world.

*Now I must enter this world, exert all my powers to become present, however briefly, as fragments of sound and smears of light. What will I become?*

As a small spacecraft grew in his field of view, an idea struck him. *I will become the king of terrors.*

Laughing again, he sang out an order.

“Become Death!”



Two million kilometers out from the turquoise ball that was Bannermene, the three-person logistic and construction tug *Xalanthos-B* was preparing to dock with the brand-new Assembly defense vessel (Landscape Class), the *Hills of Lanuane*.

Captain Kala Singh looked up from her screens and glanced out the side window at the spidery assemblage of columns and wires gleaming in the light of Anthraman, the system’s sun. *The picket line—what does it really do? Will it work?*

The cabin was silent apart from the faint purr of pumps, the soft tap of the copilot’s fingers on keys, and the occasional footfall from George in the engineering cabin to the rear.

Kala felt tired. *For the first time in my life I want a trip to be over.*

She turned her gaze back to the tiny, glistening silver object hanging between the stars like a piece of jewelry and marveled again. *How extraordinary. A year ago this warcraft was not even thought of. Now twenty like it are in service with the Assembly Defense Force, and more are being built all the time.*

They were now barely a hundred kilometers away and approaching fast. Kala began her checklist for docking.

*There is too much silence.* “Well, mission nearly accomplished,” she said to break the stillness.

Hanna, copilot and navigator, just grunted.

*There’s been a lot of both silence and grunting on this trip; I’ve never known anything like it.* George walked heavily forward from engineering. As he did, Kala glimpsed an expression of something that might have been irritation flicker across Hanna’s face.

*This ship is too small for three. How odd that in the thousands of years the basic L and C tug has been in service, no one has noticed it. Or has it just recently become too small?*

“We are nearly docking,” Hanna said, her high voice shrill and tense. “I was wondering where you were, George.”

“Just been checking the picket line array.” Kala heard defensiveness in the engineer’s gruff voice. “Looks good.”

“We have no idea whether it will work. None at all.” Hanna’s irritation was plain.

George stroked his cropped pale hair. “Oh, Hanna, it’s experimental. That’s the point. But the theory is sound. If the filament is long enough—and we’ve strung out a thousand kilometers ourselves—and the detectors are sensitive enough, any high-mass ships passing nearby in Below-Space might register. This is the front line.”

“So you say. But we haven’t been told that’s what it is,” Hanna grunted. “Not formally. At least, I haven’t.”

Kala intervened. “Nor I. But why should we be told, Hanna? The Assembly Defense Force gave us orders; we obey.”

Hanna gave a shrug of her slender shoulders. “It would have been nice to be told. To be treated like adults instead of having to rely on George’s tales.” Her tone left no doubt what she thought of his tales.

“In Space Affairs, maybe; but we are military now,” Kala said as George leaned over a screen and made some adjustments. *I must try to keep the peace.* “In the military, there are secrets. We just obey.”

“Blind obedience, secrets . . . and his rumors. It’s not . . . healthy.”

*She’s right about that.* Kala realized that now she couldn’t avoid filing one of the new MD21 report forms headed Negative Personal Crew Interactions. *Oh yes, we’ve had those over the last week.*

Hanna was continuing. “And we don’t even know they use Below-Space. That’s just another rumor of George’s.”

“That’s what they are saying in the labs. It makes sense; we’d have seen Gates.” George sounded annoyed.

“George, for an engineer you are very credulous.”

“Really? You were pleased enough when I tipped you off that we were heading out here.”

“Enough! Both of you. I’m trying to dock.” Kala hesitated . . . and shivered. “Anybody else feel cold?”

George touched some on-screen toggles. She saw him frown. “Odd. Now that you mention it, yes. But there’s no evidence of a temperature anomaly.”

“I must be imagining it. Hanna?”

She saw an angry shrug. “Yes, I feel cold.”

The details on the *Hills of Lanuane* were clear now. The approach angle emphasized how slender it was. The new warships had to be able to get through Gates—by all accounts, a challenging design constraint.

“We are going to do this on manual,” Kala announced. “With minimal pilot input from the *Lanuane*. For practice.”

Hanna sighed. “I read that bit too. ‘Under battle conditions, automatic systems may be unreliable.’ Quote, unquote.” She shrugged again.

“And, crew, we need to do it smartish. Leisurely docking is frowned on.”

“We’re in the army now,” George said with a forced amusement.

“Huh,” Hanna snorted.

Kala touched the controls. A moment later she heard something. There it was again—a faint noise, from her right. As if something had gently touched the hull. She looked around to see her crew staring at her. “You heard it too?”

There was a grunt and a nod. George’s fingers began flicking over the keypad.

“Weird. All systems correct. But, Captain, I’m putting us on full diagnostics.”

“Good idea.” *Everything we do and say will be recorded. Just in case.* “No picket line filament loose?”

“None.”

The noise came again. This time it was repeated and came unmistakably from the hull above their heads. Kala felt there was a strange familiarity to it. A familiarity that made no conceivable sense.

Kala felt herself shiver again and saw that Hanna’s brown eyes were wide.

George looked at the ceiling. “You know, if this wasn’t space, and it wasn’t a vacuum at minus one hundred C out there, and we weren’t doing five hundred clicks an hour, I’d say . . .”

“What?” Kala asked.

“That someone was walking on the roof.”

*He thought so too!* Kala was aware that her hand was trembling and she lowered it so that no one would see. She realized that it *was* cold.

A grimace appeared on Hanna’s pale face. “I said you were too credulous. A strand of filament probably.”

Kala looked at the screens. They were closing on the *Lanuane*; you could see the fins, the detector pods, and the missile packs. *I ought to strap myself in.* She took hold of the steering arms and adjusted her feet on the control plate.

She snapped out a command. “Engineer, give me some explanation for those noises other than a . . . ghost.”

“Captain, I am running a computer identification on the sounds.” George sounded somehow both frightened and irritated. “It’s checking the database of fifteen hundred years of L and Cs. There is no camera active that can image that part of the hull. Wait. . . .” George gave a strange yelp.

*Of frustration? or something else?*

“What is it?” She looked at him.

George's face was pale. "Hey . . . it's playing up. Says it is closest to . . . wait for it . . . 'footsteps on the hull during servicing.'"

"N-nonsense!" Hanna snorted angrily. "I'm sick to death of your imaginings, George. Captain, I'm not crewing with this man again. Formal request."

"Crew, crew . . .," Kala protested wearily.

"*My* imagining?" George snapped back. "Maybe. But the computer? Hardly."

Kala could feel fear in the room. *I should call the Lanuane. But what would I say?*

The noises began again. This time they moved at a slow, unhurried pace across the roof of the cabin toward the port side of the tug.

*Now that we have used the word footstep, it is impossible not to imagine that these sounds are just that. But they can't be. They can't!*

The tapping noises changed to something else. Kala felt her hands twitch again.

*Can it really be that after eleven millennia of peace and light the old fears of the dark and spirits have not left us?* And as she posed the question, she answered it. *Yes.*

The noises stopped.

Hanna's head moved abruptly in nervous agitation. "Okay. I admit it. I don't mind . . . the d-diagnostics hearing me say . . . I'm s-scared."

"I've joined the same club," George said, his voice muted.

Kala was going to add something, but above them the noises started again, then changed direction, heading pace by pace toward their right.

"The starboard access ladder," George whispered.

"The h-hatchway." Hanna's voice was a tiny rustle.

They all turned toward the recess with the compartment hatch. Kala could see the stars through its square porthole. *I know the Xalanthos-B as well as my own apartment. There are twelve rungs of the ladder curved down the side to a narrow ledge. That ledge leads to the hatch.* Kala realized she was still shivering. *What do I do?*

Above them the footsteps stopped; then she heard new noises.

*It's going down the ladder.*

A thought slid into her brain as brutally as if it had been stabbed in. *It is Death.* She felt herself tremble at the notion. This death was not the joyful, going-to-be-with-Jesus death that she had always known of but a death of darkness, loss, and endless, biting pain.

There was a new sequence of six or seven sounds on the hull.

"It can't be," gasped Hanna. "I think it's Death out there."

*You, too?*

"George, can . . . can it open the door?" Kala, transfixed by the hatchway, didn't look at him.

“It’s sealed.” George was standing up, his face twisted toward the porthole. “But, Captain, whatever it is . . . if it can walk in a vacuum . . . it can do anything.”

A soft thudding began, as if something was striking the side of the ship. It moved along, drawing ever closer to the hatch. Kala held her breath and pushed hard against the seat to stop her shaking. Then, praying, she stood up, her gaze drawn irresistibly to the hatch. Nothing else mattered.

In the next moment, three things happened simultaneously.

An alarm sounded.

A voice from a speaker blared. “*Xalanthos-B!* You are on a collision course! Cut your speed! We are taking evasive action.”

And a thing appeared at the window—a gleaming oval thing of dull, moist whiteness with deep-set, dark, empty orbs and a lank twist of black hair. A thing that even terrified brains could recognize as a human skull.

Kala knew she was screaming but couldn’t stop herself.

Frozen into immobility, she saw the engineer. His eyes were staring forward, but he was running aft. And now Hanna, wild-eyed and yelling incomprehensibly, was pushing past her.

Slowly, Kala forced herself to turn round to see, just ahead of them, the bulk of the *Lanuane*—a towering mass of white and silver metal—filling the whole screen.

*It’s too close!*

A training that had prepared her for every eventuality imaginable—but not that which was unimaginable—finally took over. Kala turned to grab the controls. But she was in the wrong position, and her hands wouldn’t respond quickly enough.

Then the panicked Hanna crashed into her. Kala stumbled, and her feet caught under the control plate.

The *Xalanthos-B* lurched and gained speed.

In the central pane of the screen she could now see every detail of the battleship: the shuttered portholes, the matte gray armored tiles, the spiny clusters of silver antennae, the thrusters urgently venting gas.

“We’re going to hit!” she screamed.

She was right.