

**Clay's Pride**



**Bud Sparhawk**

*Contact can be a tantalizing glimpse, and even clear facts get filtered through layers of human deviousness. . .*

The scream of the proximity alarm awoke Wilburn from his dream of the cloud-tipped mountains of home. He slapped the panic switch to regain control from the automatics and tried to make sense of the display. Maybe it was another chunk of debris, he hoped.

The jumbled returns from the long scan gave no indication of what was coming, only that there were more than one and they were distributed within a 100,000-kilometer cube. Even when he boosted the gain he still couldn't resolve the returns into anything that made sense.

Well, that wouldn't matter for long. At the rate the objects were closing they'd soon be in visual range. He unlimbered the scope and adjusted it for max range. There, that bright fuzzy spot must be the target cluster. He kept the scope fixed on the spot.

"Holy mother of God." He could hardly believe his eyes, as the image grew swiftly larger. The cluster appeared to be shattered icebergs, all sharp edges and random shapes. But they couldn't possibly be icebergs, not out in deep space. Those sharp ridges must have scattered the signal. No wonder he couldn't make sense of the scans. What could they be?

"Encountered some anomalous objects," he encoded into the neutrino burst message pad. "Will transmit a visual." He thought for a minute and then added, "Appear to be ice shards."

Message sent, he prepared to image the advancing objects. Strange, they looked a lot closer than he'd initially thought. A quick check of the scan confirmed it. They were accelerating, which meant they were under power—under control!

Realizing the importance of his sighting, he fumbled with the imager, aimed it at the largest shard, and took a long exposure. Even though the objects appeared to be glowing he wanted to capture as much light as possible.

The strangest thing about the resulting image was a blurry area at the lower edge, as if something had passed between him and the larger object during the exposure time.

Wilburn just had time to glance out the port to see what it might have been when the universe exploded around him. He floated among the wreckage of his ship, unfeeling of the ice forming in his veins, of the gases rushing from every orifice of his body, unseeing with his frozen eyes as the shards passed him by.

Commander Simon Clay, the senior Fleet officer on board, checked the readouts from *Pride's* watch stations and made a notation in the log. *Nothing to report*, he wrote, as completely expected. Nothing ever happened on these training flights.

The flight profile was always the same: They'd take a series of safe, half-light milliblinks out from Dzhou and run a straight survey sweep for three days. At the end of the survey they'd go through twenty barely noticeable, but more risky microblink jumps to run a second survey sweep. At the end, with only Fleet crew at the control positions, the ship would make a couple of risky, combat-standard blinks towards home.

Those last jumps would be hard on the fresh Dzhou crew, but they'd have to learn to get used to it. Nobody ever died from blink syndrome, although many found themselves wishing otherwise for a few hours afterwards.

For the umpteenth time he wondered if this was what he spent all those years preparing for: to support the Dzhou colonists' pretensions of glory? Was it worth it to have to suck up to rich popinjays like "Captain" Win Ha, who had gotten command of the ship through political connections and influence? It certainly wasn't his military knowledge or command ability; he'd amply demonstrated his failures in both

