

## Escape from Chara Prime

*Chara Prime: an Earth-like planet orbiting the yellow main sequence star Chara, or more formally: Beta Canum Venaticorum, located in constellation Canes Venatic, using an ancient stellar reference.*

*Chara is approximately 27.3 light years from the Human Origin, Sol, another yellow dwarf star around which the planet formerly known as Earth once orbited before its complete destruction during the first rebellion.*

*Locally, Chara Prime is known as Giddeon, and was one of the first worlds settled by humans—in fact the very first Earth colony. It currently has a population of 8.7 billion inhabitants. The primary economy of Giddeon includes agriculture, food processing and storage, as well as the mining of rare elements among asteroids found in the system. The local government consists of a constitutional monarchy that can trace its beginnings back to when the colony was first founded.*

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### ***Report from Admiral Koort to the Imperial Board of Regents:***

We've arrayed ships of the fleet in a concentric spherical formation throughout the system at distances ranging from one standard Astronomical Unit to one-half light year from the system's star.

As the planet still retains significant defense capability, assault ships are orbiting at longer ranges, on hold until the planetary defenses can be reduced

and military supremacy achieved. I anticipate this will take twenty to thirty standard rotations, assuming we are trying to avoid inflicting major ecological damage to the planet itself.

As ordered, we await the arrival of a Praetorian task force to lead the actual ground assault. I advise that this task force stay well away from the planet until I can guarantee its safety.

We've eliminated most of the planet's remote sensors and inserted robotic mines into orbit around the planet to deter and destroy any vessel attempting to leave without permission. Communication channels from the star system had been eliminated before the fleet appeared on their sensors. I cannot guarantee that no signal was transmitted prior to this, but communications have been denied to the planet since the fleet arrived, and we believe that escape from the surface is not possible.

Gharam Koort, Commander, 7453<sup>rd</sup> Imperial Fleet

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### ***Giddeon Defense Headquarters***

The chamber was several kilometers beneath the surface of the planet and Colonel Alireza Karimi, formerly of the Imperial Navy, could almost feel the intense weight of rock above him. Chara Prime was his ancestral home, and after serving in the Navy for more than fifteen years, the Colonel decided he'd had enough—enough of the brutality imposed by the Council of Regents' controlling of the galaxy. *Bad timing*, he thought. The Colonel had returned just last year to

begin working the family farm when thousands of ships had appeared in the system. He'd rushed to volunteer for the planetary defense force, and his experience was welcomed right away without question.

"Another wave inbound, General," Alireza said.

"Number and Time till impact?"

"It looks like eighty-one objects . . . no, make that eighty-five. Estimate to enter the atmosphere in . . . ten rotations."

"Composition?"

"They appear to be natural—asteroids. I detect no artificial signatures."

"Okay. We'll keep the arrays quiet for now. Are there any other remaining anti-ship weapons out there?"

"Ah . . . yes, General. I believe we still have three; they're orbiting the largest moon of Cronus," referring to a gas giant, some twenty AU's out from Chara Prime's orbit.

"Just three?" the General asked. Alireza nodded with a grim look on his face. "Leave them where they are for now—they may be the only surprise we have left. I guess there's no choice. Wait three rotations and then activate one of the surface batteries to break them up . . . use Beta-3. They'll know exactly where the battery is located after that, so there'll be no reason to try to hide them—keep firing at any target you can see after the rocks are destroyed. Who knows, we might even hit something."

“The Civil Defense folks need to know what to expect. The fragments are going to impact somewhere.”

“I can tell them the areas likely to be affected,” Alireza said.

“Better than nothing. Thank you, Colonel.”

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Chara Prime had been under siege for one month. A fleet from the Imperial Navy jumped into the system, battleships, heavy cruisers, and assault ships packed with Royal Marines, along with large Carriers ready to launch thousands of small frigates and fighters. The fleet had taken up positions around the entire Chara system. Clearly, the Empire intended to occupy the planet rather than destroy it or they'd all be dead already. For the past few weeks, the fleet had been pushing natural objects out of the star's orbit—asteroids and other debris—to hurl them at the planet. They were relatively small bits of rock, none more than a hundred meters in diameter, and not intended to inflict widespread devastation. Their purpose was obvious: to draw out the location of the planet's hidden defense systems. Once activated, weapons on the surface of the planet were doomed. After the incoming rocks were destroyed, the fleet opened fire on the batteries. This process would be repeated until the planet was completely defenseless.

Sooner or later, every invasion of this type devolved into fighting on the surface. Imperial Marines would be supported by countless small ships, able to operate within the atmosphere, and by large weapons mounted on orbiting

warships. Virtually all the planet's remote sensors had been wiped out on the first day, only a few quiescent sensors remained; these were cloaked and on the surface of the planet's largest moon. They wouldn't last long once activated, and that would be at the very end. The defense commander hoped the Navy would be less careful once they believed the planet was helpless. These few sensors would help them target the capital ships. For now, the military was completely dependent on old-style sensors for intelligence and on-surface weapons for defense.

General Klavor, in charge of the planet's defenses, was keeping the Directed Energy weapons quiet for now, while deploying only the minimum number of Kinetic Energy batteries required to save the most lives. They were effective at breaking up hunks of rock, but only the Directed Energy Phased Arrays had the agility and power to target and destroy a ship.

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The people on Giddeon were baffled by the siege. Their planet had always paid the tribute demanded by the Empire, and they'd never defied Imperial rule. Why was the fleet here? They'd asked for terms but none had been offered. There was no obvious reason for this siege, or for the assault everyone knew was coming. At least ten thousand Imperial ships orbiting Chara, throughout the star system, and tens of millions of robotic mines were already deployed in orbit around the planet, making it impossible to flee. Their own defensive fleet had been swept away by the immense Imperial battleships that first day.

Although the planet was not completely helpless, it retained only static defenses, which meant that the outcome of the battle was already determined. No planet could survive an assault without a fleet to defend it, and Gideon had mostly relied on the Imperial Navy for defense. Something had changed, either that or there was something on the planet the Regents wanted.

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Jorn Maalach started at the boom as another hypersonic meteor passed overhead. His cup of Kava shook and some liquid spilled onto the table, even here, many meters below the surface. A larger vibration followed the boom, marking an impact somewhere nearby.

After the defensive weapons battery fired, breaking the asteroid into fragments, Jorn heard the sound of incoming projectiles that destroyed the cannons. At this rate, an invasion would likely begin within a couple of weeks. It was time to think about leaving again.

Jorn had abandoned his house on the surface weeks before, when it became obvious what was happening. He wanted to leave but knew about the mines, and—of course—the thousands of warships he'd need to get past. They'd be looking for anything that moved away from the surface. The ship's graviton cloak would partially mask his small ship's presence—but not completely. The

field bent light, along with reducing the ship's apparent mass but it couldn't completely eliminate its signature.

Mass distorts space-time and broadcasts a clear signal, especially when moving and accelerating. That signal would be detected by sensors on ships in the fleet, even close to a large mass like Giddeon. If somehow he *could* fool the space-time distortion sensors, the ship would still leave a wake in the high-energy particles streaming from Chara. These indirect signatures were subtle but would still reveal his location. Nonetheless, Jorn believed he might have found a way out.

There was rumor of a revolutionary graviton shield generator that might be able to better mask his ship's presence and, when coupled to the ship's inertial dampeners, give him an acceleration edge to escape. Improved inertial dampening would allow him to accelerate faster, so that he could get far enough away from the planet before being detected. He needed to reach flat space as quickly as possible.

Jump Drives were only safe to use in relatively flat space—space not heavily warped by the presence of a large mass. He needed to get far enough away from Chara Prime so that it wouldn't 'refract' his ship. Gravitational refraction was a natural threat to any ship. The singularity contained within the ship's jump drive allowed him to create an artificial wormhole to transit over vast distances, instantaneously. The drive generated a virtual singularity, reflected, amplified, and 'inverted' in front of the ship—an image of the real singularity

contained and masked in the drive's heart. A pilot could jump as far as he or she liked, even out of the galaxy, but it was essential that the ship be in flat time-space and that it be in a position that allowed the pilot to predict the ship's destination. Where a ship arrived depended on several things, including the departure point and on the characteristics of the wormhole created. If a ship accidentally appeared near a large mass—the remnants of a dead star, a planetoid, or even a bit of unmapped dark matter—it would simply disappear. Ships always jumped from and to well-surveyed locations because of this.

Three weeks ago, Jorn had been approached by a man, a scientist with a strong accent he couldn't identify. The man claimed to have the design for a new type of graviton field generator. The concept of virtual 'particle' theory, associated with space-time wave control, was the foundation of virtually all modern technologies. The scientist claimed that this new design could completely mask his ship's presence, and that he'd actually built a prototype unit large enough to power a small ship like the Corsair Jorn owned.

Nor Gurtran was an odd name, and it seemed as though Galactic wasn't his native language. Jorn wasn't sure he believed all the man's claims—that it would mask the ship from the Navy sensors, while also boosting the effectiveness of the ship's inertial dampers. Dampeners countered gravitational and inertial forces during boost, isolating both people and equipment from the tremendous force of acceleration. Since the ship's mass would be artificially



reduced to near zero, the impellers that created waves in the fabric of space would accelerate them much faster, and the ship would be difficult to detect.

Most ships were designed to accelerate at about 100 standard gravities without killing the crew or tearing the ship's structure apart. Military ships were better equipped and able to sustain as much as one thousand standard gravities. But if what Nor said was true, the Corsair would be able to accelerate even faster than that. Increased acceleration would cut down on the time it took to reach flat space, and so reduce the time they'd be exposed to the fleet's sensors and weapons. Between the enhanced cloaking effect and the shorter acceleration time, they might even be able to get away alive. But Jon was still not sure this man was telling the truth.

In exchange for the new technology, Nor wanted safe transport for himself and his family—he'd actually used the word 'household'—from Chara, and to a place to be named later. He would allow Jon to keep the prototype equipment as payment.

At first he was skeptical, and said he needed more time to think things over. He wasn't desperate enough—yet—and hoped that the siege could be resolved through negotiation, but that clearly wasn't going to happen. The question was, could he trust this man's claims? The alternative was to wait for the invasion, and then to try slipping out during the confusion as Navy ships transited in and out of the atmosphere. Maybe he could find a working

transponder from a downed Imperial drone. But even if he found one, there was still no guarantee he could get away.

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The Empire controlled half the galaxy. There were small pockets of resistance here and there, but they were not a real threat to the Regents. Then there were the six alien cultures—mysterious and, thus far, too risky for the Empire to oppose in open war. No one really knew or trusted the aliens. Overtures had been made by the reptilian-like race. They sent an invitation for the Emperor to visit their home world.

Of course, the Emperor was just a figurehead. Real power was held by the Imperial Regents, a board made up of military leaders, and the Regents were controlled by one man, Admiral Danko. The Regents went along with whatever he wanted, and in exchange they received favors and protection. The Emperor did what he was told, too. After all, there were plenty of crowned princes ready to take his place—should he object. Accidents happened.

It was rare these days to see an Imperial fleet loosed on an older human settlement, especially a compliant planet like Chara Prime. No one knew what was behind the move, but the fleet was obviously being careful not to inflict large-scale destruction. There may be something on the surface of the planet that they wanted, something they didn't want the people of Giddeon to know about.

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"Do you think he'll do it?" the woman asked.

Nor nodded. “He hasn’t got a choice. The Navy wants what’s in here,” he said pointing to his own head, “and in there.” He pointed to his laboratory. “The Empire needs this technology to expand. They won’t stop, and they won’t negotiate. Even now they are probably wondering if the planet’s military commanders are building a ship able to attack them. They can’t take that chance. The only reason Chara Prime still exists is because they want the technology just a little a bit more than they fear it.”

“Why not just give it to them, Nor?”

“It would help them kill trillions of beings—exterminate whole races. And the Regents need to keep growing the Empire to retain power. Eventually, someone has to say no.”

“But why you?”

“Why me? Why anyone? Because I had the idea, and because I did something foolish—I trusted someone.”

“Won’t this man, Jorn, just sell the prototype to the Empire once he’s helped us?” Nor looked at his partner, frowning.

“Maybe. But it’s a risk we have to take. And he has no choice, either—he has to trust me.” There was a sound outside their dwelling. Someone was arriving. Nor let Jorn into the room.

“So, have you decided?” he asked.

Jorn nodded. “When can you start?”

“Right away. Everything is here.”

“You seem pretty confident that I’d do this.”

Nor shrugged. “It’s what I would do.”

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Three rotations later, the equipment had been integrated with the ship’s main systems. During that time another bombardment had occurred—yet more of the planet’s defense batteries had been destroyed. Soon the planet would only be left with its directed energy arrays, and those wouldn’t last long.

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### ***Aboard Admiral Koort’s flagship***

“Any word from our agents on the surface?” the Regent wanted to know.

“Nothing definitive. They think they’ve narrowed down the location of the traitor, but there’s no sign the Charans are building ships.”

“Hard to believe. Oh well, begin targeting their energy and water infrastructure. I don’t want to drag this out for much longer.”

“We will lose ships if we rush the invasion.”

“The price of war, Admiral. I’m ordering the Praetorians to attack in one standard rotation. Clear as many of the defenses out as you can before that, and make absolutely sure that nothing leaves the surface.”

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### ***Aboard Jorn’s Corsair***

“It’s time to move. The defenses are almost gone. The Regents must be in a hurry.”

“Agreed. My household is aboard, we should lift off.”

“Where am I headed?”

“Here is a list of jumps I want you to make, once you’re free of the system, of course. The first jump should look familiar to you.”

“Can we really push the ship that hard?” Jorn asked.

“You’ll know soon enough, but I wouldn’t risk my own people if I wasn’t sure.”

“All right. I’ve programmed the intra-system jump to get us clear of the battle, assuming we aren’t destroyed during the initial boost. And, if the acceleration rate is really what you say, it’ll take us half an hour to get far enough away to make that first jump.”

Jorn engaged the ship’s navigation system with a brief thought, and the ship began to rise—slowly at first, so as not to inflict damage to the surrounding structures, but once free of the atmosphere, it leapt up from Chara Prime at a rate Jorn never imagined possible. Within less than a second they were through the mass of mines surrounding the planet and passing the outermost moon.

“Why don’t they fire on us?” Jorn asked.

“Because they can’t see us. And they never will.”

“Nothing . . . at all?”

“No.”

“I’ll bet the Empire would love to have this.”

Nor didn’t answer.

“Hey. Is this what the invasion is about? Your design?”

“It’s difficult to tell what motivates people who already control so many stars, and yet who remain hungry for more.”

Jorn understood now. This technology could make the Imperial fleet invulnerable—nothing would be able to stop them, or even detect them. The alien races would be helpless.

After thirty minutes, they reached a point where space was flat enough to engage the jump drive. “Jump in five seconds,” Jorn said.

The graviton field formed a distortion of time-space in front of the ship, integrating it with the containment field surrounding the singularity within the jump drive. Ahead of the ship, the ghostly reflection of a virtual singularity formed, amplified by the control fields. It warped space, creating a wormhole with the characteristics needed for a one light year shift, and their invisible ship was visible for just the tiniest fraction of a second as the jump drive engaged, but it was gone far too quickly for the fleet to react—into the wormhole and out to the edge of the system.

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Aboard the fleet’s flagship, that one glimpse of the fleeing ship alerted the Admiral that something had escaped the planet.

“How did it avoid our sensors?” the Admiral wanted to know.

“I have no idea. If it weren’t for the wormhole, we wouldn’t even have known a ship had left.”

A signal in his head summoned the Admiral to his quarters. Once there, he linked up with the interstellar relay.

“Someone got away, didn’t they, Admiral?”

“I’m afraid so, Regent. The ship was invisible to our sensors.”

“Call off the assault. There’s no longer a reason to occupy Chara Prime.”

“But . . . Yes, your Excellency. What should I tell the people on the planet?”

“Nothing. The Praetorians have orders. Remove your fleet—get them clear of the Chara system and await my next orders.”

“Yes, your Excellency.”

The Admiral surreptitiously dropped a sensor behind as his fleet jumped to the next system. The sensor was linked through the one remaining communications relay, privately, only his most trusted advisors knew about the sensor. As soon as the last ship was safely away, the sensor picked up a strong pulse near the center of Chara, and Admiral understood what the Regents’ plan was. Before jumping, the last Praetorian ship launched a torpedo into the heart of the star. When it detonated, a singularity formed at the center of Chara, swallowing a critical portion of the star’s core and causing the star to collapse. Inevitably, the outer shell of the star would soon erupted outward in a nova-like explosion that would destroy everything in the system. No one would be left alive, and there would be no evidence of what had happened.

“Why would the Board of Regents sacrifice a whole star system if what they were after was already gone?” he asked his advisors.

“Contagion,” his second in command said. “Whatever we missed clearly offers significant military advantage—maybe even a threat to the Empire. The Regents wanted to make sure no one within the system could use whatever information might have been left behind to threaten them. The real question is how many more systems are they ready to destroy, and which one is next?”

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Jorn detected the signs that marked the inevitable death of Chara from the very edge of the star system. Eventually, another star would form here from the debris, but that would take a long time. Seconds later, his ship reached a surveyed point for their first interstellar jump and they disappeared from Chara and reappeared in a system twenty-seven light years away—another main sequence yellow star, one with a singularity orbiting where the third planet had been.

“All those people died. Why? So you could keep your secret?” Jorn asked.

“Do you really think the Empire would stop killing if they gained the power to act with impunity, and anonymity?” Nor asked.

Jorn didn’t answer, but when he looked at his passenger the man looked different, as if he no longer felt the need for a mask.

“What are you?” he asked, his voice shaking.



Escape from Chara Prime: A short story by Michael Selden, edited by John Hudspith

“Half human, which is fifty percent more than I can say for your Board of Regents.”