



DISSENT
by Thomas Olbert

Dissent
Book I of The Nexus

By Thomas Olbert

Phase 5

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Appropriate for Adults: Moderately Explicit Violence and Death, including domestic violence; Brief explicit same-gender sexual situations; Profanity; Violence against and death of animals

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Preface

In the age before time...

The sapien species, in its original, unrefined form, destroyed nearly all of creation. Reckless use of new and untested technologies opened trans-dimensional gateways into unexplored universes whose physical properties proved incompatible with those of the home continuum.

The cosmic disaster which followed all but destroyed the sapien home universe, forcing what little remained of the species to migrate to another universe; a primordial universe where matter had yet to congeal into galaxies, stars or planets.

Over the millennia which followed, the remnants of the species elected to genetically weed out the evolutionary source of the demon whose insatiable hunger for conquest had brought forth the apocalypse. Males were rendered extinct, and forgotten. The femes who succeeded them created the Nexus, from which stemmed the web of cosmic strings forming the framework of a new universe. Having mastered time and space, the femes had unrivaled power over the future of a new creation.

But, what were they to do?

Prologue

The universe grew.

The cosmic web was spun wider and wider about the Nexus, the spirals of new galaxies forming in its embrace.

Ralyn entered the web link at the heart of the Nexus, and spread herself upon the winds of time as the quantum strain inside her stirred to life. Billions of genetically engineered microbial creatures that thrived in quantum space, they were as one with others of their kind moving through time and space along the cosmic strings.

Ralyn's bio-rhythms synched, in perfect symbiosis with the quantum strain, her mind rode the web, along countless branching time lines. Eons flashed by as a multitude of suns lived and died around her. Ralyn watched with a loving maternal pride as the alternate futures of her genetically engineered descendant races opened before her like the pages of a book...

She saw future worlds of beautiful floating cities where graceful winged femes bravely fought monstrous feathered serpents which carried their gestating young within.

Worlds of orbiting space colonies of dome-enclosed hydroponic gardens and agraria where beautiful, green-

skinned, golden-eyed femes grew like flowers from pods and heroically battled horrific carnivorous plants to claim their young.

Worlds of blue oceans and underwater cities where femes evolved in a single life-span from land dwellers to amphibians to ocean creatures with gills and webbed fingers and silver scales glistening in ocean waves. They battled ebony reptilian demons that turned into sea serpents who carried their unborn daughters in eggs.

Space shimmered like summer heat as time raced on through the millennia, art and science evolving into patterns more terrifying and beautiful than anything Ralyn could have imagined. Yet, somehow...never the right combination of basic drives or adaptations to yield the desired evolutionary effect.

A sudden shift into murky darkness, a familiar, unsettling jolt of light, and she found herself back in the Nexus. She sank to her knees and fought off a wave of nausea as the quantum life-strain died within her. She sighed, brushing aside a tear.

Slowly straightening herself, she walked stiffly out of the web link chamber. She climbed into a transport module, strapped herself in and sealed the glass hatch of the cocoon-like pod. "Genesis level, Section R-12," she recited in a fatigued, scratchy voice, instructing the computer. She closed her eyes, her muscles tensing.

She was thrust back against the cushioned seat as the module rocketed through the labyrinth of pneumatic tubes honeycombing the superstructure of the Nexus. As the pod slowed and she felt her stomach settling, she opened her eyes and found herself in the birthing chamber of her progeny to come.

Stepping shakily from the transport module, she looked at her nascent daughters as they grew in cylindrical glass tanks of liquid, fed through artificial umbilical cords. The Nexus had combined Ralyn's DNA with that of other administrators It judged worthy to propagate the next generation of cosmic planners.

Dozens of them, all created from the genes of the chosen elite, she mused, looking down the rows of tanks. Just as her line had been created from the essence of the now-legendary Kestra and a hand-picked few of her contemporaries. Her heart drumming with fear, she drew a control device from beneath her robes and activated the gatherer robots. Like huge, humming silver bees with glowing sapphires for eyes, they shifted into phase with the Nexus's bubble of normal space and floated into the chamber on shimmering fields of magnetic force. Ralyn forced her fingers to keep steady as she guided the machines to their biocybernetic interface terminals behind the rows of artificial wombs.

Accessing the computer monitor program, she broke

down the collected DNA samples from the three alternate futures she had just visited and incorporated them into the genetic matrix of her descendants. As she transmitted the signal ordering the robots to release their charges of collected genetic material into the fetal sapiens, she prayed to the Multiverse she would be able to complete her task before the Nexus realized what she was doing.

Ralyn, a voice boomed in her head. Her heart nearly stopped. The Nexus. Did It know?

Stay calm, she commanded herself, steadying her thoughts. “Ralyn acknowledging,” she responded via the telepathic implant in her brain. She masked her fear with practiced skill, using a jumble of mundane thoughts to distract the Nexus. “What do you require?”

Come to the main junction immediately. We must confer.

“Received. I will arrive shortly. End communication.” She hurriedly completed her task, deactivated the robots, purged the computer memory of the process, and established a facade of false genetic data to hide the truth from the Nexus. Her nerves were strained as she rode the shuttle pod to the main junction; the very core of the immense artificial intelligence which was the mind of the Nexus.

She stood at the center of a wide, shining black

circle at the center of a chamber of brilliant white walls and long, tapering black triangles. A huge, humming black sphere hung in midair before her. *Report*, the Nexus Overmind commanded. The voice was like a thunderclap in her mind.

We have our god, as the primitives have theirs, she mused bitterly, never daring to voice such thoughts, or let her telepathic barriers slip. She extracted a memory link device from her robe pocket and placed it against the surgically implanted access contact at the base of her skull. Pressing a button, she triggered the memory upload from her own brain to the Overmind.

Negative viability confirmed on all three recorded experiments, the faceless super-intellect coldly intoned. *Kalthaar remains the only potential success. You will instruct all sections to concentrate their efforts there.*

She nodded. Many times she had traversed the timelines of Kestra's famous creation; the future where two opposite and irreconcilable means of sapien reproduction existed side by side. A god for the self and a god for the tribe, locked in eternal combat for the soul of each individual. A fascinating and sometimes terrifying world.

Ralyn looked up and gasped as the chamber she was standing in was transformed into a black void of spinning star fields. Fleets of star cruisers traversed the

space between the planetary systems of Kalthaar's galaxy. In just four thousand years, the femes of that world had developed interstellar travel and colonized many planets. Planets that had become independent worlds, established their own colonies and empires, and fought each other for supremacy across a galaxy. "What of the other three experiments?" Ralyn forced her voice to remain cold and aloof, a mother's love for her children well hidden behind a façade of scientific detachment. She clenched her fists, agonizing seconds ticking by as she awaited the answer.

For the time being, they will be retained for further study.

She exhaled deeply, tension flowing out of her body.

But, be warned: do not expend valuable time or effort on their behalf. They will all eventually have to be destroyed to make way for the future progress of the Kalthaar experiment.

She bit her lip until it bled, forcing a tear back from the corner of her eye. Tasting a bit of salty blood on the tip of her tongue, she dipped her head in a gesture of submission. "As you command." She said through clenched teeth. She had learned to maintain a mask of supplication with artful finesse, hiding the unspeakable hatred she felt for the Overmind.

Formed from the collected memory records and

assimilated brain patterns of all preceding Nexus administrators since the time of Kestra, It had an intelligence that regarded her and her sister sapiens as a biologist might regard a culture of bacteria she was cultivating.

But, for all Its mighty intelligence, It was still only a machine; a series of extremely complex equations passing through a semi-organic cybernetic construct the size of a planetary system. It could calculate a billion possible futures for the entire sapien race in all its forms, and with unerring accuracy, but it could not muster a single nanosecond of compassion or imagination.

You are dismissed. The chamber walls blinked to a stark, featureless black.

She turned and strode out of the junction chamber, savoring her hidden knowledge; even if all else failed and the rest of her beloved children would someday have to be slaughtered, their beauty and spirit would live on in her daughters. *Someday, this monster will be destroyed*, she silently promised herself and all her children to come. *And perhaps*, she thought, daring to take a leap of faith, *The Kalthaar experiment may hold the key.*

Part I – Fleet Captain Kaylenn

Chapter 1

Timeline: Kalthaar Experiment

Timeline Spatial: The Planet Helkos in the galaxy of Kalthaar

Timeline Chronological: The fourth millennium after the age of Kaarth, section point 120794 (billions of years after Ralyn)

Kaylenn sighed as she stood atop the hill overlooking the spaceport. She had a fine view. Far beyond the gray steel decks, docking bays and transmitter towers, over the far hills beyond the jungle, Helkos Minor was visible, its silver-blue curve standing against Helkos Major's light blue sky, its largest moon, Kaarth, hanging overhead. A thunder-goddess class space destroyer was lifting off from the space port. The ground crews, their fueling operations complete, scattered like a tide of ants as the neutron boosters activated, and the gray-metallic juggernaut rose from her landing pad. The wind that fine bird of prey generated as she rose from the spaceport ruffled Kaylenn's long red hair and the folds of her uniform jacket. She smiled as she shielded her eyes against the triple red sun, watching the pride of the Helkos Confederation fly off to war.

"Fleet Captain, by your leave." The voice behind her

was familiar. She turned. It was Neltryn, captain of her flagship, the *Kalthaar*. “The new teams are ready for your inspection, syr.” The tall, attractive dark-skinned feme said, raising her fist in the traditional military salute of the space service. Her stance was firm and strong, as always. No trace of fear of what lay ahead. Kaylenn nodded with admiration.

“Very well,” she said, returning the salute. “How do they look to you?” she asked her old friend and comrade.

Neltryn cast her large brown eyes about for a moment, then wet her full lips. “Competent. As well as could be expected for Kaltaarists, I suppose.”

Kaylenn winced in disgust, turning back to the spaceport. She clenched her hand upon the ceremonial spear her late mother had bequeathed to her. The spear with which her mother had, twenty-five years earlier, killed a rival warrior and slain Kral, cutting the infant Kaylenn from the Mother Destroyer’s womb and winning Kaylenn as her daughter. Since earning her first commission in the space service five years ago, Kaylenn had kept that spear as a good luck charm that had gotten her through six major space battles. The gold tassel and gold-trimmed banner of the Helkos Confederation fluttered from the spear shaft in the wind.

Daughter of a fine gathering, Kaylenn was, she

thought with a mixture of pride and bitterness. Ten of the best warriors her home province had to offer. She could have chosen to rest on the laurels she was born with; her bloodline alone could have assured her a position of power in government or corporate service on the homeworld. But, she would have none of it. She had been determined to win her own place in the Confederation, as a warrior, like her mother. And, by every goddess, she had proven she had a soul to match her blood.

And now, after all her achievements, Fleet Command was sending her into galactic combat with Kaltaarists under her command! Was the war going that badly, she wondered with horror. Kaltaarists as warriors? What next? As political leaders? If not so obscene, and if so many people she held dear were not facing death on a dozen planets, the idea might actually have been amusing.

Neltryn nervously cleared her throat. Glancing at her wrist chronometer, Kaylenn saw time was short. No sense putting it off. "Let's get this over with," she said as she turned and walked down the slope of the hill, Neltryn beside her. As they walked toward their landed jet skimmers, Kaylenn had a passing fancy she decided to indulge. "Did you ever have sex with one of their kind?" she asked matter-of-factly, glancing over her

shoulder at her subordinate.

“What, syr?” Neltryn asked, nearly stopping in her tracks.

“A Kaltaarist. Did you ever have one?”

Kaylenn hid a smirk behind false seriousness as Neltryn fumbled for an answer, obviously sweltering a bit inside her uniform. “Well...yes. A couple of years ago, I spent a furlough on one of their planets.”

“Curious?” Kaylenn quipped as she climbed aboard her skimmer.

“A little, I guess,” Neltryn muttered, tilting her head to hide a grin as she climbed aboard her own skimmer.

“And, are the rumors true?” Kaylenn asked, securing her spear beside one of the jet pods.

Her old friend looked at her and smiled. “They’re adequate,” she said quietly. “They have a fire for living, in their own way. But, they’re a bit too...deferential for my taste, if you know what I mean.”

Kaylenn nodded, starting her skimmer. She did know. She and Neltryn were much alike. And, if the demands and strictures of military command had not stood in the way, Kaylenn would have liked very much to have taken their friendship to the next level. The wind shrieked through Kaylenn’s hair as she maneuvered her skimmer about ten feet off the ground, down the slope of the hill toward the spaceport, Neltryn keeping pace with

her. *First rule of combat command*, she reminded herself as she set her skimmer down at a landing pad near the boarding ramps of her command cruiser. *Never get attached. The moment you allow favoritism to creep into your heart, you let your crew down.* And that meant death.

Her executive officer, Baltryk, and two ship captains stood at attention and saluted as she and Neltryn approached. “Progress?” she asked Baltryk.

“On schedule, syr,” the tall, strong feme replied in her husky voice, a whip of sandy hair blowing in the summer wind. “All sections report we’re ready for liftoff, and the fleet reports we’re on-track for rendezvous at designated orbital coordinates.”

“Where are the new fighter crews?” she asked reluctantly.

“Formed up on the tarmac awaiting inspection, syr.”

“Escort.”

Baltryk saluted, and she and the other two officers led Kaylenn and Neltryn to a line of femes in space pilot uniforms standing at attention before a line of short-range space fighters. The traditional tattoo marks on their faces branded them all as Kaltaarists. This was the first time she had seen their kind on a military base as anything other than maintenance workers. She passed her eyes up and down the line. Their faces were frozen

enigmas, but their bodies showed them for what they were; farmers, builders and laborers. Not a battle scar on any of them, nor that indefinable look that came with being a seasoned warrior. She looked at their eyes. Not a trace of eagerness or fear. Just calm readiness. She clenched her teeth, trying to hide her disgust. Was she expected to lead serving drudges into battle?

“Which of you commands this squadron?” she barked out.

One of them immediately marched forward in crisp military fashion and saluted. “Saaryth, Lieutenant Commander, syr, at your command.” Kaylenn looked her over. She was tall. Well-built. Attractive. Long, dark hair fastened in a military knot behind her head. Light brown skin. Large, striking dark eyes. A precision and discipline to her that was impressive. Kaylenn recognized the tattoo markings on her face as signifying membership in one of the Kaltaarist tribes of Trynn, a Helkan Kaltaarist world in the same star group as Kaylenn’s homeworld, Zeln.

Kaylenn heard Neltryn’s breathing accelerate just the tiniest bit. She glanced at her old friend and caught the briefest glint of anger in her dark eyes, just before Neltryn snapped her eyes straight forward and stood at attention. Jealousy? Was Kaylenn that obvious? No matter. Lust was an occupational hazard, and easily

conquered. “You’re from Trynn, Lieutenant Commander?” she asked, looking into the eyes of the Kaltaarist.

“Affirmative, syr.”

“Your career there, before you were drafted into the service?”

“Respectfully, syr, my people do not have ‘careers.’ We have clan postings. Mine was spacecraft construction. I was head overseer of the fighter assembly section of the Trynn shipyards under military contract for the Vedran campaign. We produced the Taarex-class fighter deployed at the battle for the Quay-Len system. I myself tested all of the prototypes, from the Taarex to these Braal-class fighters my team will be flying on this mission.” She inclined her head slightly, indicating the fighters lined up behind her. Kaylenn looked them over. Fine-looking birds. Formidable weapons. With the right pilots at the controls, anyway. “And, purely for the fleet captain’s own information, syr, I was not drafted into the service. I volunteered. As did every feme in my squadron.”

“Why?” Kaylenn asked point blank. “I thought Kaltaarists didn’t believe in war.”

“We do not, syr. However, as loyal citizens of the Helkos Confederation, we are beholden to the motherworld government for our protection. The

planning commissions and tribal councils of our respective worlds have decided that, while some of us can better serve the Confederation as laborers and medics, others, like myself, are better suited to assist the war effort. The priestesses of Kaltaari counsel that each should serve the tribe in her own way, and according to her abilities.”

“Yes, but surely you must feel morally compromised,” Kaylenn said sarcastically, probing for a reaction. “After all, the killing of sister sapiens is considered an affront against that grazing beast you call a god, is it not?” The other feme’s face remained as still and tranquil as a lake. She had not flushed. Her teeth had not even tightened. Was there no fight in these creatures?

“Once Kralites in their greed and violence insist on starting a war, there is nothing for Kaltaarists to do but try to ensure that they at least conduct it as efficiently and with as little useless bloodshed as possible.”

Neltryn, looking angered, started to speak, but Kaylenn held up a hand to stop her. The flagship captain stepped back, looking frustrated. This Kaltaarist had bite, as well as a fetching frame, Kaylenn noted with a strange amusement. “Back in formation, Lieutenant Commander,” she commanded. “You’ll soon have the chance to prove just how efficiently you can run your

squadron. Don't expect it to be like a simulator test."

"I will not, syr," she replied respectfully, saluting and marching back to her place with her pilots.

"Arrogant little work drudge," Neltryn grumbled as she walked with Kaylenn toward the *Kalthaar's* boarding ramp, her hands clasped tightly behind her back.

Kaylenn smiled slightly. "Tough, or completely ignorant," she said, the smile slipping from her face as she rubbed her fingers nervously against the shaft of the spear. "We'll find out soon enough."

Chapter 2

Timeline: Kalthaar Experiment

Timeline Spatial: The bridge of the Kalthaar, interstellar space, en route between Helkos and the Keltrys solar system in the galaxy of Kalthaar

Timeline Chronological: The fourth millennium after the age of Kaarth, section point 120795

The ship trembled, metal bulkheads rattling as the laser batteries detonated several incoming robot bombs near the *Kalthaar's* hull. "Turn us toward them and bring the mains to bear!" Kaylenn shouted as her flagship faced off against the lead Vedran space destroyer defending the enemy fuel convoy.

"Yes, Fleet Captain," Neltryn responded, drumming instruction codes into her tactical board, her voice cool and steady. The *Kalthaar's* forward particle beam cannon fired streams of light into the darkness. Through her virtual reality headset, Kaylenn watched the computer breakdown of the hits scored on the enemy ship's forward armament. Scrolling text indicated damage, flashing blue circles indicating the sections of the enemy ship still protected by magnetic shielding. Hurriedly drumming the input keys on the panel of her command chair, she downloaded the tactical breakdown to Neltryn's terminal.

Kaylenn was nearly thrown from her chair by the next explosion to rock her ship. The bridge lights flickered wildly and alarm klaxons sounded as the enemy's barrage struck. Damage reports and casualty figures scrolled across Kaylenn's computer-generated display. "Twenty degrees hard a-port," Neltryn barked at her helm officer, processing the tactical layout and laying in a new attack vector. "Course zero-zero by seven zero four. P.B. turrets three, five, and seven fire at designated targets, on my signal only!" she said through her headset radio, feeding the target specs to her gun crews. Kaylenn admired her. She sensed Neltryn could command the obedience of her troops with nothing more than a change in tone. Kaylenn had chosen well for this war.

Kaylenn completed her plan by deploying robot bombs along the enemy ship's possible evasive routes and downloading their coordinates to Neltryn. The kill was set. "Number five, fire," Neltryn ordered. Kaylenn smiled as the computer registered a hit to the enemy's aft thruster section. "Number three, fire." Another hit, in the forward weapons array. Kaylenn salivated, savoring the thrill of the hunt. The damaged enemy destroyer turned and swung hard a-starboard, running. One of Kaylenn's robot bombs, sensing the enemy's approach, moved to intercept. The enemy fired their laser turrets,

but Neltryn's aim had been good; most of their defensive laser array had been destroyed.

Smelling victory, Kaylenn removed her V.R. headset and switched the incoming data to bridge visual. It was time to reward her warriors with the sight of the enemy's blood, to fuel morale. The 'alert' signal flashed across a dozen monitor terminals. A dozen pairs of eyes snapped up. The decks, walls and overhead became a three-dimensional holographic projection of the enemy destroyer, huge and gray against the black and the stars. It was as if the forward section of the *Kalthaar's* bridge had suddenly been cut away, leaving the tactical, helm and radar officers sitting at their terminals staring into open space.

The robot bomb exploded against the destroyer's central gunnery tower, a flaming yellow sun erupting from the ruptured superstructure as the bridge section dissolved in white fire. "Number seven, fire," Neltryn ordered. The coursing blue-white energy stream of a particle beam hit the now-exposed fuel pods, triggering another explosion. The enemy ship flared like a nova and vanished into a ball of white light, the flash eclipsing the star fields for a moment. The bridge crew cheered wildly, shouting the ritual greetings used to honor the victor as she returned from the Great Hunt, the daughter of Kral in her arms.

“Well done, Neltryn,” Kaylenn heartily declared. Neltryn looked up at her from her station and smiled, raising her fist in salute. “Now, let’s finish the job. Take us to the convoy, and see if Baltryk needs any help with the rest of those destroyers. And, pick your targets carefully, Captain—we want the fuel convoy intact.”

“Yes, Fleet Captain. Helm...new course: zero-seven by eight zero nine.” Bits of still glowing ship debris spun past the *Kalthaar*, ripples crossing the holographic starfields as the occasional bit of flotsam struck one of the ship’s magna shields. The ponderous gray and red bulks of the Vedran fuel tankers lined up bellow. Above, the battle raged. Destroyers and battle frigates maneuvered for control of the convoy, particle beam fire and exploding bombs lighting the blackness. Kaylenn drummed a few keys on her panel, overlaying the computer analysis onto the live-action visual.

Kaylenn’s brows knotted. The enemy maneuvered well. The computer schematic showing the placement of red arrows symbolizing the enemy units and blue arrows signifying her forces left no doubt as to what the Vedran Fleet Captain had in mind. By arranging her ships in a crescent-like pattern, she was luring Kaylenn’s ships into a clumsy central thrust while spreading her own fleet thinner and thinner along a lengthening curve. Once all of Kaylenn’s surviving ships had taken the bait,

she would close the crescent into a circle, cutting Kaylenn's fleet to bits. "Raise the *Braal*," Kaylenn ordered. "Put me in direct communication with Captain Baltryk."

"Syr, there's no response on any com band," the communications officer said with a hint of nervous fear slipping into her voice as she looked at Neltryn with her slanted, dark eyes. "I get only static. They must be jamming us."

The dull, icy grip of fear touched Kaylenn's heart as she watched the visual. She instinctively grasped the shaft of her mother's spear, mounted in its base beside her command chair. "Deploy all robot probes!" she shouted. "Locate the *Braal* at once." Seconds ticked by, turning into minutes. Gunships exploded in flaring balls of orange fire, lighting up the convoy.

"Fleet Captain," the stocky little tactical officer said. "Probe Three has returned. Computer download confirms identification of the *Braal*. She's been hit, syr. Main section gone, bridge unit completely destroyed. No sign of escape pods or survivors. She's finished, syr."

Baltryk...dead? Kaylenn stared at the battle playing out before her...hardly a battle now, more like a leaderless pack of wild dogs chasing after prey, scarcely trying to avoid killing each other as they closed on their quarry. *Kral take the idiots!* she silently cursed,

switching off the holographic display and donning her V.R. helmet. The Vedrans must have deployed some new jamming technology. Once Baltryk had lost contact with her attack group, order and formation had quickly broken down. The enemy fleet captain had played it perfectly, curse her. She had sacrificed a considerable portion of her fleet to take out Baltryk's ship. Once Baltryk was eliminated, every captain in her squadron was on her own.

Kaylenn choked in anger and disgust as she watched the haphazard strikes of a dozen Helkan ships chasing enemy cruisers that were obviously luring them to their doom. In her mind's eye, Kaylenn could see the captains in her fleet. Hekryn, Drayd, Kuln, all of them. Each hungry for revenge and glory, each imagining herself bringing home the most spectacular kill and earning a place in the Planetary Governor's mansion of her homeworld. Perhaps even a seat on the Confederation Council itself. "Can you cut through the jamming?" she demanded urgently.

"We're trying, Fleet Captain," Neltryn replied, bending over the shoulder of her communications officer. "The enemy is using some form of quark pulse scrambler wave we've never seen before. Sensors are unaffected, but communications are fried. We're trying to divert power from the main engines to boost the

signal, but—”

“Use the robot probes as message pods! Try to get through to at least one of those ships!”

“I’ll try, syr, but the enemy swift-strikers are killing our probes as fast as we send them out.” Neltryn looked at her, an intensity in her eyes. Her forehead glistened with sweat. She held her voice steady. “They’ve effectively cut us off from Unit One, syr.”

Kaylenn lowered her eyes, her knuckles turning white as she clutched the spear even tighter. “Can we communicate with the other two units?” she asked.

“Barely, syr. It gets harder the closer we get to the enemy fleet.”

“Transmit the following message to all ships still in com range: Break the circle. Once transmission is complete, attack the enemy formation. Hit and run pattern. Score as many kills as you can, but stop them from closing that circle!” She silently prayed to her matron goddess that enough of her captains would put loyalty before ambition and follow her lead.

“Yes, Fleet Captain,” Neltryn responded, giving a new course heading to her helm officer. Kaylenn followed the course of her ship’s attack run. Neltryn had lined it up well. Her gunners concentrated on the drive sections of the enemy ships, aiming for their main thruster pods, where the magnetic shielding was

weakest. Four other ships followed her in, but the rest went off on their private hunts, scoring spectacular but valueless kills. The crescent formation held. Kaylenn ground her teeth as the circle began to close.

Five enemy battle cruisers sped in from five different angles, lancing in upon Kaylenn's fleet in a five-pointed star pattern. She recognized the computer I.D. on the attackers, the fast new Zaarin-class destroyers the Vedrans had just deployed. Small, light and swift as Kral's own claws. They were hopelessly out of range, and Neltryn's people still had not found a way through the jamming. Kaylenn stared at the V.R. display in wide-eyed horror as the five advance destroyers swept through what was left of Baltryk's jumbled fleet unit, picking off her ships like flies. The black void of the V.R. vision lit up with computer-generated explosions. The V-shaped formations of the enemy attack groups formed up behind the five lead ships and moved inward toward the center of the circle, preying on her scattered ships at will. Her heart sank. "No," she whispered.

She removed the V.R. helmet and looked at Neltryn. The captain stood stiffly at her station, looking directly at her, as though awaiting orders. Grief was coldly reflected in her eyes. Guilt stabbed at Kaylenn's heart. By every rule she knew, she was beaten. She had only one arrow left to shoot. What did it matter now? She

accessed the launch bays and spoke into her headset microphone. "Lieutenant Commander Saaryth."

"Receiving, Fleet Captain," Saaryth's voice replied.

"We're drawing the enemy out for you. Kill them.

Now."

"Received. Execute."

Cold as a computer, by the sound of that voice.

They have good fighters, Kaylenn thought, donning the V.R. helmet. They might be able to do considerable damage. At least our destruction will not go unavenged. She sighed. She could not deceive herself. This Saaryth seemed capable enough, but without communications, what could she do? Kaylenn watched the computer representation of Saaryth's fighters leaving the *Kalthaar's* launch bays, a swarm of tiny blue triangles. Clearing the ship, the squadron splintered into five precise, diamond-like groups of four. Kaylenn could not believe her eyes. She knew how tricky that kind of precision flying could be, even with radio guidance.

The five groups peeled off, each group attacking one of the five lead ships of the enemy attack formation. Kaylenn's jaw nearly hit the deck when each fighter group, upon reaching its target, broke into four independently targeted fighters. Flying in perfect coordination, they enveloped each of the five enemy leaders and blanketed them with laser fire. Dozens of

small orange circles appeared in the computer sim, signifying hits on the five Zaarin-class cruisers. Impossible, but it was happening. Or, was it? She put aside the V.R. helmet and activated the hologram view. One of the beleaguered enemy ships filled the room. Four tiny black metal hawk-like attackers spun round and round the ship's weapons arrays in a sort of pinwheel maneuver, scoring hit after hit. The enemy ship's laser turrets exploded, followed by its particle beam turrets and finally its fuel bays. Geysers of orange fire breached the ship's hull from the inside out. Its hull bloated and exploded in a mass of blinding white-hot gas.

Shaking off her momentary numbness, Kaylenn programmed a sweeping run on the ship's external viewers and put it on holo. The viewer's perspective swung across the star fields, finding the other four Vedran lead ships also under attack by Saaryth's fighters. Bright orange explosions and lancing blue beams of destructive energy filled the black void. "Course zero-five by eight zero one," Kaylenn ordered, overlaying attack grid coordinates on the holo-display of the nearest Vedran lead ship. "Bring all P.B. turrets to bear, and fire at will." Neltryn quickly instructed the gun crews, and the *Kalthaar* made her run. Her beams lashed out and struck the thruster and drive sections of

the beleaguered enemy ship.

Saaryth's pilots were in the line of fire, but they stayed on the enemy destroyer and continued firing. Amazed, Kaylenn zoomed in on the holoview and saw the fighters were concentrating their laser fire on the laser batteries and P.B. turrets. They were protecting the *Kalthaar* at the risk of their own lives! One of the fighters was hit by enemy laser fire and spun, damaged into space. Kaylenn expected the pilot to turn her craft toward the *Kalthaar* and attempt an emergency landing. Instead, she turned toward the enemy ship, crashing in a ball of flame against the main gunnery tower, wiping out the bridge section and all that remained of the shield array.

The remaining fighters spun off in a perfectly synchronized maneuver. As the ship dissolved under the *Kalthaar's* barrage, Saaryth's fighters split up and set their headings for the other three targeted ships. That number was quickly reduced to two. Then one. The other destroyers in Kaylenn's battle group had followed her example and launched their fighters as well, Kaylenn realized. The star-shaped maw of the enemy's trap was now a pentagram of five blazing orange infernos hanging in space. The enemy fleet, suddenly stripped of its fleet captain and her squadron commanders, quickly deteriorated into chaos. It was

every Vedran captain for herself now.

“Fleet Captain. The enemy jamming is breaking up,” Neltryn announced with a beaming smile crossing her face, her finger tapping her radio headphones. “All our captains are calling in, reporting kills. The enemy is scattered and in full retreat, syr!” The crew cheered wildly as the blue arrows signifying their sister ships swarmed across the star fields, hunting and killing the red arrows representing the enemy ships. Flaring white circles appeared as the enemy ships were destroyed one by one, popping like a hail of fireworks. “Shall I give the order to pursue, Fleet Captain?” Neltryn asked, a predatory smile crossing her face.

“Negative,” Kaylenn replied. The smile slipped from Neltryn’s face. “I don’t want to spread the fleet thin or waste precious time or fuel just so a few captains can score points or medals. Our supply ports at Keltrys IV need that fuel and that’s our priority. Recall our fighters and deploy a fleet unit to escort that convoy to the Keltrys system.”

“Yes, Fleet Captain,” Neltryn said in a dry voice, giving the order over the intership com band. Her shoulders heaved. Her breath was rapid. The fire of the hunt was in her blood, and Kaylenn had taken the kill from her. She sensed the disappointment of all her officers. It hung over the bridge like oppressive summer

heat. Morale might be bolstered by this victory, she thought, but the moment her leadership came into question, all would be lost. Clasp ing her mother's spear, she glanced up at the holoview and saw Saaryth's fighter group in tight arrowhead formation, heading back to the *Kalthaar* on a graceful blue-white burn of vented plasma.

Casting her eyes across the entire hologram and studying the computer analysis, she saw all the other Kaltaarist fighters returning to their base ships in similar formations. She shook her head in awe. Such perfect coordination. In a dozen offworld sorties, she had never seen its like, even from the best of Kralite pilots. Her own ships were still only haltingly breaking off their pursuit of the fleeing Vedran destroyers and reluctantly returning to fleet formation. Kaylenn raised the incoming fighter group on her personal com band. "Lieutenant Commander Saaryth?"

"Acknowledging, Fleet Captain."

Kaylenn felt an odd sense of relief at finding Saaryth was still alive. "Well done, Lieutenant Commander. Please extend my congratulations to your entire squadron, and my condolences for your losses. I will certainly recommend you for decoration once we reach Keltrys." It was humbling, talking this way to a Kaltaarist. What would her mother have thought?

“Thank you, Fleet Captain. However, Kaltaarists do not give or accept decorations. We live for each other. Nonetheless, I will extend your sentiments to my people. Saaryth out.”

“Insolence!” Neltryn said, having caught the conversation on her own radio link. “Shall I discipline her, Fleet Captain?” Her eyes flashed with anger.

Kaylenn glanced around the bridge, and could see by the tensing muscles, hopeful glances and cruel smiles of her officers that they wanted her to put the Kaltaarists back in their place. Their anger was just as manifest, though repressed, when she answered. “No. Not necessary. They’re different, that’s all. Let’s use that to our advantage. Neltryn, download all computer logs for our report to Fleet Command, and proceed to Keltrys immediately.”

Neltryn saluted stiffly and obeyed. Kaylenn clutched her spear tightly, resolving to watch her back from now on.

Chapter 3

Timeline: Kalthaar Experiment

Timeline Spatial: The Keltrys system in the galaxy of Kalthaar

Timeline Chronological: The fourth millennium after the age of Kaarth, section point 120799

The officers and crew of the *Kalthaar* and her sister ships celebrated their victory with gusto on the Keltrys IV space station. In the main recreation area, the tables shook as a hundred Kralite femes pounded in applause, red and blue lights flashing wildly across a stage where beautiful young Kaltaarist femes in scant silk garments gyrated to the blaring music. Victory songs and martial salutes to each of dozens of matron goddesses fueled the femes' fervor.

As Kaylenn stood by a viewport, looking down on the blue-green surface of Keltrys IV and on its second moon now peeking over the horizon, she noticed her own name and those of several of her captains had been included in the new ballads. Baltryk and her brave warriors were mentioned as having earned a place in the hunt of the goddesses in the land beyond. No mention of Saaryth or any other Kaltaarist.

The loud music and revelry was a jarring change from the drab, solitary quarters Kaylenn had just visited

on the *Kalthaar* and the other ships in her fleet. There had been the usual well-rehearsed speeches and consoling gestures for soldiers mourning the loss of friends, sisters and lovers. Answered, as always, by false courage and brave words forced out through trembling voices, tear ducts struggling to clamp down on the flow over reddened eyes. Warriors did not long mourn for the fallen. That was a sign of weakness.

As always, there were the usual token offers of financial assistance to friends and lovers left behind, contributions to the temples of matron goddesses, and occasionally the offer of aid to home villages for those few Kralites who maintained contact with their agrarian home clusters after achieving warrior status. The Confederate Council had to make a few such gestures to keep the planetary administrations happy and united behind the war effort. *But here...here celebrated the victors*, she thought with a strange melancholy. *The ones worthy of Kral. Kral who, unlike Kaltaari, loved only the strong and the ruthless.*

Sipping at her drink and scanning the room, she noticed Neltryn and a group of officers drinking at a table near the stage. Thinking this might be a good opportunity to fortify her position, she walked toward them. They all stood and saluted as she approached. "At ease," she said with a smile, setting her glass on the

table and pulling up a chair for herself. A look of tension appeared on Neltryn's face.

The other officers politely excused themselves and quickly moved to the other side of the room, leaving Neltryn alone with Kaylenn. Kaylenn took a swallow of her liquor. The message was clear enough. They were giving Kaylenn a choice. The lines had been drawn. Kaylenn sighed and looked at Neltryn who sat quietly, looking at her. One chance to make her case, to win her loyalty? A second swallow brought a buzz to her head. Fair enough, but she would not beg or bargain. "Did you send the report of our victory to Fleet Command?" she asked.

"Yes, Fleet Captain."

"And I assume we'll all be going home to a victor's welcome?" she asked with a smile, raising her glass in toast. Neltryn shrugged, casting her eyes down and rubbing her fingers against her glass. "Is there a problem, Neltryn?"

Neltryn cleared her throat and looked up, her eyes slightly reddened about the edges by liquor. "I had hoped to bring this to your attention at a later time, Fleet Captain. Fleet Command finds our computer logs of the battle to be unacceptable in their present form."

Kaylenn had feared this. She felt a slight chill, but shook it off. "Please explain."

“They think the role of the Kaltaarist pilots should be edited from the logs. They’ve already deleted all mention of the Kaltaarist squadrons from the official record, and they expect us to modify our logs accordingly, to avoid any discrepancy later.”

Kaylenn stared at her subordinate and friend for several seconds. “Have you done so?” she asked calmly.

“No, Fleet Captain. I concluded it was your decision.” She looked at Kaylenn with calm, steady eyes. So, there it was. The one and only offer of redemption. If Kaylenn agreed to alter the logs, then she would be re-accepted into the affection of her sister Kralites. On their terms, of course. If she refused, she had best learn to sleep lightly. She would not be the first commanding officer to perish under questionable circumstances in a time of war.

“Fleet Command may have misread certain aspects of the logs, Neltryn,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “The transmission may have been faulty; residual jamming, ion interference. I suggest you re-transmit the logs in their present form. Just to be sure Fleet Command understands just how valuable the Kaltaarists are to this fleet, and to the Helkan cause. Oh, and please attach a copy of my personal commendation for Lieutenant Commander Saaryth and her people, as well

as my commendation for you and your command staff.” A clear answer, all the way up the chain. Delivered with a clear offer of reward in exchange for loyalty.

Neltryn’s eyes flared a bit, in obvious surprise. Not many fleet captains would dare defy Fleet Command, even after a victory this spectacular. Kaylenn was hoping Neltryn would respect her courage, even if not her judgment. She waited a few seconds for a reply. “I understand, Fleet Captain. I will send the transmission immediately.”

As Neltryn started to rise from her chair, Kaylenn gently laid a hand on her arm, trying not to appear desperate, but hoping to play on a mutual attraction she had sensed for some time. “No hurry, Neltryn,” she said with a smile. “We are on leave, after all, until we receive our flight orders. I had hoped you and I might take a shuttle down to the surface. There’s a lovely little coastal spot on the far tip of the southern continent. A kind of villa overlooking the ocean. I visited there once, a few years back. The setting suns are beautiful against the sea. Flaming orange fading to turquoise and blue at twilight.” She gently stroked Neltryn’s hands, seeing a clear sign of arousal in her eyes. “At dusk, three moons bright and silver over the waters. The waters are very warm by night there,” she whispered to her, leaning across the table.

“Thank you, no, Fleet Captain,” Neltryn said, pulling back and taking a large swallow of her liquor. “I have made other arrangements.” Kaylenn followed her glance to the other side of the room and saw her officers watching their conversation, apparently with great interest. Neltryn stood up and saluted. “I pray you enjoy the remainder of your stay at Keltrys, Fleet Captain,” she said with cold courtesy as she turned and walked over to the other table. Kaylenn sighed in bitter disappointment, finishing off her drink. Neltryn had been her last hope. Now, she was on her own.

End of Sample

This is the end of the sample. To read more, please purchase *Dissent* by Thomas Olbert.

About the Author

Thomas Olbert is a resident of Cambridge, Massachusetts and enjoys writing sci-fi and paranormal fiction, good films, good plays, spending time with family, volunteering with community groups and long walks along the Charles.

He completed two years of liberal arts college, and is the author of several publications, including *Dissent* and *Holocaust*, Books I and II of the *Nexus* published by Phase 5 Publishing.

Other works have been published by Eternal Press, Mocha Memoirs Press and Lillicat Publishers:

Desert Flower by Thomas Olbert, now available from Eternal Press

Black Goddess by Thomas Olbert, now available from Mocha Memoirs

Anthologies:

In The Bloodstream, and *An Improbable Truth*:

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