

CRASH LANDING

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The starship frigate was making a series of wormhole connections during the journey to the Confederation space station so Kladomaor decided to stop at the Protector's designated work area away from the bridge. The Boxan stood over ten feet tall and the dark power armor he wore was a must, even for a mission such as this. Eventually he'd get standard fleet-issued equipment. He'd put in a requisition to transfer to a fleet command position and Battle Commander Jaedon had snatched him up, but officially he was still a Protector and part of the military elite force for the Boxan High Council. Once they reached their destination he would join the Confederation Fleet, which boasted multiple alien species that had been cultivated into one harmonious Confederation.

Kladomaor authenticated with the frigate's systems using his Protector credentials because it was the only way he could access the encrypted channels for the latest security reports. Battle Commander Jaedon had told Kladomaor that it was his personal responsibility to ensure that their precious cargo arrived at the Confederation space station, and he'd served long enough to know the Battle Commander was testing him. Using the Protector net to get security-log information was beyond what any normal fleet officer should be required to do—or, indeed, have access to—but Kladomaor wanted to prove his worth to the Battle Commander. Jaedon was the ideal officer whose military career was lauded as what every young officer should strive to achieve.

The holoscreen came on and Kladomaor began reviewing the reports from the inter-star system comms network. He dismissed the first few reports regarding fringe systems before seeing the one for the Qegi star system. Kladomaor frowned and opened up a secondary holoscreen. The Qegi star system wasn't part of the Confederation and wasn't due to join until the intelligent species that lived there had matured. The Star Shroud network should have isolated that system, but the ship traffic being logged was enough to rouse his curiosity. He brought up the latest logs and his frown deepened. Quickly closing the holoscreens, he headed toward the bridge. He

needed to inform Battle Commander Jaedon of what he'd found while there was still time in normal space that they could change coordinates if they needed to.

Kladomaor went onto the bridge and hastened straight to the Battle Commander's couch.

The Battle Commander looked up from his own personal display. "Kladomaor, you were due to report earlier. A Strike Commander should never be late to their post."

The Battle Commander glanced over at the Xiiginn sitting next to him, but Mar Arden was regarding Kladomaor curiously. The Xiiginnns were a pale-skinned species with chiseled features and luminous violet eyes because their species had evolved on a planet with a dim star. The Xiiginn could see in near darkness and had developed lenses to filter out the bright lights the Boxan's preferred.

"I apologize, Battle Commander. I stopped at the Protector's command terminal and pulled the latest reports for the systems we needed to travel through on our way to the space station," Kladomaor said.

The Battle Commander frowned. "I wasn't aware your credentials still worked."

"Only until we reach the space station and I'm formally transferred into the fleet, Battle Commander."

Jaedon nodded and glanced at his personal display.

"What was in the reports, Strike Commander?" Mar Arden asked.

Kladomaor glanced at the Xiiginn who was sitting with his long tail coiled several times around his middle. Xiiginnns were not only among the first species cultivated into the Confederation by the Boxans but were also among the most trusted.

"Ambassador," Kladomaor said, acknowledging the Xiiginn and looking back at Jaedon. "Battle Commander, there are strange reports about the Qegi star system."

Jaedon frowned. "I'm unfamiliar with this system. It's not in the Confederation."

“No, it’s home to a primitive species that has only just developed space-flight technology using chemical fuel propellant. The reports show two Boxan vessels entering into an armed conflict within the system,” Kladomaor said.

“With whom?”

“The report says they fired on each other,” Kladomaor said.

“Impossible. Put the report up on the main screen,” Jaedon said.

Kladomaor used his neural implants to send the report to the main holoscreen. Mar Arden rose from his seat and came to stand at Kladomaor’s side. Kladomaor looked back at Jaedon.

“Battle Commander, I have an incoming distress call,” the comms officer said.

“Let’s hear it,” Jaedon ordered.

The message was of another ship that was experiencing issues with their main power generator and was in danger of crashing into a nearby moon.

“Navigation, plot a course to that ship,” the Battle Commander said.

The orders were confirmed.

“But the report from the Qegi star system. Surely we should go investigate that,” Kladomaor said.

Jaedon returned to the command couch. “You’re new to the fleet, so I’ll explain this once. There will be an investigation into the report from the Qegi star system, but it’s secondary to the immediate danger of the ship in the distress call. I’ll report it up to command central once we reach the space station, but my immediate concern is for the distressed ship. Their imminent danger is our highest priority and even supersedes the Tetronian Key for the Shroud Networks.”

Kladomaor’s ears turned downward. “Of course, Battle Commander,” he said and went to stand off to the side. Clearly, he had a lot to learn. The Tetronian Key was being officially handed over to the Confederation. The Star Shrouds and monitoring stations already in place around star systems with intelligent life-forms that had the potential to become interstellar beings would no longer be under the

province of the Boxans alone. They would share custodianship of the galaxy with the interspecies Confederation they'd built.

Kladomaor looked up and found Mar Arden staring at him.

"Helm, take us in," Jaedon said. "Strike Commander, I want you to get a crew ready to render assistance from the shuttle bay."

Kladomaor saluted the Battle Commander and left the bridge. The ship itself wasn't big in comparison with other ships of the fleet. Frigates were highly maneuverable and quick, and not at all equipped for long durations in the great expanse. Battle Commander Jaedon's previous command had been aboard a Dreadnaught-class starship with a crew that numbered in the thousands. It was aboard the Dreadnaught that Kladomaor had expected to serve, but it was going through a maintenance rotation at the shipyards in the Sethion star system.

Heading to the ship's only shuttle access, Kladomaor rounded the corridor and then slowed his pace as he walked past the cargo area in order to glance in at the Tetronian Key, which was a bronze cylinder with a glowing cyan tip that sat in the center of the room. The key was only used to control the Star Shrouds they'd deployed around inhabited star systems. There were four soldiers standing guard nearby.

After passing the cargo bay, Kladomaor quickened his pace to the shuttle area. He'd been a Protector for a number of cycles and it was in his nature to question things. And one of many things he questioned was why there wasn't more security for something as important as the Tetronian Key. There was little risk of armed conflict in the Confederation as all species worked toward a harmonious existence in the great expanse, so why not provide more protection for the key that maintained harmony outside the Confederation?

A squad of ten soldiers lined the corridor while waiting for him outside the shuttle airlock, and they snapped a salute.

"Strike Commander," the nearest soldier said.

Kladomaor stood in the middle of the corridor. "We're on standby to render assistance to a ship that sent out a distress call. They said

they're having trouble with their main reactor and are in danger of crashing into a nearby moon."

Kladomaor opened the airlock. "Let's get the shuttle ready in case they need us."

Kladomaor watched from the corridor while the soldiers went inside the shuttle and began their preflight checks. An alert came to prominence on his helmet's heads-up display. The frigate had just traversed a wormhole and was almost to the coordinates of the distress call.

"Strike Commander, the shuttle is ready to depart—"

Without warning, Kladomaor was slammed into the wall and then fell backward away from the shuttle. After a moment's confusion, he realized the gravity field had failed. He bounced off the corridor walls, trying to get a handhold, and crashed into the end of the corridor, his power armor taking the brunt of the impact. He rolled to his side and centrifugal force pinned him against the adjacent wall. The harsh sound of twisting metal was followed by explosions. Kladomaor pulled himself up far enough to engage his mag boots while his combat suit went into its own life support. He then cautiously stood up and saw a gaping hole where the shuttle had been and the ship's atmosphere being sucked out that hole. The area should have sealed itself off as soon as a drop in pressure had been detected.

Kladomaor walked toward the breach, his mag boots the only thing keeping him from being pulled out of the ship. He tried to access the ship's systems, but they were offline so he slowly approached the jagged hole and peered out to see the pockmarked surface of a moon swing into view. They were closing in on the lunar surface and the ship was out of control! Kladomaor tried to open a comms channel to the bridge, but it failed. He backed away from the hole. The interior of the ship was completely vented and he needed to get to engineering. From there, he might be able to get the ship's systems back online.

Walking as fast as he could in his mag boots, Kladomaor reached

the end of the corridor and came around the corner. The dark corridor ahead was a disorienting mixture of flashing lights and floating debris, but he pushed onward, following a map of the ship that showed on his internal heads-up display. In a sudden, freakish display, the light held momentarily, illuminating the area and showing several dead Boxans caught in the debris. Kladomaor gasped but then gently moved the bodies so he could get through. A few minutes later he was outside the door to engineering.

Kladomaor peered through the window. Sprawled on the ground was a Boxan with a large gash on his head, and Kladomaor couldn't tell if the engineer was still alive. He glanced at the controls for the door but didn't want to risk opening it so he slammed his fist on it and shouted. The engineer jumped and looked over at the door. Droplets of blood floated in the area by his head as he pulled himself toward Kladomaor.

"Can you restore power?" Kladomaor shouted through the window.

The engineer looked confused and Kladomaor repeated the question, but the engineer started coughing as if he were gasping for breath.

"Life support is failing. You need to get your emergency mask on," Kladomaor said.

The Boxan pulled himself up so his face was even with the window. He kept blinking his eyes and Kladomaor knew he was moments from losing consciousness.

Kladomaor reached for the control panel on the door, but the engineer banged against the door from the other side, shaking his head. He waved Kladomaor to the window and Kladomaor leaned in, watching the other Boxan intently.

"Sabotage!" the engineer cried out and released his hold on the door.

Kladomaor reached toward the control panel while klaxon alarms blared. Impact was imminent. His power armor configuration realigned its matrix to a rigid protective shell and Kladomaor was

unable to move. The lights in the corridor went out and all the floating debris and dead bodies were slammed about as the ship crashed into the lunar surface. The force of the crash overwhelmed his mag boots and Kladomaor was also tossed about, unable to do anything but hope that his armor protected him.

Kladomaor's power armor released a jolt of electricity to revive him. Stimulants entered his system and Kladomaor became fully awake. He sat up and looked around. Off to the side he saw the dark gray landscape of the lunar surface and Kladomaor climbed to his feet, trying to get his bearings. He stood in the remains of the corridor that was at the rear of the ship and he had no idea how it had stayed intact. Kladomaor tried to scan for a distress beacon, but none had been deployed. A diagnostic on his armor showed the comms systems were damaged.

He had to get out of there and look for survivors so he left the corridor and stepped out onto the lunar surface. Kladomaor went over his last moments on the ship. The engineer had told him that the ship had been sabotaged, but who would want to sabotage their ship? What could they have done to force the ship to crash onto this moon? And had the distress call they'd intercepted even been real?

Pulling himself together, Kladomaor looked around to find himself in a shallow canyon surrounded by pieces of the ship. How many of the crew died in the crash? He tried to brush those thoughts aside, but then he kept coming back to the fact of their ship having been sabotaged. There had been a small crew serving aboard the ship, mostly comprised of Boxans, but there were a few Xiiginns as well. He hadn't observed any suspicious activity. The only thing that stood out in his mind was the report from the Protector's encrypted channels. Two Boxan ships had reportedly fired on each other in the Qegi star system, but the Battle Commander had said the distress call had priority. And the sabotage accusation didn't make any sense. What

had the engineer seen that made him believe that? A blazing thought seared its way to the forefront of his mind. He hadn't figured out who had taken out their ship, but he knew why.

Gravity was registering at point six of Sethion's normal and Kladomaor was able to climb to the top of the shallow canyon where he could look down and study the wreckage, searching for the section of the ship the cargo hold had been in. Whoever had taken out their ship was after the Tetronian Key. It was the only explanation that made any sense.

The ship had broken up into so many sections upon impact with the lunar surface that not even his suit computer could make sense of it, and the wreckage covered large stretches of the scarred lunar landscape. He'd have to work his way through all of it. Kladomaor frowned and updated the sensors on his suit to detect portable power cells. The casing for the Tetronian Key would have been configured with a redundant power supply. He could track that and find the key before anyone else did. He just had to get close enough for the sensors to detect it.

Kladomaor leaped down the canyon and started making his way through the wreckage. There was no sign of the shuttle, and the soldiers aboard it running preflight routines had been the only ones with power armor on that could have survived the crash. The bridge might still be intact, but it would take him awhile to work his way there. Perhaps there were pockets of other survivors.

A trace detection of power cell activity appeared on his heads-up display and he tracked his way toward it. Coming to a section of the ship that was partially buried, Kladomaor started looking for a way inside. He saw a faint cyan glow and pulled away some of the wreckage. The Tetronian Key was on its side, wedged in tight. The glowing tip was greatly diminished and power levels were almost depleted. Kladomaor frowned in thought, then reached to the side of the key and managed to open an access panel. He pulled out a cable and connected it to his power armor, sighing with relief when his suit computers registered the

new connection. The power cells had been damaged in the crash, and if the power was completely depleted, the energy storage matrix would dissipate and they'd lose the keys to the Star Shrouds forever. The Boxans hadn't used any type of hardware storage devices in many cycles. There was always a redundant power supply and he doubted anyone had anticipated the situation in which he currently found himself.

A command window appeared on his heads-up display.

::Alternative power source detected....::

Kladomaor tried to take control, but he was locked out.

::Power source inadequate to sustain key matrix. Determining storage alternatives....::

Kladomaor tried to move, but his power armor was locked into place.

::System upload in progress. Commencement immediate. Terminate upon completion.::

Kladomaor tried to use his neural implants, but nothing would respond. He felt a buzzing in his head and his eyes widened. The AI tasked with protecting the Tetronian Key was moving the data into the computer systems on his armor and linking it to his brain. Pain burst across his head and Kladomaor squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't move and there was no way to stop it. He stood there helplessly as the AI finished its task.

::Upload complete. Tetronian Key catastrophic failure avoided. Biological alternative approved. Must return to Sethion immediately or data fragmentation and loss will commence.::

The command window disappeared and Kladomaor was finally able to move, but his head felt as if it weighed as much as a ship. Pain relievers flooded his system, but they hardly dulled the ache. Kladomaor scrambled back and sat down, his breath coming in gasps, and he was finding it difficult to focus. The AI had uploaded the Tetronian Key into his brain! A timer appeared in the upper corner of his heads-up display. The Boxan brain wasn't meant to hold this much data and if he didn't find a way back to Sethion soon, he might

die. He glanced at the casing of the Tetronian Key. The power cells were dead.

Kladomaor regained his feet and had to steady himself. Everything he looked at was surrounded by a luminous, pulsating glow so he closed his eyes for a few moments and then opened them. The halo that surrounded the wreckage of the ship diminished, but if he moved too fast, it returned.

Kladomaor blew out a breath. He needed to find the bridge so he could send out a distress beacon. He wandered through the wreckage, hoping to find survivors, but there were none. There weren't even any bodies. It was as if everyone had vanished.

As he passed the middle section of the ship, he saw an armored flap that was partially opened and he peered inside at an escape pod. Kladomaor grabbed the edge of the flap and pushed upward, causing the servo motors of his power armor to go to maximum as the flap slowly peeled up. Inside was a control panel that was still running under backup power so he keyed in the command sequence to release the pod and stepped out of the way. A burst from the pod's retro engines fired and the pod shot out from the ship, slamming into the canyon wall nearby and coming to rest a few hundred yards away. Kladomaor headed for the escape pod. All pods were equipped with survival kits, which included a backup comms system.

He circled around more debris and found a dead Xiiginn laying face down on the lunar surface, and it looked like he held something clutched in his hands. Kladomaor reached down and pulled him over. The faceplate of his helmet had cracked and he must have died quickly. He had a tablet computer in his hands that was still working so Kladomaor pried it loose and opened the interface. This tablet computer wasn't standard issue in the fleet, and despite the fleet uniform the Xiiginn wore, Kladomaor wondered where he'd gotten it. The interface opened and showed him a standard display. There was a tracking signal that Kladomaor uploaded to his suit computer, and the signal pointed to something away from the crash site. The tablet looked to have more information but he didn't have time to go

through it. Normally he'd upload the data from the tablet, but with the massive amounts of data from the Tetronian Key, he didn't want to take the chance. He opened a storage panel on the leg of his suit and dumped the tablet inside.

Kladomaor went over to the escape pod, opened the door, and stepped inside. After searching the small space, he retrieved the survival supplies, which included an Arc sidearm that he attached to his hip. The Arc sidearm was more of a deterrent, capable of delivering a high-ampere electrical shock rather than a lethal projectile. He opened a comms interface and looked for any other distress beacons, but there weren't any. He updated the standard message that there was at least one survivor and considered whether to include that the ship had been sabotaged, but since he didn't have any evidence to support the sabotage claim he entered that the conditions of their crash were highly suspicious. He set the message on a loop and left the escape pod, marking its coordinates on his internal heads-up display in case he needed to find it again.

Once again scaling the gentle incline to the top of the shallow depression, he began scouting out the rest of the wreckage. He plodded along, pausing long enough to look for survivors, but there weren't any. He couldn't be the only survivor.

Jolted from his reverie by the sound of a hand canon being fired, Kladomaor's gaze darted upward, following the bolt as it raced toward the great expanse. He noted the origin of the shot and quickly made his way toward it.

As he approached the spot where he believed the canon had been fired, Kladomaor found himself peering down into another crater at several Boxan soldiers standing among the wreckage, forming somewhat of a line behind Battle Commander Jaedon. A smaller figure appeared to be the Xiiginn Ambassador he'd seen earlier on the bridge called Mar Arden.

The Xiiginn was pacing in front of one of the soldiers, speaking to him, but Kladomaor was too far away to hear what they were saying. As he began to slide down the crater wall in a controlled shuffle,

another one of the soldiers noticed him and quickly shook his head. Kladomaor had been about to call out when the Battle Commander aimed his hand cannon at the soldier and shot him.

Cycles of training kicked in and Kladomaor scrambled over to hide behind some wreckage, trying to make sense of what he'd just seen. Had the Battle Commander found the Boxan who sabotaged the ship? Kladomaor crept behind the wreckage and circled to the other side. He was much closer to the group now.

"Answer the question," Mar Arden said.

"The answer won't change. The key was in the cargo hold. I have no idea where it is now," the Boxan soldier said.

Mar Arden stepped away. "He is of no further use."

The soldier raised his hands. "Battle Commander, don't do this! I've served the fleet—"

The soldier's pleas were cut short as a bolt from the hand cannon tore through the chest of his spacesuit.

Kladomaor gasped and jerked his sidearm from its holster, stepping out from behind the wreckage.

"What are you doing? He surrendered!" Kladomaor shouted.

Battle Commander Jaedon swung the hand cannon toward him. Two soldiers took advantage of this distraction and rushed the Battle Commander, taking all three of them down as the weapon dropped from Jaedon's hands. The soldiers fought to restrain the Battle Commander, but he managed to overwhelm them both and regained his feet. A third soldier charged toward Jaedon and the two grappled until the Battle Commander tore that soldier's helmet off, exposing him to the poisonous atmosphere. The soldier immediately fell to his knees, choking. Kladomaor stepped toward the dying soldier, but his body went still.

"I'm not going to let you do it!" one of the remaining soldiers shouted. He picked up the hand cannon and aimed it at the Battle Commander, then shifted it toward Mar Arden.

"Hold on," Kladomaor said, holding his sidearm ready. "What happened here?"

“They sabotaged the ship,” Jaedon said. “I order you to take out the traitor.”

The soldier’s wild-eyed gaze swung between Mar Arden and the Battle Commander. Then, looking at Kladomaor in desperation, the soldier indicated Mar Arden and said, “He’s controlling the Commander. We didn’t sabotage the ship.”

Kladomaor looked over at the Xiiginn, but Mar Arden just held up his hands and shook his head.

“Let’s put our weapons away,” Kladomaor said.

“I gave you a direct order, Strike Commander,” Jaedon said.

“I heard your order,” Kladomaor said but kept his gaze on the soldier.

“He’s a traitor.”

“And he’ll stand trial for it,” Kladomaor said.

Mar Arden suddenly spun into action, sending his long tail out to strike the weapon from the soldier’s outstretched hand. The soldier scrambled to pick it up. The Xiiginn grabbed the soldier’s wrist and twisted. The hand cannon pointed toward the soldier’s face and fired.

Kladomaor pointed his weapon at the Xiiginn but was tackled by the Battle Commander. Kladomaor rolled away and the Battle Commander charged. Kladomaor fired the pistol and missed. Jaedon grabbed his hand and Kladomaor twisted free.

“Why are you fighting me? I’m not a traitor,” Kladomaor said.

The Battle Commander stopped for a moment, appearing to be confused. Then he looked over at Mar Arden. The Xiiginn watched them intently and then his expression relaxed.

“You were sent to the shuttle before the crash so you couldn’t be one of the traitors,” Mar Arden said.

The Battle Commander walked over to Mar Arden’s side and the Xiiginn handed him the weapon.

“What happened?” Kladomaor asked.

The Battle Commander looked over at Mar Arden as if unsure what to say.

“Engine failure caused the ship to go off course. We managed to level it off to avoid casualties,” Mar Arden said.

Kladomaor glanced at the Battle Commander, who gave him a nod.

“The Battle Commander was injured during the crash. I’m afraid he’s not himself. Did you find any survivors?” Mar Arden asked.

Kladomaor frowned. “Everyone I saw was dead.”

“You know how important the cargo we carried was. Did you find it?” Mar Arden asked.

Kladomaor looked around at the dead soldiers and fleet officers. They had all been shot.

“They turned on the Battle Commander. They wanted to take the key to the Star Shrouds for themselves,” Mar Arden said.

Kladomaor held his sidearm loosely in his hands. His instincts were crying out that something about this whole situation was off. The only thing he could be sure of was that The Battle Commander wasn’t himself.

“They were unarmed. I heard you asking one of the soldiers where the key was,” Kladomaor said.

Mar Arden narrowed his gaze. “You’ve seen it.”

“I’ve hidden it,” Kladomaor said. “I sent out a distress beacon from one of the escape pods. Help will be here soon and then we can sort this out.”

Kladomaor’s suit computer alerted him that someone was approaching and another Xiiginn came from the same direction that Kladomaor had come from earlier. The Xiiginn ignored Kladomaor and addressed Mar Arden.

“I found the Tetronian Key, but its power was depleted.”

“Garm Antis, this is Kladomaor. He’s hidden the key,” Mar Arden said.

Garm Antis looked over at Kladomaor as if he utterly detested him. “Give us the key!”

“You don’t give me orders, Xiiginn,” Kladomaor said.

Garm Antis laughed and looked back at Mar Arden. “I don’t

know how we've endured the supreme arrogance of such an inferior species. Have you taken him?"

Kladomaor raised his pistol. "Taken me? What are you talking about?"

"Haven't had time. I only had the bridge crew under my power and he was a last-minute addition to the crew," Mar Arden said.

Kladomaor looked at the Battle Commander and Jaedon's eyes were vacant, as if he had no thoughts at all.

"Give us the location of the key," Mar Arden said.

The Battle Commander raised his weapon and pointed it at Kladomaor, whose face registered the complete disorientation he was feeling. "What have you done to him?"

"He has learned his place, as will you," Mar Arden said.

Kladomaor shifted his pistol, trying to decide who was the real threat. Blinding halos surrounded each of them and the pain in his head intensified. He cried out, bringing his hands to his head but then quickly pointed the pistol back at the Xiiginns. He stepped backward.

"Where are you going to go? We have the only way off this moon," Mar Arden said.

"I disabled the distress beacon," Garm Antis sneered.

Kladomaor squeezed the trigger and a bolt blazed toward Garm Antis. The Xiiginn fell over as his suit systems were overloaded. Kladomaor dove to the side and shot another bolt toward Mar Arden, but the Battle Commander stepped between them. Kladomaor raised the Arc sidearm to shoot again, but someone grabbed him from behind. Kladomaor was spun around by a Boxan soldier and thrown to the ground. Another two soldiers leaped onto him, pinning his arms to his side. He tried to twist free, but the soldiers held him down. The third soldier disarmed him and the other two dragged him to his feet. They brought him before Mar Arden, and Kladomaor clenched his teeth.

"Where is the key?" Mar Arden asked.

The soldiers forced Kladomaor to his knees and he glared at the Xiiginn. "You betrayed us."

"You have no idea how long we've planned for this," Mar Arden sneered.

"I'll never give you the key."

Mar Arden nodded to the soldiers. They picked Kladomaor up and slammed him onto the ground. Suit integrity alarms showed on his internal heads-up display.

"I'm going to—"

"What? You'll do nothing. Would you like another demonstration of the power of the Xiiginn?" Mar Arden asked.

The Xiiginn looked at one of the Boxan soldier standing to the side. "Kill that one," he said, pointing to another soldier.

Without hesitation the soldier attacked the other soldier, pushing him to the ground and bludgeoning him until his helmet cracked.

Kladomaor looked on in shock, then turned to the soldier who held his arm. Nothing of the horror they'd just witness registered on the soldier's face. "Why don't you fight back?"

Mar Arden laughed gleefully. "They can't fight back."

Something deep inside Kladomaor pushed its way through him—a primal force left over from an age when the Boxans had waged war amongst themselves. He was alone and couldn't figure out how the Xiiginn were controlling the others.

"You can't fight us," Mar Arden said, bending over so his face was in Kladomaor's line of sight.

Kladomaor sprang to his feet and grabbed Mar Arden by the neck, but the Xiiginn squirmed out of his grasp and kicked off Kladomaor's broad chest. The remaining two soldiers tried to grab Kladomaor, but he twisted free of them, using the momentum of one to send them into the other. He spun around, looking for the Xiiginn, and found him standing over the Battle Commander. Jaedon pushed himself to his feet.

"Stop," Mar Arden said. "Back away from him."

The two soldiers immediately did as they were told.

Mar Arden narrowed his gaze. "You admire this Battle Commander, don't you?"

The Xiiginn took the hand cannon from Jaedon's hand and circled around him, pointing the barrel of the gun at the Battle Commander's head.

Kladomaor stepped forward. "Don't," he said.

"Give me the key and I will spare his life," Mar Arden said. "I'll spare yours as well."

Kladomaor's brows pushed forward into a deep frown. He glanced at the two soldiers, who stood waiting for Mar Arden to tell them what to do, and he took a step back. "You can't kill me or you'll lose the key forever."

Mar Arden was unimpressed. "We'll find where you've hidden it."

"How? There are four of you. Do you plan to scour the entire surface of the moon until you find it?" Kladomaor asked, trying to buy some time.

"You think it's just the four of us? Let me show you," Mar Arden said, then shouted, "Come out! I need you!"

From the surrounding wreckage of their ship came the crew of the Boxan frigate—the remaining bridge crew, as well as others who served in the fleet. They all exhibited hauntingly vacant expressions except when the Xiiginn called to them.

"Now, tell me what I want to know," Mar Arden hissed.

Kladomaor looked around, unable to believe what he was seeing. He stumbled back again and then ran, darting past his fellow crewmembers, who just stood there. When he heard Mar Arden howl in anger, Kladomaor risked looking behind him and saw that the crew of the ship was chasing him.

A comms channel opened on his suit and Mar Arden's face appeared. "You have nowhere to run, Protector."

Kladomaor kept going and saw the marked location of the escape pod. At the edge of his screen were the marked coordinates he'd gotten from the Xiiginn tablet he'd found earlier. He maximized the

power output to his armor and ran as fast as he could toward it. The Boxans that pursued him fell behind. Their spacesuits were no match for his Protector armor. He'd worn it because he was going to be officially transferred to the fleet upon their arrival at the Confederation space station.

Ahead of him was a Xiiginn shuttle. Boxans and Xiiginns had coexisted for some time and had adjusted their shuttle's interior to account for their differing sizes. This model of shuttle looked to be one that could easily accommodate his size, and the fact that the shuttle was here at all meant that the Xiiginns had been planning this for some time.

He reached the shuttle and snatched the Xiiginn tablet from the storage compartment in his armor where he'd placed it earlier, using the Xiiginn's credentials to open the shuttle.

Kladomaor climbed aboard and shut the doors. His pursuers caught up to him and he heard them banging on the hull for a few moments. Kladomaor went right for the pilot's chair and began bringing up the shuttle's systems.

Mar Arden's face appeared on the screen in front of him. "If you try to leave, that shuttle will explode."

Kladomaor paused for a second but then kept working. Either he would die in here or he'd most certainly die out there. He disengaged his helmet, which retracted into its storage compartment at his neck.

Mar Arden sneered at him.

"I'll take my chances," Kladomaor said and powered up the shuttle's engines.

The shuttle hovered above the lunar surface and he retracted the landing gear.

He looked at the screen, meeting the Xiiginn's hateful gaze.

"Where is the key!" the Xiiginn screamed.

"I am the key," Kladomaor said and raised the thrusters, leaving the moon behind.

"I will hunt you down. Your empire is finished. You'll see," Mar Arden said.

The comms signal fragmented and then went offline.

Kladomaor glanced around the small shuttle. The Xiiginns had betrayed them. They had been first among the cultivated species into the Confederation and yet he'd never sensed the hatred they'd shown today. His mind raced as he tried to recall everything Mar Arden had said. The Xiiginns were part of Boxan society and they were the most trusted among other species. They were even allowed to reside on Sethion. Kladomaor felt a great weight settle into the pit of his stomach. He had to warn them. The Xiiginns couldn't be trusted.

Kladomaor opened a connection to the long-range comms platforms and there was nothing in the normal logs and alerts that indicated there'd been an attack. He next used his Protector authority to get the encrypted channels. Video logs kept appearing and disappearing as if there were someone erasing them. Selecting one, he downloaded it to his ship before it disappeared.

He opened the message and a Boxan's face appeared.

"This is Prax'pedax, Battle Commander of the Sethion fleet. There have been reports of multiple attacks in almost every star system in which we have a presence. Multiple Confederation species have turned against us. The ship bearing the Tetronian Key has been lost, and we have to face the fact that the key to the Star Shroud interstellar network is gone. If you're seeing this message, your orders are to return to our home system at once. Return to Sethion. I must warn you that we've had reports of Boxans attacking other Boxans as if they were under someone's control. We're doing everything we can to sort this out, and any Boxan out in the great expanse must be careful and return home."

Kladomaor sat back in his seat and blew out a breath. Multiple attacks meant that Mar Arden hadn't been lying. A smoldering rage built inside him. He'd spent the bulk of his life as a Protector whose sole purpose was the preservation of life. In his mind he kept seeing Battle Command Jaedon helplessly doing the bidding of the Xiiginns, and he wanted to turn the shuttle around and take out every last one of them on that moon. A small part of him wanted all this to be a

misunderstanding, but he'd seen it with his own eyes. Those images were burned into his brain.

He brought up the navigation system and punched in the coordinates for Sethion. At least he'd managed to keep the Xiiginns from getting the Tetronian Key. For the moment they still had control of the Star Shroud networks and all those systems with intelligent life on them that weren't ready to venture out into the great expanse. Kladomaor swallowed hard. Nothing would ever be the same. He'd travel to Sethion, but he didn't know who to trust. Glancing back at the image of Prax'pedax that was still on the comms screen, he decided to seek out the Battle Commander, but he wouldn't confess that he had the Tetronian Key, deciding it was safer to keep that information to himself. He still had time.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Crash Landing*. This story shows Kladomaor's early experience in what became known as the Xiiginn uprising, an interstellar war that continues long after this story and precedes the events in the *Ascension Series*. *Star Shroud* is the first book in the *Ascension Series* and is about Earth's discovery of an alien structure in the solar system which starts humanity's journey into the galaxy and its inevitable pull into an interstellar war.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I've written multiple science fiction and fantasy series. Books have been my way to escape everyday life since I was a teenager to my current ripe old(?) age. What started out as a love of stories has turned into a full-blown passion for writing them.

Overall, I'm just a fan of really good stories regardless of genre. I love the heroic tales, redemption stories, the last stand, or just a good old fashion adventure. Those are the types of stories I like to write. Stories with rich and interesting characters and then I put them into dangerous and sometimes morally gray situations.

My ultimate intent for writing stories is to provide fun escapism for readers. I write stories that I would like to read, and I hope you enjoy them as well.

If you have questions or comments about any of my works I would love to hear from you, even if it's only to drop by to say hello at

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Thanks again for reading

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