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ALIEN DEATH FLEET

STAR FRONTIER TRILOGY: BOOK ONE



STAR FRONTIERS 1

**ALIEN DEATH
FLEET**

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For Patty. Who else?

Chapter One

Assistant Far Space Controller Blenn stirred and came awake slowly in the comfortable command chair. For several seconds, he could not separate dream from the reality of the heads-up display all around him. The dream had been nice, so nice. He slipped back into the dream and smiled as he recalled the way he and the fine, willing, dark-haired Lola from the robo-maintenance department had used her telepresence controllers to

Blenn snapped fully alert when the warning gong sounded. He almost fell from his chair in his haste to bring up the full probe screens showing the outer fringe of the system. Never in the three months he had been on duty in this sector had anything more interesting than a small asteroid appeared. Even that worthless hunk of rock and water ice had been even more boring than usual.

Dozens of new red lights blossomed like madness in Blenn's HUD, almost blinding him. He blinked most of them off. Even at minimal display, too many flashing lights remained for it to be anything but a malfunction.

“Damned incompetents,” he grumbled as he leaned

forward to manually cancel what had to be spurious readings from his control board. "Nobody can repair anything right anymore. Whatever happened to good maintenance programmers?"

His anger faded and his heart threatened to run away when he discovered a fully operational board. A second check returned the identical results. Functional board, disaster imminent.

He leaned back for a moment, barely understanding the magnitude of his problem. Then he overcame his shock, spun and hit the big blue supervisor alert button.

"Danil, I've got a thousand indications of penetration. It must be a comet that split apart. But what a comet!" His gaze flashed to the mass detectors incrementing at the side of his HUD. He turned cold all over when he saw the densitometer readings. This was no gaseous, half-frozen ball of ammonia that had split apart. Quick eye movements got the computer to analyzing the data. Transuranic elements. The exact isotopes used in FTL shift engines.

He had detected a fleet of more than ten thousand vessels.

"Show me. Transfer to my board. I'm not getting anything," came the supervisor's irritable voice. Danil, too, had been disturbed and did not appreciate it. He hadn't been dreaming of Lola; he had been with her.

"Why can't you see it? It should have lit every board in the center." The far-space controller fought to keep from shouting. He settled down and tried to think it through. Danil grumbled constantly, even after the readings transferred to his HUD.

"You're demoted one rank," snapped Danil. "There's nothing unusual on the readouts. Quit daydreaming on duty."

"But—" Blenn fell silent. All indication of an invasion fleet had winked off his densitometer and mass

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spectrometer readouts. He leaned back, sweating in spite of the cool wind blowing from the small room's air ducts. He had done the preliminary checks and his equipment functioned within design parameters.

"Damned if I know what's going on," Blenn said to himself. He began working through a full systems check. Fifty seconds later, he stabbed his finger down on the supervisor's call button again.

"What is it now?"

"The peripherals are malfunctioning. Run your own check. Something has circumvented them."

"Impossible. That would take weeks of work, even if someone knew where all the detectors orbited. Not even the damned rebels could spend the time doing that without being discovered."

"Someone did it—and they were a fraction of a minute off in cutting in their own readings. We're getting recordings, not real-time pickup."

The irascible supervisor cursed, then chased Lola from his office and began his own circuitry check. The expression on his face gradually changed from irritation to disbelief. Then he turned and alerted his own superior.

Assistant Far Space Controller Blenn relaxed. He had done all he could to warn of possible trouble. He remained unsure what had occurred, but he knew heads would roll somewhere. If it happened to be Danil, fine. The way he eyed Lola made Blenn a trifle uneasy. He leaned back, knowing he had done all he could.

Still, something unusual was happening, and it made him uneasy.

He remained unsure until the Death Fleet appeared in formation at a range close enough to rake his home planet with their radiation cannons.



The boy should have been in school, but the afternoon

was too warm to endure another instant of stuffy classroom. He had not bothered returning to his school console; it might be an hour before a random check showed he wasn't working. He leaned back in the center of the grassy meadow, head resting on his folded hands. He had plugged in an old math drill program he had finished weeks ago. Computer teachers were so dumb sometimes.

Not that he minded. The warm air turned him drowsy, and the few breezes blowing up from the valley carried a hint of rain that might fall later. He remembered distant Earth with no real pleasure. The weather there was too predictable. Anyone could vote on what they wanted. It seldom rained because everyone insisted on sunshine.

He liked occasional rain. It made him feel . . . sinful. That was the only way he could describe it. He wasn't supposed to get wet. His clothing disintegrated, and his mother had to reprogram and use precious ration units, but he didn't care.

He liked the feel of rain against his face.

He drifted, more asleep than awake. The roar like a million thunderclaps brought him bolt upright. His eyes widened as he stared at the cloud-specked turquoise sky. Huge patches of festering black appeared everywhere. At first, he thought it might be stormclouds forming. Then he caught the glint of sunlight off flat black metal.

"Ships," he whispered, as if someone might overhear. "There must be a million of them up there."

There were only ten thousand, but they worked in perfect coordination and performed the deadly work of orders of magnitudes more.

The grin faded when he realized that the bright rainbow did not bring assurance but death. Anything living within the path of the rapidly sweeping shaft of radiant energy died horribly.

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The boy grinned when he saw a rainbow arch down from a black ship. It was so gentle, so peaceful, such a promise of rain and freedom and everything he enjoyed so.

He shot to his feet when he saw the blackened grass appear at the edge of the meadow. A tree exploded and spewed boiling sap in all directions; the burned-out carcass looked like a flailing black skeleton. One finger pointed at him, marking him for death. He didn't bother putting on his boots. Barefoot, he ran for his life, crushed grass wetly staining his feet.

The swathe of death followed—too fast.

He never saw the lovely rainbow. The ionizing radiation from the warship burst apart every cell in his body. He experienced a surge of pain and then infinite blackness and death possessed him.

The rainbow scoured the meadow of all life and swept on, seeking anything living and leaving undisturbed all inanimate objects.



“They might as well be saturation bombing with neutron bombs,” the scoutship pilot told his three passengers. They crowded into a space cramped with only two. The pilot had been preparing to lift when the enemy ships struck. He and three maintenance men had launched into a low-planet orbit, escaping the first delicate and deadly rainbow touch by seconds.

“You mean they're not blowing up anything? They're just killing anything alive?”

“Looks like,” the pilot said. He worked on his small vidscreen. He made contact with a dozen checkpoints, but no human responded. All automated transponders worked without a glitch, but the living controllers behind them did not answer.

Using both his optical detection and synthetic-aperture radar mapping equipment, he watched the progress of the destruction below. He felt like vomiting.

Cities that had teemed with people now stood devoid of life. It looked as if the inhabitants had simply left, but he knew they were slumped over consoles and in lobbies and in transit equipment, fried beyond recognition. The rainbow weapon had not cared if they were newborn or old; all died under its implacable caress.

"Why didn't we have any warning? Those bastards in Far Space Control must have sold us out!" The maintenance man raged and tried to swing his fist. The compartment was too cramped. The two beside him restrained him from further angry outbursts.

"The controllers? I doubt it. Why let in a fleet that's not likely to take any prisoners? That . . . That's a death fleet!"

"They sold us out. What other explanation can there be?"

The pilot shrugged. He had no idea. He worked mapping the rocky outer planets in the system. Occasionally, he sent small detectors speeding on their way into orbit around the primary. Ever since Mordred III had been devastated by the comet, all Earther colonies kept close watch for incoming cometary objects. A fleet this large could not have slipped by unseen.

"They might have burned out the detectors," suggested another. "You know they're easy targets for proton storms."

"If all the detectors went out simultaneously, there'd still be an alert. We got nothing. And why didn't someone spot such a huge fleet on radar? There's continuous scanning to keep our near-planet traffic under control."

"Good questions," the pilot said, his gorge rising as he watched the efficient death meted out to his home world by the stark, black-metal-hulled fleet. He switched on all his recorders and got what information he could on the ships and their weapons. He knew it was pitifully small and insignificant. A combat scout might have discovered more. A combat scout might

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have also been destroyed.

Death Fleet. He grimly let the name roll over and over in his head. It was fitting. Too fitting for comfort—or survival.

The pilot checked his energy leakage. The tiny scout might have been dead in space for all the power it consumed. Most of the power required went for air circulation and purification. He kept the engines on standby and used only minimal capacity for the radar spying.

He closed his eyes and rubbed them. Spying. That's what this was. An enemy had swept through the system and unerringly found the nerve center for the planet. He had seen the way the rainbow energy weapons sought out the defensive positions, the military complex, the places around the city where ships might be launched to defend a hapless world. He had been lucky, ready to launch, engines hot. Taking on his passengers had been unexpected but necessary, seeing the radiation weapon from the Death Fleet working its way across the launch facility.

He rubbed his eyes even harder. The heat inside the ship from the four bodies overwhelmed the small exchanger unit's capacity. Already, the air tasted stale and laden with sweat and fear. Was he really lucky?

"What are they doing now?" demanded one of the men.

"Can't tell," the pilot said. "They're systematically beaming the surface. There's no way anyone will be left alive."

"Bastards."

"Who are they?" asked another. "This isn't some rebel group out to overthrow the Empire."

The pilot shook his head wearily. What did it matter? He doubted rebels had the support to build the immense fleet now orbiting the planet. If they did, they would directly attack the Emperor on Earth. His own sympathies lay with the rebels rather than the geneti-

cally altered Emperor, but those were distant concerns now. He enjoyed living on the frontier, as primitive as it was, because he didn't have to think about the strutting, prancing, superior men and women and other genetically enhanced . . . things. Here, he did his job and everyone—every human—left him alone.

Everyone except the people in huge black spaceships with radiation weapons efficiently killing every human on the planet.

He scowled when he saw a few hundred of the largest ships change position into polar orbits with exaggerated eccentricity. He punched the data into his on-board computer. The ships maneuvered to give them the most time low over the major land masses. The pilot watched in fascination as the first of the immense ships dipped down and looked as if it fell apart.

"They blew up!" cried a man peering over his shoulder.

"No," the pilot said, thinking furiously. He worked on the computer, making sure he recorded every instant of the strange operation. "They're landing. They're actually invading the planet."

"All the Empire Service tactical officers say that's not possible."

"They're doing it." The pilot increased magnification and watched as massive land rovers spread out.

"What *are* they doing?" asked another.

"Can't say, but it might be that they're looting the planet." The pilot shifted the memory blocks from his mapping cameras into a radiation-shielded safety vault then cycled in new cerampix to record every detail. "They used their radiation weapons to scour the planet of life. They want what's left."

"They're welcome to my vidset," grumbled the third man, who had been silent to this point. "Damned thing never worked right."

The pilot tried to make sense of what he saw. Until

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he had seen the efficient dark automated beetles moving out to scoop up the spoils of genocide, he had considered the remote possibility that rebels really were behind the attack. No rebel needed the types of materiel disappearing into the automated maws below.

"Aliens," he muttered. "I'd heard rumors of a couple systems getting hit, but I thought it was all outgassing."

"I heard something similar in a bar. The Proteus, down by Jeffcan Supply? You know the place?"

The pilot grunted noncommittally. The man rattled on about how a drunken coworker had told him of major destruction wrought farther out in the Orion Arm.

"We've got to get to another system. They took us by surprise. I don't know how, but they did. We can stop them. Look at those ships. There's not a one that can stand up to an Empire Service cruiser. They seem all fragile and . . . I don't know. Diffuse? But they're big bastards. All we need is time to prepare."

"So how are we going to do it? I'm getting damned hot in here. Can't you turn up the heat pump on this tub?"

The other maintenance men grumbled about the rising temperature, too. The pilot didn't bother telling them the scoutship was at the limits of its operational capacity already. They worked on ships similar to his every day and knew the workings better than he ever could. They complained only to assure themselves something was right in the universe.

For his own part, he wasn't sure. He couldn't take his eyes off the magnified image on his vidscreen showing the huge automated pirate factories below reducing a planet's wealth to easily looted crates. The beetle-shaped machines rolled forward, devouring everything in front of them, then excreted their fodder in a long trail behind. He shifted his view and saw new machines being dropped by other ships. These machines scooped up the crates and jetted upward immediately. He

guessed the process would go on endlessly until everything the Death Fleet wanted was stripped from the world.

The Death Fleet. He screwed his eyes closed and tried to force the name from his brain. It was not possible because it was too descriptive.

“They’ve finished bombarding the planet,” the pilot said, a hollowness rising inside. That meant nothing survived below—except the alien looters. He didn’t have a family to speak of on-planet, and he had just broken up with his girlfriend, but they were all dead now. His boss and the few friends he had made and even the most casual acquaintances—all gone. Dead.

Dead by alien hand. Neither the black ships nor the automated looting factories were anything he had ever seen before. To his way of thinking that meant aliens.

His knuckles turned white as he clutched hard at the edge of the control panel. A strong hand on his shoulder brought him out of his emotional wasteland of loss and anger.

“What?” he snapped.

“We got to do something. We’re not outfitted for a long trip, not with four of us aboard. There’s nothing for any of us down there.” The maintenance man pointed toward the vidscreen showing the voracious black beetle machines creeping through the city, tiny robot feeders scurrying back and forth to keep a steady flow through the packager. Crates dropped behind the machine and were hurried to cleared areas where the ferries swooped down for them.

“They’ve done this before,” he said, anger rising. “This isn’t the first world they’re destroyed and robbed. They’re too efficient for this to be new to them.”

“Space take ‘em,” the man said. “The world’s gone. The whole damned colony has bought it. We’ve got to think about our own necks.”

“We can’t shift for another system. There’s too much

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mass and not enough fuel for that.” The pilot laughed harshly. “There’s not even enough oxygen, and we’d fry halfway there. It’s harder to get rid of waste heat in shift space than it is in normal space.”

“How many can this wreck shift safely?” the man asked in a low voice.

“Two. Maybe three, but that’s pushing back the bubble’s edge. Why do you . . . ?”

The pilot watched with a growing sickness as the man swung around. A short punch with the tips of his fingers crushed one man’s windpipe. Before the third maintenance man could respond, his met the same fate. Both had been killed with a minimum of fuss or mess.

“We’d better waste the air and jettison them. I don’t want to share the compartment with two dead men all the way to . . . where?”

The brightness in the killer’s eyes made the pilot stammer. “Nearest planet. Lyman IV. Yes, Lyman IV.”



The two bodies drifted just outside the scoutship. The pilot couldn’t take his eyes off the near-view vidscreen showing hull conditions. The dead faces always seemed to swing around toward him, open and accusing eyes fixed on him.

He began laying in a course through shift space—the only reason he still lived. The maintenance man could kill him any time, but he needed piloting expertise. One vidscreen filled with two dead bodies and another showing massive plundering, the pilot set the computer for the shift.

He wondered how long he would live.

He wondered how long any human would.

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