

ZEATON – SAMPLE CHAPTER ONE

“Dimensions are alternative versions of this universe.

A duoverse is where multiple universes reside.”

Alliance Temporal Manual (revised 2760)

Wednesday 26th April 2767 – 0757 hours

Controller Jim Farrel leaned back in his chair watching his second in command fidget as they waited. Both knew this meeting would seal the fate of the Zeaton mission.

Dave Malcolm was fifty-three, his junior by only a year, yet he looked years older. Jim put this down to the fact that Dave was a worrier; a trait that paralysed him – would he be up to this decision? Jim decided he couldn't let that stop him from getting the job done.

Jim checked the chronometer embedded in the conference table.

“How much longer?” Dave asked.

“Professor Swensen is invariably late,” replied Jim.

Dave raised his eyebrows and they fell again into silence.

The door to the conference room opened and Foster Bryant and Mike Phillips entered, “Did you convince Miss Howard to join us?” Foster asked Mike.

Mike shook his head. “She thinks we're on a suicide mission. Tried to talk me out of going, then got angry and walked out. I think she hates me.”

“I rather suspect otherwise,” replied Foster. He turned his attention to the two men seated at the table.

“Take a seat, gentlemen,” said Jim. “We await the Prof...”

The door slid open and Professor Swensen staggered in with a jumble of monitor pads, which he dumped onto the table.

“Professor! You ready to give us an update?” asked Jim.

Swensen sat down then decided to stand. "An update?" he began flustered. "Oh, yes! We did a study of the captured Jenoaan craft that proved, as I suspected, their drive travels not to other dimensions but to other universes."

"Excuse my ignorance, Professor but what's the difference?" asked Mike.

"It is an often misunderstood concept. Dimensions are different facets of a single universe, offering parallel worlds with alternate time streams. Universes exist independently, with their own set of dimensions, within a duoverse. Unfortunately the Jenoaan craft is attuned to only one universe and we do not understand the technology sufficiently to change that."

"I think most of us here know that, Professor," interrupted Dave. "And those who don't can study it later."

Mike detected the antagonism but chose to ignore it.

"As you wish, Mr. Malcolm," continued Swensen. "My findings indicate that the Jenoaan technology complements my own transit bubble system. I therefore believe the craft is well suited to undergo a Zeaton mission."

"Is that it?" queried Dave Malcolm. "In the last three hundred years there have been five Zeaton missions. No one has returned from any of them."

Jim noticed Dave was already finding it easier to put down proposals than support them.

"I don't believe it is necessarily a suicide mission. All previous missions tackled the problem head on. They tried going straight back along our time continuum vortex, where they experienced forces exceeding one hundred and sixty million cycloids as they approached the creation event, and much higher when they did reach it. No ship could survive that'.

"The project is therefore impossible," Dave said triumphantly.

The Professor, for once unruffled, defended his position.

"By combining the Jenoaan technology with that of my Tymamid transit bubble system we can observe the creation event from the safety of another universe. Previous expeditions did not have that ability."

Dave threw his hands up. Jim ignored it. "Foster. Would you report on your findings?"

Foster leaned forward. "The Jenoaan ship is far superior to ours in structural design. It has a solid hull yet it is lightweight. The ship is smaller and more spartan, offering no frills, and cramped quarters. Much of the space will be taken up with equipment designed by the Professor to enhance the force field."

Professor Swensen interjected: "The Jenosan shield actually functions within the hull itself, reinforcing the atomic structure of the ship down to sub-atomic level. This combined with the anti-vibration regulator will provide an impenetrable shield."

"From my experience," said Dave Malcolm, sitting back with his arms folded, "...anyone who relies on an impenetrable shield is dead. It's only impenetrable until someone penetrates it!"

Swensen sat for a moment without responding. He looked to Mike who winked back in support. Then the old man leaned forward, glaring at Dave. "According to my tests that shield will withstand shock waves of up to one hundred and sixty three million cycloids. That is as close to impenetrable as we can come."

The reaction around the room was one of disbelief.

Jim was impressed. "And how does this anti-vibration regulator work?"

The Professor became animated. He was now doing what he enjoyed most, explaining his inventions. "It is a shock wave neutraliser that absorbs energy and disperses it through the sub-atomic structure of the ship. Then it releases it back into its surroundings as an equal but opposite force. Unfortunately the device offers no short-term defensive capability for other ships, as it reduces speed and manoeuvrability. Also it requires a ship of Jenosan design and construction. As yet we have not been able to replicate the material from which it is built."

Jim nodded and turned to Dave Malcolm. "Opinions?"

Dave offered no response. Jim looked at Foster for a recommendation.

"I say go. Estimated departure date, next Monday. That gives us five days to finalise preparations. We plan to take the 'Ukador' as escort travelling about one billion years to our rear. Every three billion years we will leave a Tymamid Commlink Marker Buoy to relay messages back to the 28th. We estimate it will take nine days to reach the last known safety point. From there we will transfer to the other universe to observe events."

"Have you selected the team?" asked Jim. "I presume Morgan will be in command of the 'Ukador'?"

"Yes replied Foster. Mike will travel with me on the 'Primeval Explorer' and we'd like to have Miss Howard as medical back up on the 'Ukador'.

"Then proceed." Jim noticed Dave moving to protest, then deciding against it. "I wish you all luck. Meeting adjourned."

They all rose to depart. Professor Swensen approached Mike, with a smile on his face. "That went well. Did it not?"

“Yes it did”.

“I thank you, my friend. No one has ever instructed me before on how to conduct myself at a meeting. It was hard.” Without further comment he collected his unused monitor pads and walked off.

Jim overheard, and realised that Mike and the Professor had outmanoeuvred Malcolm.

“Are you really going to let them go on this suicide mission?” pressed Dave.

Jim simply smiled and walked out.

Having been born in the twentieth century, Steve Phillips felt he would never get used to the twenty-eighth century. For starters he found it disturbing to float on an antigrav mattress that suspended his body a few inches off the bed. Once he'd tried sleeping on a hammock this gave him that same unsafe feeling. There were no sheets, as the room was temperature controlled and even bad nights were denied him as he was surrounded by a mantra field whose vibrations were set to relax the mind into a state of deep meditation. There was one advantage, it left him feeling more rested and energetic than he ever remembered.

“How much longer?” he thought. “How much longer until we go home?”

It had been less than a month since his wife, son and brother had found themselves in the future, victims of a twenty-eighth century war that spilled over into the 20th. Now that he knew the Alliance was going to let them go, he longed for the familiarity of home. His brother Mike was different, he seemed content to stay even involving himself in that Zeaton mission.

Sometimes Steve resented his brother; Mike had left him to continue the family business after their father died to pursue a career as a national security agent. Now he was departing on what many viewed as a suicide mission while he and his family had to undergo awareness training focused on the dangers of revealing what they knew of the future when they got home. His wife Barbara, with her journalistic instincts firing, found the need to conceal this story hard to accept.

He rolled over and placed an arm around his wife, remembering how his arm would go to sleep in this position back home. Barbara groaned in ecstasy at his touch while his hand roamed her body.

Cameron Phillips was seven years old and found the future an exciting place. He had no desire to return home, as that would mean leaving behind his alien friend. Dekein was believed to be an adult alien of an unknown species who together with Cameron had been rescued from the Jenosans. The alien seemed a little simple, by human standards and enjoyed playing with the young human. Dekein had been given quarters in the holding area where he was being detained.

Cameron had located his friend by utilising the domestic link to the Alliance information network, which he had mastered faster than his parents. Observing they were otherwise engaged, he slipped out the automatic door and made his way down the sterile white corridors to a lift. On entering he gave a vocal instruction and was taken to the holding level. From there he confidently made his way to the designated room. Although Dekein was unable to leave he was not a prisoner, anyone could visit, so no security lock or alarm was activated.

Cameron stood on the raised landing inside the door noting the similar design to their flat; smaller, furnished with the same chrome chairs upholstered in a black fabric that broke the monotony of the white. There was a molecular assembly unit, an entertainment communications screen, no ornaments to break and no adults; everything they needed to have fun. He walked down the ramp to the adjoining bedroom overjoyed at the prospect of playing with his friend. It was dark inside but he could hear breathing.

“Dekein! Are you awake?”

The form on the bed rolled over and stared at Cameron. “Dekein awake. Cameron come to visit, Dekein?”

The computer, responding to the voices, activated a subtle lighting to reveal a feline creature with short arms and legs that seemed more suitable for walking on all fours. His face was flat, lacking any nose or ears and yet his hearing was better than any human. His eyes and mouth offered a human aspect while his skull, devoid of hair, was encrusted in ugly bone projections that suggested a savage aspect to his otherwise childlike look of innocence.

“You bet. We have this whole place to ourselves. Let’s have a party!” suggested Cameron, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

“What is party?” asked the alien, rising out of the bed on two feet, his streaked leathery skin of green and yellow giving an illusion of fur in the low light.

“Haven’t you ever had a party?” asked Cameron in disbelief. The alien looked blankly at him. “Then I’ll show you. Come with me,” he urged, taking the alien by the hand.

Tanesha Howard felt afraid and angry, as if Mike had just done something to hurt her.

“You’re not seriously going on that mission?”

“Yes, I am. And I’m asking if you would join us in the escort party?” asked Mike.

“What! And be killed like everyone else who’s ever gone on a Zeaton mission? No thanks, I want to keep my life,” she replied, turning away to test some mediscans.

Mike placed his hand gently on her shoulder. “Tanesha,” he began but she shrugged off his attentions. “None of the other expeditions had the safety precautions or the equipment. If you are worried about your safety, you’ll be a billion years in the rear, with plenty of warning about any danger.”

“Why go at all? I’m sure the other missions thought they were better equipped too.”

Mike observed her re-testing the same equipment as she tried to hide her distress. “Because we want to know what’s out there. Because we once believed the world was flat and if we sailed far enough from shore we’d fall off the edge. Because we wouldn’t be exploring the universe today if people like Columbus had not taken calculated risks.”

Tanesha slammed the mediscan down and swung around violently. “This isn’t an ocean cruise! Aren’t you afraid?”

“Yes. Of course I am. But I have to go. I have to prove myself in this century if I’m to stay here.”

He watched her lips harden. “Then go. Get yourself killed but leave me out of it!” she replied and stormed off, colliding with Commander Rolf but not stopping to apologise.

Rolf was senior security officer for Alliance Headquarters, a solidly built man of Irish descent. His manner and rigidity would have placed him in good stead as a Sergeant Major in the nineteenth century British Army, lacking only the wide moustache. He did not like Mike who refused to conform to the rigid protocols that formed his secure orderly world.

Mike ignored him but Rolf’s piercing eyes bored into him as he blocked the doorway. Mike looked up and returned the stare without a word.

“Why don’t you just go back with your brother and leave our time to our people? We don’t like immigrants – you’re an unwelcome relic. What can you hope to achieve on this mission?”

“I don’t know. Maybe find God with a set of blueprints,” he replied with a cheeky smile and pushed past him.

Barbara returned to the bedroom where her husband was dressing. “Have you seen Cameron?” Steve shook his head. “He isn’t in his room.”

“Hey! Computer! Can you locate Cameron!” asked Steve, deciding to use the technology his son had shown him.

“Cameron is in Holding Bay 7, Level 6,” replied the computer.

Steve and Barbara stared at each other. "Computer. Put a map on screen identifying that location," requested Steve.

Instantly the wall they were facing lit up with a map of the building. Two lights flickered indicating their present location and that of Cameron.

"How did he get there? And who's in Holding Bay 7?" asked Barbara, not expecting a response.

"Holding Bay 7 is occupied by the alien, Dekein," replied the computer.

Barbara didn't trust aliens; to her they were an unknown threat to her twentieth century maternal instincts. The thought that her son was alone with one filled her with horror as she bolted out the door.

When they entered the Holding Bay, Dekein and Cameron froze, their faces failing to conceal the guilt of being caught.

Steve and Barbara stared at the mess surrounding them; half eaten serves of ice cream, in numerous flavours, melting over the upholstery, plastic frames, chrome arm rests and the walls. Bowls of other substances also half eaten were strewn around the debris of soft drink containers, lolly wrappers, pieces of bread and assorted games. The two offenders did not appear any cleaner than their surrounds. Dekein not having dressed was still nude, food discolouring his skin toning. Cameron's clothes were wet, his hair was plastered with what looked like ice cream and he had removed his shirt. Both were eating what looked like hot dogs with yellow ice cream dripping from one end to the floor.

"Where did you get all this?" yelled Barbara.

Cameron pointed to the assembly unit. "It makes anything you want," he mumbled, his mouth full, his body frozen in place by the fear and expectation of what punishment may await.

In that instant, Barbara could only see two very naughty children. "Well you two, you can start cleaning up this room. If it's not spotless within the hour you'll not be allowed to play together again. Is that clear?"

Both of them nodded obediently; Dekein sitting closest to the assembly unit started by inserting his hot dog into the dispensing window. Cameron followed suit.

Steve found himself a clean chair from the bedroom and sat down to observe as Barbara supervised. This was a different world, he thought, as he watched the mess being fed into the assembly unit where it simply disappeared. He could never adjust to this place, he felt uncomfortable; the last survivors of a species known as twentieth century man. His son seemed to adapt but he longed for home, his business, and the things he'd grown up with.

Even the décor was all too foreign. The stark white clinical walls with dust free surfaces that could convert to any scene on request, was disconcerting to one used to a stable wall with hanging pictures. He wished Mike wasn't going on this mission.

Jenoan ships were dark and cramped, a warrior ship – no room for comfort. As Mike entered the stark cockpit he felt mildly claustrophobic. He'd been looking for Foster but found Olio instead. Izu – Olio was a robot who came from a planet under Jenoan rule where sentient robots were treated as slaves. He'd taken refuge with the Alliance during the recent conflict. His face displayed no defined features, only a pair of hollow oval slits marked where his eyes should be.

"Olio! Where's Foster?" asked Mike.

Olio jumped, having allowed himself to be distracted as he tested instrument response times. "I'm sorry, master. I was daydreaming," he replied in a voice that lacked sexual identification.

"Day dreaming? Do robots do that?" asked Mike.

"Yes, master," replied the robot, sounding offended.

"I'm sorry, Olio. I didn't mean to upset you. I'm just finding it hard to relate to a robot with feelings and weaknesses like people."

"It is all right, master. You must have time to adjust. It is just that you are not alone in your supposition that as a machine I am something less than human. It is not as bad as my home planet but it is still painful," replied Olio.

Mike thought of his encounter with Rolf. "You know, I think I have some understanding of how you feel, Olio. As someone from a past age, I find myself being treated as if I was a savage, an intruder or some kind of idiot. Comparing me to some medieval knight in the twentiethcentury trying to turn on his TV with a lance. I hope I can change that."

"I have studied some of your history on this matter. I'm unable to give you any support for that hope, master. It is your friends who will accept you if you earn their respect; there will always be others who consider you an outsider, a primitive, an alien or a machine in an attempt to make themselves seem superior. Even in this enlightened age," replied Olio, wisely.

"Olio! You still there?" came a voice from another quarter of the ship.

"Sorry, Master Foster. Master Michael is here and we were talking. All responses positive, ready to move on to system check 'gamma'," he replied, shouting down the corridor.

“Good, but do you have to always call me, master? You’re not my slave, Olio. You are my assistant,” returned Foster.

“Commencing ‘gamma’ system check, master,” replied Olio, ignoring Foster’s instruction.

“He means well, Olio,” said Mike sympathetically, after a long pause. Olio nodded, acknowledging he appreciated the kind words.

Mike sat there in silence for a moment examining the close quarters; considering the narrow corridor to the bunk billets and storage compartment. Four small rooms of dull metallic grey, the only colour coming from instrument displays each with its own black background. “You know, Olio. I was just wondering how we’ll manage living in these cramped surrounds for up to a month? It’s like a prison.”

“Have you considered a touch of colour to lift your spirits during the journey?” suggested Olio.

“I wish we had time for frills, Olio. We’ll be flat out getting this ship ready as it is. Our only break will be stopovers on deserted planets to stretch our legs. You ever been camping, Olio?” asked Mike.

“No, master.”

“I miss camping. Getting that way at home you can’t do it any more. Too many fire regulations, camping rules, threats to the environment. I used to go with my father as a kid. So much space, so tranquil, just you and nature and a sky full of stars.”

“Sounds spiritually uplifting,” replied Olio, his featureless face managing to convey emotion despite its bland silvery finish.

“Not like this tomb of a ship. If I make it back, Olio I’ll take you camping,” he said and walked out.

Olio watched his friend go, he knew Mike was depressed and probably afraid but he could do nothing. He needed the support of his family at this time. Olio returned to work and wondered what it would be like to have a family.

Monday 1st May 2767 – 0800 hours

“Day one of the sixth Zeaton mission and perhaps the end of my life,” thought Mike as he stood in the departure lounge of the launch chamber. Departure time had come around a bit too soon, he’d had no opportunity to resolve the situation with Tanesha. Now it may never happen – she hadn’t come to see them off.

He surveyed the subdued crowd of gloomy faced 'farewellers' consisting of Professor Swensen, Jim Farrel, Barbara, Steve, Olio, and Rolf scowling nearby.

"Is this a launch or a wake?" called out Mike. Everyone turned in response but said nothing.

"I somehow think they are unlikely to respond to such frivolity," advised Rolf, standing behind him with a malicious scowl.

"I'm going to miss you, Commander you bring a wet blanket to every occasion," said Mike turning away.

"When will you be back, Uncle Mike?" came a voice from his left.

He looked down and saw Cameron.

"In about a month. Then we'll all go home," he replied, placing a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Can Dekein come with us?" asked Cameron.

"I don't think so. But maybe you can visit him from time to time," reassured Mike.

Cameron nodded as if agreeing on a matter of great importance.

Mike caught the signal as Foster proceeded towards the ship's gangway. Professor Swensen, who was so wound up and excited he could hardly put two words together, wanted to give some final instructions. "Now, Mr Bryant, remember do not engage the anti-vibration regulator until you reach the vibra field or you'll shake the ship to pieces. It also places a tremendous strain on the ship's structure. You must watch that stress gauge at all times. If it goes into the red, get out of there."

"I won't forget, Professor. Mike! Final check, time to get moving!" he ordered.

The room went silent as he disappeared inside. Mike kissed his sister-in-law goodbye and hugged his brother.

"Take care. We'll be waiting. You make sure you make it back," cautioned Steve as they exchanged a final handshake. Mike turned to go but Cameron stopped him with a big hug and a few tears.

"I'll bring you back a souvenir that will make you the envy of your friends," promised Mike, pulling himself free.

Without looking back he followed Foster inside the alien ship and shut the door. Everyone stood silently as the ship made it final preparations for departure.

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