

Siege
of
Ardon

By
Henry Eaton

For
Samantha, Heather & Matthew

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Introduction

During 1187A.D., Saladin, the Sultan of Egypt, routed the Christians and captured their king thus capturing Jerusalem. This brought about the third crusade which was comprised of armies from France, England and Germany. While these medieval armies marched towards Jerusalem, a highly advanced civilization was reaching for the stars hundreds of light years away.

Having risen from the horrors of nuclear war two hundred seventy five-years before, the Ardonnarians came to the realization that they could not fight another war and survive. It was a war people of Earth could not even imagine during the middle ages, but they would, about nine hundred-years later. It would be a time of famine, moral decay, cultural collapse and political upheaval the world had never seen.

After the Ardonnarian war ended, what remained of their various governments met near the ruined capital of Delondra on the western continent to hammer out a charter that has stood for nearly three centuries. Their charter revolved around a single planetary government split between the east and west hemispheres. This allowed for a level of independence and experimentation between two political philosophies.

The Ardonnarians revamped their religion back to a period thousands of years before their church fractured into dozens of competing and conflicting factions, much like Earth today. This structured their society with daily rituals based on the ancient books of Kur who was the greatest prophet of their God who lived nearly two thousand years before the great war. Many believed he was actually God himself.

Hundreds of the brightest priests and church leaders from the many different factions gathered in the large stone temple Kurah, in Kurdash, to hammer out a unified religion. This religion gave them a sense of purpose and unity in their lives. It also established a common set of morals that has stood firmly until now. It was not an easy task with the talks breaking down many times over the smallest of details. All parties had to be forced back to the council by the people amid growing tensions between competing political parties. It took fifty years before a final charter was approved by the council, which was then taken to the people of Ardonnar for final ratification.

The Ardonnarian culture advanced quickly over the past few hundred years like no other time in their history. They had freedom to explore and create within the new governmental, social and religious guidelines. This freedom led to a rapid expansion of knowledge and technology that took their people from their home planet into their solar system and beyond to other star systems.

Their first expansion included establishing permanent colonies on the two moons Nisaba and Anaru, which orbited Ardonnar. This included a military base and manufacturing plant on the outer moon Anaru. They established several mining facilities on asteroids and moons throughout the system including a second strategic base further out in the system. Next were two colonies on nearby planets in their system. All required life support systems and pressure domes to survive in those hostile environments.

Over the last fifty years they had expanded outward into three other solar systems, establishing self-sustained open colonies in each system. Unlike the bases in their home solar system which relied on support from Ardonnar, the Ardonnarians were able to farm and exist openly on the planets in these other solar systems with little help from home.

The Ardonnarians played a sport called Sabit which was similar to soccer. There were teams of nine players on each side. Each side had their own ball and the object was to race forward keeping the ball away from the other team and putting it into a goal on the far side of the field. The other team, however, had a ball as well which they ran into the other team's half of the field to score on their goal. It was a game of strategy as each team needed to balance an offense and defense which were active at the same time. Some games were high scoring and were limited to four quarters totaling fifty minutes of play. Each city had a team and played against teams in their own hemisphere. Once a year the top five teams from each

hemisphere would gather for a seasonal tournament to crown a champion. That contest was coming soon and the favorite was a team from the eastern hemisphere which had won the last two titles. Fans took sides and bitter rivalries ensued.

There were other sports, but none captivated the people like Sabit, especially around the annual tournament.

Everything was going their way. Life was good. However, on the main eastern continent several factions had begun fighting traditions and had turned away from their religion for a more enlightened belief where they were the center of existence and tailored God to fit their individual beliefs.

The new beliefs in the east removed Kur from the forefront altogether, while worship of man and their planet moved front and center. With each passing year more and more people turned away. The eastern society was beginning to crumble as the people adopted ways contrary to the teachings of Kur. The past few years saw violence escalate as priests were attacked, temples were vandalized or destroyed, and worshippers harassed and murdered.

The great temple in Kurdash was protected by soldiers from the west and friction between them and the local eastern civilians was intense at times. The eastern leaders were upset each time a western soldier had to shoot an eastern civilian who provoked a fight. Soon Ur, the eastern president, called in his own soldiers to offset the western troops protecting the great temple. This resulted in even more tension and there was talk of war among some groups.

Many of these same protesters were working their way into the eastern government and had amassed enough power to enact laws and changes making it more difficult to follow Kur in the east. They now controlled enough of the eastern government to push against the global leaders and leaders of the west.

Aanepada, who was the global president, did not want to change the structure of the planet's government and he had the backing of the people in the west. The planet was dividing, and both sides began building missiles, bombs and recruiting armies as a deterrence to war. Aanepada was in the sixth year of his seven-year presidency and was just trying to get through it and pass the decisions off to his successor. The next election was a year away, but already candidates were vying for votes.

To be president or a council member you had to previously serve as a member of the religious councils. The eastern coalition was pushing for a secular candidate for president that would force a charter conflict which is what they wanted. They hoped the judicial wing of the government would yield to them in a charter conflict and give their candidate the nod, should he or she win. The judicial court was composed of seven members, currently four from the east and three from the west.

During the nearly three centuries of peace, the Ardonnarians had built an impressive society. Their technological revolution allowed them to build amazing cities with towers made of glass and steel reaching hundreds of stories high. They had a public transit system that covered the entire planet and power in abundance.

Having fought their last war over fossil fuels, they turned to nuclear energy which was now cheap to produce and very safe. Their last nuclear accident was more than a hundred and fifty years ago. In spite of this, the eastern coalitions wanted to stop using nuclear power on the baseless claim that it was dangerous and polluting the planet, even though the waste was sent into space towards their sun Utui to be burned up. They had a following that was growing based on the false claims.

Over the past fifty years, terrorist groups began growing with little opposition from the eastern government. These groups began targeting nuclear waste transfer sites as well as nuclear power stations in an attempt to stop the use of nuclear power which they felt harmed the planet. Soon other groups began to destroy new housing developments, other construction projects and everything with which they disagreed. The terrorist groups began targeting politicians and groups of people that would not support their cause. The current global president, Aanepada's, own father was a victim of these terrorists when he left the presidency several years ago. Some of these groups were finding sympathizers in the west and small terror groups began to spread in the west, with random small attacks. So far in the west, the military was quick to find these groups and squash them.

1

On the western continent, more than a thousand zag north of the planet's rebuilt capital of Delondra, a transport craft was preparing to launch from the newly built spaceport. The spaceport was named Udara after a previous western continent leader. This angered people in the east. Udara would handle dozens of flights a day to all the colonies.

Hundreds of people waited behind a barrier a few zag away from the tarmac as the transport ship ShuBuré prepared to ignite its engines. Armed soldiers patrolled the crowd because of threats by the local terror groups.

The ShuBuré was a large ship measuring the length of a football field and half as wide. It had four large engines under the craft for thrust: two in the front and two in the back. Once off the ground, these engines would rotate the nozzles rearward to provide forward thrust as the ship headed for space. At the very rear were three round engine ports in a triangle formation which utilized waste from the star drive during solar system travel. The star drive utilized the tops of the main thrusters to house the high-energy plasma guns that would tear a wormhole in space that the ship would use to travel towards other star systems. This drive system cut the travel time to weeks and months instead of years and decades. The bottom of the ship had two large doors which swung open to access the cargo bay. On top of the ship were two long panels which were the inter-coolers for the antimatter star drive engines. The inter-coolers would swing down over the four rocket engines once the ship was in space. The crew and passenger compartments were in the forward section of the ship and separated from the rest of the ship by a thick blast shield. This protected the occupants from any radiation the star drive produced.

The transport was heading to the third extrasolar colony on a planet called Silili in the Ubara system roughly forty light years away. The round trip would take them nine months to complete. Just a routine mission to bring supplies and more colonists to their furthest colony yet.

The ShuBuré was commanded by Commander Gula and his first officer, Commander Puabi. Both had come from the same village to the north of the base on the western continent. Both were experienced in interstellar space

Henry Eaton

flight from an early age and were third-generation space pilots.

Gula and Puabi grew up together and were nearing the age of thirty. It was the age when western women were to be married and Puabi was under constant pressure by her mother to get married and spare her family the embarrassment of having an out-of-age woman in the family. It was a stigma that would hover over them for years and many would call her cursed.

Puabi loved Gula and felt that they should be together, but Gula never seemed interested in being more than friends from the same village.

Puabi was running out of time.

Puabi and other women were also under constant pressure for their clothing. In the east everything was acceptable, but in the west, which still embraced the teachings of Kur, it was quite different. Most women wore loose-fitting robes to cover any detail of their bodies, and this conflicted with military requirements. Wearing a robe into a space suit, or while trudging through the mud or water during a military exercise was impossible. Their uniforms were designed to be as loose fitting as possible and still conform to military standards. Many of the priests and teachers of Kur continued to fight the changing standards; some argued that the rise in immorality, especially in the east, was because of the lapse in standards. Then people in the east argued the opposite.

Over a loudspeaker above the crowd the countdown began. "Pur...nidi...amam...tulu...nadi." All four of the large engines began pumping fuel and fire and began to rumble from the large nozzles facing down. "Baur...gal...girse...kilu...tuam...zour!"

All four of the large vertical engines ignited with a thunderous roar, and the craft lifted slowly off the tarmac as the thrust from the engines blasted against the concrete platform. In the distance, people cheered in spite of the deafening roar, and they lifted their heads as the craft rose up and cleared the support towers. Once clear of the towers the landing gear retracted. The engines rotated back slightly and the ShuBuré headed off towards the thin clouds above.

After a few minutes, the ship cleared the thin clouds and accelerated out of the atmosphere into space. Once away from the planet's atmosphere, the large engines rotated back completely and propelled the ship towards the inner moon Nisaba. Here, the transport would get a speed boost from the moon's gravity that would propel it out of the solar system. Once past Nisaba, the

Siege of Ardon

inter-coolers rotated down along the sides of the ship and began to glow with a green light as the antimatter engines warmed up. The ShuBuré exited the solar system in two days, then the star drive engines kicked. Four bright beams of energy shot out from the tips of the four engines and converged on a point in space well in front of the ShuBuré. A hole ripped in space large enough for the craft to enter.

Gula stood at the center of the bridge and got a nod from Puabi who sat at the navigation console near the front of the bridge. All the indicators on her panel were green.

“Take us in,” Gula stated as he sat back in his chair.

Puabi turned forward and slid the three levers on the side of her console forward and the three large engines at the rear of the ship lit up. The ShuBure flew quickly into the wormhole taking the ship to Silili.

Henry Eaton

2

During this time, a dangerous race from another star system discovered Ardonnar. The Inean recon ships traveled more than a hundred light years to reach Ardonnar. Luckily for the Ardonnarians, they came from a direction opposite from their colonies. The recon ships studied the planet for months and saw what the planet had for resources. After much debate among the Inean leaders, the decision was made to invade Ardonnar and strip it of its natural resources. It was a process the Ineans had used on several other planets in other systems. Their tactic was simple: attack swiftly and with overwhelming strength. Any inhabitants who survived would be killed off or sold as exhibits for their museums and, zoos and as slave laborers. This eliminated any future chance of a race coming back to fight them, which concerned the Ineans. The sheer magnitude of the Inean invasions rendered many planets uninhabitable from the vicious bombing and stripping of its natural resources. The Inean home planet was becoming crowded and the goal was to save this planet and inhabit it once the Ardonnarians were eliminated.

The decision to invade was difficult, mainly because the Ineans preferred overwhelming odds, but they did have the advantage of surprise. The Ardonnarians were more advanced than any other race they had conquered, and were expanding into space too quickly. This prompted the Ineans to invade now before the Ardonnarians posed a greater challenge later.

The Ineans were a nonhuman warrior race. They were taller and larger than humans stronger, but much slower. They had gray, blotchy, rough skin covered with minimal clothing made of leather like material, sometimes made from the skins of races conquered. They had stubby, rounded horns protruding from their foreheads and a bony brow like a Neanderthal. Their tongues were long and forked at the end, which attributed to the snapping in their deep, hissing voices which boomed when they spoke. Their eyes were bright red and seemed to glow in the dark. They were a violent race and thought nothing about killing billions of inhabitants of planets they invaded.

Siege of Ardon

The Inean warship, Nikstra, slowed as it approached the Ardonnarian system. The ship was here as the first step of an invasion fleet with Ardonnar as its target. The Ineans had planned on a surprise attack which would quickly paralyze the Ardonnarians. The Nikstra was the first wave that would knock out the planet's military and government quickly. The full invasion would follow with dozens of ships that would kill all of the inhabitants. Once the planet was secured, larger ships would land and dismantle the rest of their infrastructure, stripping the planet of its valuable resources which the Ineans needed to sustain their hungry society. The Ineans planned the first step around stolen technology which was nothing new for them. Most of the technology the Ineans possessed was stolen from races they conquered or had helped fight other battles, and then conquered. Either way, the Ineans feasted and expanded their society on their brute force and overwhelming numbers.

That was how they acquired the star disruptor. The star disruptor was a large device that took energy from a star and then used that energy to open a wormhole to a black hole in the center of the galaxy. The black hole would then yank on the star violently until the wormhole could not sustain the energy surge and shut down. This would pull on the star causing the star to erupt violently and blast a portion of the star in the direction of the device. If the probe was positioned properly, the plasma burst could be targeted towards a planet or fleet of ships where it could raise havoc. The Inean plan was to target Ardonnar with the repeated blasts and subsequent CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejections) to disrupt the planet's power grids and its weather patterns. The Ineans had used this device with deadly accuracy in the last planet they invaded. By the time that race realized they were being invaded, it was too late.

The Nikstra had waited for activity to settle down in the Ardonnarian system as the autumn festival on the planet got into full swing. There would be few ships going back and forth during the festival for two weeks. The Nikstra slowly started their way to Utui, Ardonnar's sun. The ship swung wide of Ardonnar to avoid detection and headed in past the inner planets with their engines off using the gravity boost from the inner planets and moons on their way. The Ineans had gone to the extent of covering the ship in absorbent foam that would absorb Ardonnarian scans. It was also painted black with the windows painted over, rendering the ship virtually invisible against the backdrop of space.

After a long flight, the Nikstra parked behind Utui and waited to ensure they had not been detected.

Henry Eaton

On the bridge of the Nikstra, the captain of the ship, Damok-Sai, hovered over his communications officer and both listened to the radio transmissions from the Ardonnarian ships. Damok-Sai was the son of Manava who was the Inean leader Sankar's righthand council member. He was leading his third invasion and was highly regarded in Sankar's inner circle to replace his father, Manava, when he retired from the Inean council.

The Inean government was set up based on family and class. Sankar had been the leader for nearly forty years and his family had held power for more than three hundred-years total. The next level was the parliamentary council which was the next fifteen top family leaders, which included Manava. The regional generals made up the next level, which Damok-Sai directly reported. One moved up or down based on the favor of the leader and his top council.

After several days listening and scanning, Damok-Sai was satisfied that the Nikstra had not been detected. He turned to his weapons officer who was in charge of deploying the star disruptor. "Akul! Launch the star disruptor," he said in a booming deep voice, snapping some syllables with his forked tongue.

"Yes, Damok-Sai," Akul replied. He had waited impatiently for this moment. He hurried to his computer console and entered several commands into the computer. The bridge of the Nikstra erupted into activity as several Ineans ran about preparing for the most important part of their mission. Several more entered the bridge and took up seats facing banks of computer terminals scattered about the command center atop the large ship. Beneath the five-mile-long Nikstra, several small explosions occurred between the hull of the ship and the long black cylinder beneath it. The cylinder floated away slowly, shedding its black cover revealing a shiny silver, cigarshaped cylinder. After the device cleared the Nikstra, Akul ignited the star disruptor's thrusters to take it toward the star Utui. Once it was at a safe distance, he parked it and began the startup sequence. Akul entered commands into the computer and watched his screen for the results.

The side panel bolts blasted off the star disruptor and the panels swung outward. Four golden solar collectors unfurled and extended nearly ten miles in each direction. The panels unrolled sideways two miles each and ended up facing Utui. Akul watched as the power meter crept up from red into the yellow band and then finally into the green. He entered more commands and the lower panels blasted off, revealing a mass of circuitry and equipment. Power cables as thick as a house. Magnetic coils as big as a skyscraper swung into place. The end closest to the star began to expand, going from a half-mile in diameter to nearly fifty-miles. Large equipment swung into position

Siege of Ardon

completing the fifty-mile-wide ring. Next, a long antenna extended out through the ring towards the star as lightning bolts crackled from the ball at the end to the ring. The antenna stopped just short of ten miles in length and the energy was beginning to affect the Nikstra.

“Akul, move that thing away from us!” Damok-Sai bellowed with a glance towards Cakra, who was the scientist responsible for adapting the star disruptor to Inean technology. Cakra nodded as he monitored the interface between the ship and the star disruptor. So far, all was working perfectly.

“Yes, Commander,” Akul replied, and he ignited the star disruptor's engines. It headed towards Utui, a trip that would take a few days to complete under conventional rocket power.

A few days later, once the probe was a hundred thousand miles from the star's surface, Akul parked it. The energy readings were now solidly in the green and he glanced up at Damok-Sai who had walked onto the bridge moments before.

Damok-Sai, who was impatient, growled at him, “Do it!”

Akul nodded and pressed the final commands into the probe. The image of the star disruptor fluttered and shimmered and then it disappeared. “The cloak is working. In three days, once the probe orbits to the other side of the star, we will have the first star disruption, Commander.”

“Excellent, engineer get us back to the rendezvous point where the rest of the fleet should be by now.”

“Yes, Commander,” Devavarya replied.

The ship's main engines came to life with a roar through the ship, and the ship shuddered and slowly pulled away from Utui. As the ship passed the innermost planet, one of the engines flared briefly and settled back down. Alarms sounded and then shut off as Damok-Sai turned towards Devavarya with a glare.

Gula stood at the back of the bridge of the ShuBuré with Puabi as they talked about their plans for when they returned to Ardonnar. Gula had plans to attend the last days of festival. He was interested in unwinding from the long journey, while Puabi planned to check on her sister's new baby and spend some time with her family.

The annual festival was a two-week-long, planetwide celebration to Kur which led up to the annual harvest. No work was done during this time and no

Henry Eaton

new flights left the planet. The festival culminated in a mass pilgrimage to Kurah, the temple of Kur, in the eastern city of Kurdash. The armies of both sides were well represented and on high alert, following threats to kill the pilgrims as they made their way to the holy temple. It was a threat taken seriously as over a thousand pilgrims had been murdered two years before. Many feared it would be the spark needed to ignite a planetwide war. Luckily war was averted, but tensions remained high.

“Shall we take this conversation to dinner, Commander?” Gula asked.

“Definitely, Commander Gula. I haven't eaten all day,” she replied and she followed him toward the hatch. Gula had shown more of an interest in Puabi during this last mission, and she hoped that he was finally *coming around*.

As they approached the hatch, the door slid to the side with a hiss and an alarm went off. It was the proximity alarm warning them of something in the area. They both turned quickly and returned to their posts. His was at the rear of the bridge in the command chair, and hers was at the navigation console which was in the middle of the bridge facing the main screen.

“Report!” Gula asked as he sat firmly.

“Sensors have detected an object in our vicinity, Commander. Turning full sensor array in that direction,” Ama-Anzud responded.

“What kind of object?” Gula asked with urgency. His concern was for asteroids and comet fragments that could damage his ship or destroy it. It was the annual season for the meteor showers which raised the likelihood of such a strike.

“It is a ship, sir. Metallic and propelled.”

“Whose ship is it? An eastern ship?” Puabi asked knowing the eastern continent had been slowly shying away from the annual religious feast for several years now.

“I don't think so. It is way too big and is heading out of the system's orbital plane at a high rate of speed.” Ama-Anzud replied.

“Can you track it?” Gula asked.

“Sorry, Commander. It has moved out of the sensors range already.”

“Save all your data,” Gula replied.

“Already done, sir.”

Gula walked forward and stared out the large view screen at Utui and the

Siege of Ardon

bright speck that was Ardonnar in the distance. He had a sinking feeling in his stomach that their lives were about to be changed forever.

Puabi admired Gula standing there, as most women did. Gula stood over six feet tall. He had his hair cut in a typical military style and his uniform was well pressed and fitted to his muscular frame. However, she had the same sinking feeling. One coupled with a feeling of doom. She watched him, wondering what was running through his mind.

Gula turned around. "Comm, contact Udara for me."

"Yes, Commander," Puhrum replied. "Udara, this is ShuBuré please respond," she repeated several times. Several seconds later she looked up, "Commander, I have Udara on the comm."

"Thank you, lieutenant. Udara this is ShuBuré. We have detected an unknown ship leaving our system at a high rate of speed. Have you detected anything?"

"ShuBuré we have not detected any other ships in your area. Download all your data to us and check your equipment," the voice replied over the loudspeaker.

Gula turned to Ama-Anzud who gave him the thumbs-up and replied, "All systems check out, sir."

"Udara, all systems check out fine. Data files are on the way," Gula stated with a glance toward Puabi for any input. She didn't offer any.

"We have received your data, ShuBuré. We will analyze it and meet with you when you land. See you in a few days. Udara out."

"So that is it. We wait," Gula said and he left the bridge.

Puabi followed him off the bridge. She wanted to be with Gula, even though it was forbidden for a woman to ask a man in their society. She held out the hope that he would pick up on her interest and ask her for an official date. She knew he felt the same way, but still would not take the bait. "Still hungry?" she asked.

"No, not any more. I got a weird feeling about what that might be."

"Yeah, me too," she said looking up at him with her dark eyes calling out to him.

"I think I'll go to the gym for a while so I can think about this."

She stopped and watched him as the elevator door slid open and he

Henry Eaton

walked away. She leaned back against the side of the elevator and sighed as the door slid shut. Puabi was tall for a woman. She had long dark hair pulled back in a pony tail. She had deep, well-tanned skin with dark seductive eyes. She wore no makeup, as it was forbidden by the Priests of Kur.

On the bridge of the Nikstra, Damok-Sai and the rest of his bridge crew listened in on the radio conversation between the ShuBuré and Udara. Then, there was silence. Damok-Sai turned and glared at Devavarya his engineer and growled. “Your incompetence has given us away.”

“Commander, they don't know what they saw. They have no idea. They will just chalk it up as an anomaly and forget about it,” Devavarya replied to his commanding officer. He knew the penalty for screwing up and feared for his life.

“For the last time, you have left me no choice. It was your engines that flared. It was your underestimation of our engine needs to move the probe here and delay our emperor's conquest by six months. I am in line for the parliamentary seat when my father retires and you won't cost me that.”

Devavarya got up from his seat and started toward Damok-Sai. “You blame me, but it was your impatience that cost the emperor his precious months. I told you and many others, including Cakra, that the engines were underpowered for this mission, but you did not listen.”

Damok-Sai lunged forward, growling loudly, bringing his large jagged dagger down into Devavarya's chest. He pushed him back and drove the bloodied dagger down again as Devavarya stood his ground.

Devavarya reached for his own dagger as his heart began to falter and he collapsed to the floor.

Damok-Sai pulled the dagger from his engineer's chest and put it back in his belt with blue blood dripping from it. It was to show the rest of the crew that he would not tolerate dissent or mistakes. Everyone on the bridge went back to their stations and looked busy.

Damok-Sai grumbled and looked around his bridge which was silent except for the beeps and chirps of the computers. “Launch the EMP missiles towards the planet!” he shouted.

“Missiles away,” a nervous technician replied as several missiles streaked away towards Ardonnar. Soon their engines would shut down and the missiles would drift into position to avoid detection from the Ardonnarian sensors.

Siege of Ardon

Damok-Sai looked down at the body on the floor. He growled and walked off the bridge, leaving the body of his dead engineer on the blood splattered deck.

3

In a cavern deep in Mount Laarsa, in the Humbaba mountain chain, which runs north to south on the western side of the western continent, dozens of Ardonnarian scientists staffed a military base which monitored their planet and solar system. In one theater-style room were several large monitors along the walls displaying different views of Utui, Ardonnar's sun. A few dozen people operated this part of the base, which acted as an early warning for the planet should the star act violently. The commander in charge, Baltuti, had direct communication with the planet's president, Aanepada, who could order the shutdown of the planet's power grid and nuclear plants should a massive solar storm head towards the planet.

The day started off quietly as they did just about every day. Baltuti hovered near a terminal where an attractive woman monitored the temperature of Utui's corona. He had his hand on her shoulder as he leaned forward and whispered in her ear. Enir grinned and was about to say yes to his advances when her display suddenly began displaying a stream of data. The screen began flashing red warning messages and she began entering commands into the computer.

Baltuti stepped back as all eyes turned toward her station, and then all the other stations began to go wild with activity. Baltuti went from station to station and the situation was the same: Utui had gone critical.

"Get me the president!" Baltuti yelled.

The big monitors all switched to a scene of Utui belching a blob of fire directly towards Ardonnar. A dense Coronal Mass Ejection tens of thousands of times the size of the planet raced towards the planet.

"Baltuti! All of our readings are off the charts. This is thousands of times

Henry Eaton

worse than our worst case scenario. We need to shut the grid and reactors down now to avoid disaster!” Enir screamed over the loud chatter in the observatory.

Another technician turned his way. “Baltuti! Gamma-rays are off the charts. I can't explain it!”

Yet another yelled out. “X-rays are spiking as well.”

Enir turned to him. “Did a black hole hit Utui? Cosmic rays are spiking and they shouldn't be right now!”

A young intern ran up to Baltuti, her long hair flowing behind her and flowing past her head when she stopped abruptly in front of him. She fumbled nervously with the radio and then handed it to him.

“Mister President, Utui has gone critical. You must shut down the power grid and nuclear reactors. All ships in flight must be grounded immediately!” Baltuti said with urgency.

“What happened, Baltuti? I didn't think the next solar cycle was due for years,” Aanepada asked. He got up from his desk where he had been working on a proposal to ease tensions with the east and walked towards the large windows overlooking Delondra. It was a clear, cool day and he watched the people going about their business below.

“It isn't, sir. I don't know what caused this. It is our worst case scenario times a thousand. It is just short of Utui going nova. All was quiet and then all tari broke loose, but the grid needs to be shut down,” Baltuti said as he watched the screens on the walls. One after another were going to static as the large, fiery piece of the star destroyed their satellites between them and Utui.

“Nova? Can we survive this? How long do we have?” Aanepada asked as he got tense. He turned his gaze to the sky which was beginning to turn yellow.

“We can survive, but there are barely minutes before the dangerous radiation begins to hit our atmosphere. The storm is racing toward us at an unprecedented speed,” Baltuti said as another large monitor went to static.

“I will shut down the gri...” Baltuti pulled the transmitter from his ear and looked at it while all that came from the speaker was hissing. The connection was lost. Several other monitors went to static. The only one left active was one tracking the ShuBuré turning towards its final approach to the planet. He had no way of warning the ship away and there was no place for it to hide anyway.

Siege of Ardon

Damok-Sai watched the solar burst head towards the planet and he grinned. “Detonate the EMP weapons!” he growled.

Above the planet the EMP bombs exploded and Damok-Sai turned his head and howled. The rest of his crew did the same.

“It is a glorious day for Emperor Sankar,” he bellowed and his crew howled towards the ceiling again.

“The outer edge of the storm is already hitting our atmosphere Baltuti!” Enir yelled as she glanced at the monitor, which had begun to crackle with electricity while tracking the ShuBuré. “There is a severe electromagnetic disturbance engulfing the entire planet. This is way too much for the solar storm to produce! I can't explain it.”

“All ready? That is too fast,” Baltuti said in disbelief. “And what is with the EMP?”

Enir turned toward Baltuti, “Sir, we must shut down.”

“The grid is still up?”

“It is, sir,” another technician said from down below Baltuti's level.

“Duga!” cursed Baltuti.

“Sir we must shut down. NOW!” Enir yelled as she stared at her boss.

Baltuti slumped his shoulders in defeat. “Fine, shut it down.”

Everyone in the room began to shut down their equipment when the storm hit. The lights glowed brighter and then began to spark and burn out. Terminals flared up and a few of the wall monitors exploded showering sharp glass fragments over the technicians below, who tried to take cover. The main lights blew out completely and the emergency lights flickered on and the room glowed red as they buzzed.

“Baltuti! The main relays are frozen,” a technician yelled from the first floor. “The filters are melting!”

Baltuti turned and ran towards the main power cabinet and pulled the door open. Static electricity danced and crackled over the large breakers. He went to grab the handle of the breakers and electricity crackled up his arm, sending him back a few feet. He pulled back and held his hand as the feeling went

Henry Eaton

from his arm. He looked around for something to hit the lever with. He found a broom with a wooden handle, which he felt would be safe.

Others turned to watch, including Enir who realized what he was doing. She stood quickly and held her hand out to stop him and yelled as well, “No Baltuti, don't do it...” but her words seemed to come in slow motion, too late. He jammed the broom's handle between the breaker and the lever and pulled down as Enir started to run towards him. The electricity crackled up the wooden handle and into his hands. He flew across the room and head first into one of the large monitors on the wall. The monitor shattered and Baltuti crumpled to the ground. Smoke rose from the remains of his hands and feet which had completed the circuit when he opened the breakers. Glass crashed down around him and the emergency lights went out.

President Aanepada stood in his office facing the large windows that displayed much of the capital city of Delondra. The sky had changed from a deep blue from the dry crisp early autumn air to a bright yellow glow. The people below began to realize there was trouble as power transformers on the outside of buildings began sparking and exploding. People raced into homes and businesses only to rush out again as everything electrical began burning up. Smoke began to rise up around the city beneath him and then the sky turned orange and rippled as the fiery blob blasted into the planet's atmosphere. Soon, lightning bolts began crashing to the ground and across the sky as the planet's magnetic field collapsed and tried to reestablish itself funneling the Inean's EMP weapon's energy to the ground. Thousands of bolts of lightning crashed down in Delondra sending people for cover that wasn't there.

The city was a combination of old and new. It was the capital of the west during the last war and much of it had been leveled. Some of the outer parts were old, at least two hundred to four hundred years old, while much of the core of the city was relatively new. It overlooked Delondra Bay which was crowded with hundreds of boats of all shapes and sizes. Many were fishing boats and pleasure boats with a few yachts. It was a sight to behold, especially this time of year as the leaves changed color and reflected off the water.

The view from Aanepada's balcony was of the brick plaza below with statues, water fountains, colorful gardens and small ponds that held various fish and waterfowl.

A younger woman came up beside Aanepada and held his arm. “Terrible, isn't it?”

Siege of Ardon

He kept facing forward. “Yes, it is. Very bad. The whole planet will be affected over the next few hours.”

“What will happen?” she asked.

“Well, I could not shut the power grids down, communications went down quickly. So that means relays, transformers and everything that requires electricity will be burned up. Soon the magnetic field of the planet will start stressing and snapping, which will induce many problems in the weather and allow dangerous charged particles into the atmosphere. Then it gets real nasty. This is all based on our worst case scenario which this blows away by a factor of about one thousand.”

“We should get you to cover then,” she said tugging on his arm as the wave of lightning crept closer to them. Behind the wave was a wall of fire and smoke.

“Yes, of course,” he said with a huff, more out of frustration that he could save himself while thousands below could not. He knew the death toll and destruction would be catastrophic.

She guided him from the room as a lightning bolt crashed through the large windows, blowing glass into the room. Kilar turned to see what crashed through, half expecting a transport to fall from the sky, but all she saw was a bright flash and a thunderous boom and she stumbled.

Aanepada pulled her with him as she slumped in his grip. He stumbled and landed on the floor with her on top of him. He sat up quickly when he saw blood. He helped Kilar to sit up and he noticed blood oozing from her chest. Then he noticed the large chunk of glass protruding from her chest. She saw it too and looked up into his eyes. “I love you, father.” With that she convulsed and slumped against him.

Aanepada's hands shook as he held her. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he began to cry. After a minute he began to chant to their god Kur as the building shook violently from the solar storm slamming into Ardonnar.

Aanepada's mind raced through his life full of tragedy. His wife died at a young age from a rare cancer and he raised his daughter Kilar and his adopted daughter Dagan from very young ages. His own father, Mituti, who was the leader of the planet, was killed with his mother shortly after he left office by an eastern terrorist who blew up their transport as it crossed the ocean from the eastern continent. Aanepada's brother died recently from a flulike disease he contracted on one of the new colonies in another system. So he was surrounded in death and his own daughter's death would prove to be his most

Henry Eaton

difficult yet to deal with. He held her now lifeless body close as tears streaked down his cheeks.

The CME engulfed the entire planet in minutes as it blew past. All around the planet fires raged, transports fell from the sky and the planet's power grid was soon a burned-up pile of copper, rubber, plastic and silicon electronics. It would take years to bring power to the planet again and decades for some of the remote regions.

In the eastern capital of Ninki, a large transport's engines shut down and crashed into the capital tower. The ship's fuel ignited an inferno that collapsed a tall tower into an adjacent tower, bringing them down on top of people trying to escape the disaster.

To the southeast of Ninki, in the city of Kurdash, tens of thousands of people swarmed into Kurah, the ancient temple of God for their culture and also the inspiration for the city's name. It was a huge stone structure larger than a baseball stadium that had stood for nearly twelve hundred years and was the center of the current festival on Ardonnar. People rushed in, bowed down, and began chanting to Kur as an earthquake rumbled through the region. The quake was possibly brought on as the CME stressed the planet and the magnetic field swung wildly about. The earthquake would be the largest on record for the region. The temple began to rumble. Dust and small pieces of stone rained down on the tens of thousands of people below and they jammed the exits trying to escape. Then the ground heaved and crashed back down and the temple collapsed on top of the people in a huge cloud of dust and smoke that swept across the city.

In the ultra-modern western city of Belit-Sheri, with glass and steel high-rise towers, above-ground monorail and many exotic parks and gardens, stood large silver cylinders. The cylinders held millions of gallons of petroleum fuel from one of the last oil refining plants left on the planet. The fuel was used in remote areas, where it was impractical to bring nuclear power. People saw the waves of lightning coming their way and started to leave the area over fear if one of the tanks were hit.

Power transformers exploded off of buildings and from underground power stations. Manhole covers launched hundreds of feet into the air followed by fire and smoke. Several buildings erupted into flames as Ardonnarians ran from them into the streets. Cars, trucks, buses, and monorail rolled to a stop as their electrical systems overloaded which was caused by the Inean EMP weapons detonated high in the atmosphere.

Siege of Ardon

The people in the street looked up as a transport flew low overhead with flames coming from one of their engines. The transport began to spiral out of control and crashed low into a high-rise building and exploded. The building toppled over and crashed down on the Ardonnarians as they tried to escape.

The Ardonnarians breathed a sigh of relief as one of the petroleum tanks was hit by lightning and held, but it would prove to be short lived. Several bolts struck another tank and it split in two and the fuel flooded the streets. A few minutes later another lightning bolt struck a power station, igniting the fuel. The streets of Belit-Sheri were ablaze, and then the other tanks exploded, showering the city with flaming oil that ignited a city-wide fire. Rivers of fire swept along the streets, burning everything and everyone in its path.

There was no escape as people of all ages were swept away towards the sea in a wave of fire.