TRESPASSERS

BOOK 1 OF THE CHAOS SHIFT CYCLE

TR CAMERON

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For Laurel, my love, and Dylan, my life.

The Destroyer *Lubyanka*. Undefeated. Undefeatable.

Cadets Anderson Cross and Kate Flynn face the ultimate rite of passage: taking on the *Lubyanka*. Countless others have tried. Countless others have failed. Now it is up to them. Together, they will try to overcome the unbeatable enemy.

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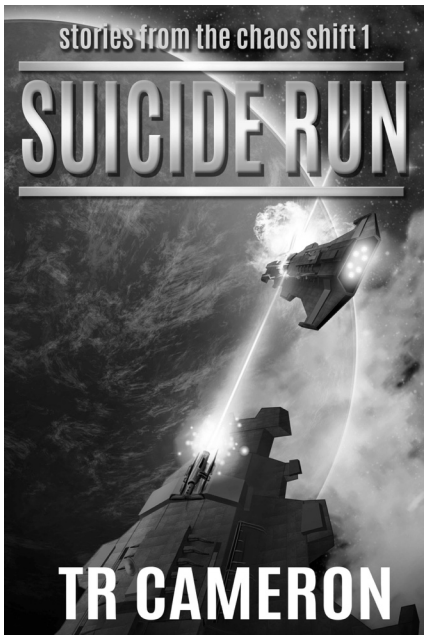

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CHAPTER ONE

Lieutenant Commander Anderson Cross didn't realize that this day, this shift, would be the beginning of the end of life as he knew it. He was unaware that he would be responsible for all that was to come. For now, it was just one more night, one more patrol.

"Alter course twenty-two degrees to the north," he barked. The response wasn't as quick as he would've liked. Maybe his baritone wasn't as authoritative as he imagined.

"Aye," replied Lieutenant Erin Smythe while tapping a series of controls on the flat display in front of her. The ship responded smoothly to her touch, the course correction a hint of motion accompanied by the usual pressure-flex in the hull.

Cross was long accustomed to the second shift command, allowing him to work with the second and third shift officers, but several of his new "night" crew were still having adjustment issues. His executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Kate Flynn, glanced up from the science station and shared his look of amusement. They both remembered their own first steps toward command, which included rotations in each of the crew positions.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Cross said. He took a moment to

appreciate the ship around him. She was a far cry from the newly-minted, gleaming warbird he always envisioned commanding. One of the final ships off the last generation's production line, UAL-2112 showed the cracks and dents that came with age and experience. The *Washington, DC* was her official name, but in practice she was routinely called the *Washington*, or the *Dee-Cee* by her crew. He was proud to be aboard, and prouder still to be in command—even if it was only command of the second shift. He was number three in the *Washington's* hierarchy, subordinate to Captain James Okoye and Commander Felix Olivas. Still, command was command.

Kate's voice cut through his musings. "Permission to leave the bridge, Lieutenant Commander Cross?"

"Granted," he said without thinking. As his brain caught up, he asked "Where are you headed?"

"Jannik and I think we've finished the sensor upgrades on our survey satellites. If it tests out, we might be able to improve the sensors in our torpedoes with the mod. I've done all I can from up here, and he wants to run a couple more simulations before he goes off-shift."

"As if he's ever off-shift." Cross nodded and injected appropriate command gravitas into his response, "Sounds like a worthy project, Lieutenant Commander Flynn. Carry on." He could never pull off a believable level of formality with Kate, a friend and on-again, off-again romantic partner since their academy days. He deliberately did not watch her leave the bridge.

TWO MORE HOURS of endless patrol passed, leaving the crew working hard to stay alert. Cross groused in his mind about the foolishness of patrolling this sector of space where only random chance would put them within sensor range of a threat—

"Contact bearing 313°, 30 low. Running analysis now." His tactical officer's voice betrayed her youth and excitement.

Cross issued the commands to set an arcing intercept course with the unknown blip as Lieutenant Claire Martin resumed speaking. "Contact is an Alliance destroyer. He's in the database, AAN *Gagarin*." Cross moved to peer over her shoulder. The tactical display streamed information about the Alliance ship.

"About our size," Cross murmured. Weapons and defense specifications scrolled past, and he acknowledged it with a grunt, clapping her on the shoulder. "Good work, Martin."

He returned to the captain's chair, sitting down and rocking to get comfortable. New ships boasted adaptive seating for the bridge crew, a luxury he had enjoyed during his rotations and missed now. "Casco, hail his captain with my regards. Politely request that they leave this sector of Union space." The communication officer followed his orders, the message taking only seconds to travel to the other ship. A reply arrived with matching speed.

"Sir, they claim that they have every right to be in this area, as it is a contested zone between our two governments. They suggest that perhaps we would like to depart forthwith."

Cross barked a short laugh. "Forthwith? Who says that? Send reply: Respectfully request that you follow your own advice and get out of United Atlantic League territory immediately." He felt the eyes of the bridge crew on him, but refused to acknowledge them. *The other ship wanted to play? Then play they would.*

"Response received, sir. I'm routing it to your display." A small screen glowed on the wide arm of his chair, and he activated the nondescript earpiece that all the ship's commanders and execs wore. Cross appreciated Ricardo Casco's sense of discretion as he played the imaginative, expletive-laden challenge to engage in anatomically impossible actions from the Gagarin's commander. His teeth flashed in a grin. *Oh, it's like that, is it?*

"Helm, plot and execute a direct-intercept path with the *Gagarin*. Weapons, open tubes and bring cannons to full power. Tactical, orient shields toward the enemy and balance them, but be ready to react. There's no predicting what he'll do." Cross tapped a

command code to adjust the ship's status. "Setting battle standby throughout the ship."

The bridge crew jumped to their tasks, as the computerized voice announced the change. The thin, light panels running along each wall turned from white to orange-gold and began a repeating pattern. On every deck of the *Washington*, crew members hurried to their assigned battle stations, with those in the outermost sections of the ship climbing into vacuum suits upon arrival. The *Washington* lacked the power-assist models that were now standard issue.

His chair display registered a query from Captain Okoye. Cross quickly typed a reply outlining the situation and received a "carry on" in response. Encounters with the Alliance were common on patrol, and unless things escalated, the captain would trust him to handle it.

Cross watched the enemy ship turn to meet their approach on the main display. Lieutenant Martin confirmed the enemy's course change and reported readiness. "He has six launch tubes facing forward, covers open, plus a pair of long-range plasma cannons. His broadsides are similar to ours, with a dozen lasers mounted and half that many tubes. Aft armaments are weaker than ours. He's only got two tubes and one medium range plasma cannon."

The most frustrating thing about the quarrel with the Allied Asian Nations was that the two factions were so evenly matched. Each came from the same gravity well, expanded at roughly the same rate along only slightly different vectors, and developed technology at almost identical paces. Add in the actions of spies on both sides, and it was beyond difficult to gain a lasting technological edge over the opposition.

In his anxiousness, Cross leaned toward the main display. Forcing his nerves down, he sat back in his seat, depicting the picture of calm for his crew.

"Continue on intercept course, but be ready for evasive maneuvers when he breaks off, or when we launch, whichever comes first. Weapons, at a range of 10,000, launch a spread of torpedoes set to

detonate in between our two ships, and fire a quarter power blast from our plasma cannons into his forward shields. If we're lucky, he'll get the message." The monotony of second shift command fell away, and was replaced by the anticipation of real action.

As the distance clicked down to 20,000 meters, Cross keyed the ship-wide intercom and announced, "Stand by for maneuvers. Standby. Standby." Throughout the *Washington*, crew members moved to grab the handholds present in all compartments and passageways, or secured themselves at their battle stations. On the bridge, automatic harnesses deployed from the seats at all positions, locking them into their insufficiently, padded non-adaptive chairs. He shrugged to settle his harness into place.

At a distance of 11,000, the *Gagarin* fired first. Where Cross had envisioned the encounter as a test of wills to be resolved with a show of bravado, the other ship's commander apparently saw it as a test of power that required the starship equivalent of bloodshed to determine a victor. Both plasma cannon blasts splashed against the *Washington's* forward shields. The bridge's display dimmed to compensate for the brilliance of the beam. It brightened again just in time for Cross to see the impact of six exploding torpedoes.

"Helm, evasive pattern Alpha, but circle for a broadside. Weapons, ready all around. Tactical, damage report."

"Shields holding, sir. Minor bumps and bruises to the crew, but no significant damage to the ship. One or two more dings and scrapes." Every sailor aboard took pride in the accumulated scars that the *Washington* displayed. "The *Gagarin* is circling back toward us."

Smythe announced, "Broadside position in twenty-seven seconds."

Cross fielded another question on his display and summarized the situation as, "Trading shots across the bow." There was no response. He feared that the Captain was already running toward the bridge.

"Hail from the *Gagarin*," reported Casco. "He requests cessation of hostilities and for both ships to exit this contested territory."

Cross frowned. *Arrogant bastard.* "No reply."

FIFTEEN SECONDS LATER, the two foes reached classic broadside position. Tactical officers on both ships were accomplished at their craft and angled the shields to absorb the impact of a salvo of missiles and a cannon barrage. The space between them overflowed with propellant, shrapnel, and lances of coherent-energy seeking a crevice to creep through. A laser overloaded on the *Gagarin*, catching fire and melting down to a blackened piece of slag. The *Washington* accumulated more cosmetic damage, but nothing beyond that.

"Send message to the *Gagarin*: Again, request that you depart UAL space forthwith," his earpiece crackled with the captain's voice.

"Cross, status report."

He spoke in a hushed tone, confident the earpiece's microphone would pick him up, "Trading shots with an Alliance ship still, Captain. I don't think it will go anywhere." He paused, waiting for Okoye's reply. It was not the one he wanted to hear. "En route from Engineering. ETA eight minutes. Try not to destroy my ship in the meantime."

The two ships circled in space. Casco reported, "The *Gagarin* is requesting visual comm, sir."

Cross swiveled his chair to look at the communication officer and raised an eyebrow. "Really? That's interesting. Sure, let's see what they have to say." He turned back to face front and ran a hand through his hair, an unconscious and consistent move prior to important conversations that always amused those who knew him well.

Lieutenant Ricardo Casco's hands moved across his controls, and the display split in two, with the real-time exterior view of the *Gagarin* on the left and its commander on the right. He was a veritable giant of a man, almost spilling out of the command chair.

When he spoke, his rumbling voice reminded Cross of stones

grinding together, "You damaged one of my guns, Union. An apology is in order."

Cross reclined and made a show of thinking. "I think it is more accurate to say that your gun was faulty, and failed to discharge its duty in the heat of battle. I cannot be held responsible for your gun's inadequacy."

The Alliance captain reddened slightly while Cross spoke, the only signal that his needling had hit home. His response was measured, "I believe that you are incorrect. My original statement stands. Are you prepared to apologize for this inappropriate provocation in neutral space?"

Cross straightened and locked eyes with the image on his screen. "First, we are not in neutral space. The United Atlantic League claimed this territory more than a year ago, and I have no doubt this was duly communicated to your government. Second, it was you who fired on us first, and that makes you the one guilty of 'inappropriate provocation.' Third, perhaps I used the wrong word when I described your gun as inadequate, and for that I apologize. I meant cowardly."

His bridge crew sat in stunned silence at Cross's words. The commander of the *Gagarin* was silent as well. His face stilled the way a predator's might before charging. The moment stretched as the two commanders stared at each other.

After an eternity, the Alliance officer nodded. "So be it. You have chosen your fate. I will deliver it to you." He cut the communication line, and the screen reverted to a full-size image of the Gagarin orienting for another attack on the *Washington*.

"Helm, evasive Bravo. Get some distance, minimal cross-section. Tactical, keep shields oriented toward him, extra power forward. Weapons, set up firing solutions on his engines. If we can knock those out, we can take care of him at our leisure."

Cross watched as the *Gagarin* advanced on the main display even as the *Washington* retreated.

"Setting battle stations." Orange-yellow lights turned to a red strobe, and pressure hatches closed throughout the ship.

"Casco, send to *Gagarin*: Last chance. Leave this sector now. We don't have to do this." In his heart, he hoped that they wouldn't take his offer. He knew his ship and his people were better, and he would enjoy proving it to the AAN commander. "Tactical, battle display please."

A moment later the forward screen split again, displaying a real-time camera view in one half and a three-dimensional representation of the *Washington*, the *Gagarin*, and the natural obstacles present in the area. To the benefit of both sides, there was very little space debris in this remote part of their patrol pattern.

"No response from the *Gagarin*, sir. I have the message on auto repeat."

"Excellent, thank you." The other commander wanted to mix it up. That suited him just fine.

"Standby, people. We'll let him make the first move and reveal all of his secrets." Cross saw space combat as a multilevel game of chess. The psychological played out on one board, the tactical on another. He had already achieved dominance on the first by pushing the *Gagarin's* commander into an emotional response rather than a measured action. Now he would see what opening strategy he used, and through it understand his approach. Cross didn't lose often, although his style often left few pieces standing at game's end.

Without warning, the *Gagarin* vanished in a smear of acceleration. "Tunnel jump," the officers at tactical and the helm reported as one. The response was automatic, and the helmsman activated their own tunnel drive, throwing them into the unreality that transcended time and space.

CHAPTER TWO

The tunnel drive was the backbone of modern space travel. Cross didn't understand the deep science behind it, but he knew the basics. When activated, it created a shortcut from here to there—wherever here and there might be. For short distances, such as the combat tunnel jump, the transit was virtually instantaneous. For longer spans, there was a huge mathematical equation that explained how long it would take per parsec traveled. Fortunately, computers handled that calculation effectively. All he needed to know was it was the only way to cover the vast distances between systems without growing old on the way, and using it too near a gravity well resulted in the complete destruction of the tunneling vessel.

Once the tunnel drive was available, combat applications were inevitable and immediate. But after years of use, those applications had lost their effectiveness. The "tunnel jump" repositioned a ship into an advantageous position during battle. The UAL used the tactic to great effect until the other side began to as well. Now, both sides compensated for it as a standard operation. Upon entering a new sector, the ship's helm officer set up a jump point that looked safe.

With everyone committed to this policy, the tunnel jump became at most a distraction, rather than an advantage.

Time and space bent again, ejecting first the *Gagarin* and then the *Washington* into normal reality, further apart than before the jump. The tunnel quickly fell in upon itself and disappeared. A countdown clock appeared on the display tracking the time until the drive would be reset and ready for another transit. This was also a function of distance jumped. In this case, the two ships could not jump again until about six minutes had passed.

Cross failed to understand the science behind this as well, but was aware collecting microscopic reaction mass was somehow pivotal. All he knew for sure was that for the next five minutes and fifty-two seconds, both ships were restricted to operations that occurred within the normal confines of reality.

"He's closing at 80% max, and angling to come at us from below." Claire Martin's voice was matter-of-fact, but Cross heard the slight tremor underneath the words. It occurred to Cross that like Martin, several other officers may not have had any non-simulated battle experience. When the new officers arrived under his command during their last base visit, he had reviewed each of their jackets. Many of them were newly minted and still going through the rotations process to hone their skillsets. He would need to check in with each of them once this altercation was over to make sure they handled actual combat without problems.

The rest of his crew were officers content to be masters of a single position on a succession of ships, like his weapons officer, who lived to shoot things.

Martin's voice was slightly less deadpan as she reported, "Six torpedoes inbound on a direct path. Computer suggests high probability they are standard explosive. Bow shields reinforced."

"Very good, Lieutenant Martin. Helm, we'll make our first pass to their starboard side. Weapons, prepare our port broadside. When we reach 5000, launch forward tubes, and set torpedoes to circle behind

to strike his engines. Once in broadside position, fire at will. Tactical, don't neglect the other areas of the ship as you shift shields. That devious bastard may have up some surprises up his sleeve." His officers confirmed his orders.

"Comm, verify the tunnel beacons are recording." Inspired by the black boxes used on airplanes in days long gone by, the beacon was a small tunnel drive with a recording chip in it. That chip contained recordings of all the ship's data up to the second. It also held updated information on the location of the nearest friendly ship or base. Individual beacons could be launched manually, and all would launch automatically if the ship's condition deteriorated to a point where the computer calculated destruction was imminent. After detaching from the ship, the beacons were programmed to tunnel to the closest ally and communicate its data in the hope that any survivors might be rescued.

"Verified, sir."

Both ships closed, and the officers obeyed their instructions. Vibration thrummed with the launch of the *Washington's* torpedoes, and a moment later the enemy's missiles slammed into the *Washington's* forward shields. The humans were knocked around just enough to slow their reaction time, but the computer executed its preplanned operations without flaw. A broadside of energy weapons and torpedoes slammed against the shields of the *Gagarin*. He responded in kind, opening up with everything in his starboard broadside. Both emerged unscathed from the exchange and traded launches and blasts from their aft armaments as they sought separate corners.

"Well, that was inconclusive," Cross said. "Okay people, time to try something a little different. One thing this old girl has going for her is ridiculously overpowered maneuvering thrusters. Let's use those. Helm, set up for a pass on his starboard side again. This time, do an old-fashioned barrel roll alongside him, cutting our velocity to keep us in contact as long as possible. Weapons, program a sequence to match the helm's actions and fire every weapon on the ship as it

comes into alignment with the *Gagarin*. Instead of a single broadside, we'll hit him with everything we've got. Tactical, plot the rotation to have our shields angled throughout the roll."

Cross waited as the bridge crew–his bridge crew–worked to fulfill the tasks he had set for them. Time acted oddly in moments like these, simultaneously compressing and stretching. Eons passed during the short seconds as he watched them calculate navigation, offense, and defense. One by one, stations reported ready. He took a deep breath, smiled at his people, and bared his teeth at his distant enemy. "Execute."

The *Gagarin* was already in motion as the *Washington's* engines pushed her ahead, and the distance between the ships evaporated. The enemy commander showed he was also capable of clever tactics, and launched torpedoes from all his ports at a distance. Their flight patterns revealed they would curve in and strike the *Washington* from multiple angles at once.

"Countermeasures," Cross commanded.

"Countermeasures, aye" the tactical officer said, and a flurry of small projectiles ejected from defensive emplacements spotting the hull, quickly lighting up with the blooms of engaging thrusters. These miniature rockets were all engine behind an explosive nose, and they moved at twice the velocity of the incoming barrage. Impact crushed the triggers within the warheads, setting off shaped charges that detonated their targets, eliminating the majority of them. The ones that remained could not get through the *Washington's* shields.

"Countermeasures successful," Martin reported.

Upon reaching broadside position, the *Gagarin* unloaded a torrent of energy that spread across the strengthened shields and dissipated, failing to find a breach to exploit. The *Washington's* first broadside did the same. Then she rolled and brought her second broadside to bear on the aft portion of the *Gagarin's* starboard defenses. His shields were still recovering, and the additional onslaught penetrated, scouring gun emplacements from the hull and

sending flames into the missile tubes. A chain of explosions began within the magazines for the starboard launchers, and sections of the ship blew out into space.

The *Gagarin's* shields flickered, and Cross seized the opportunity to clear the board. "Weapons, target his engines. Fire all aft torpedoes, then add the plasma cannon right as they hit."

Cross watched as the missiles leapt from their tubes, the main display now segmented by one of his crew into forward and aft views. Time stretched again, and it seemed a lifetime until the projectiles met and battered the unstable shields of the enemy ship. The cannon pierced the compromised defenses, its beam of coherent energy drilling deeply into the engine housing. An explosion rocked the *Gagarin* as it lost half of its power. Cheers erupted around him. Cross smothered his wide grin and got back to work.

"Helm, put us at a safe distance. Comm, message to the *Gagarin*: Take your remaining engine off-line and stand down. Once you have stabilized your ship, we are ready to assist. We will tow you to the nearest UAL base, where your ship will be impounded and your crew released."

Additional explosions shook the *Gagarin*. They shrank in both size and frequency as the damage control teams on the Alliance ship fought them. Low-volume conversations began on the bridge, replaying moments of the battle. The tension that had sustained all of them through the terrifying experience of combat bled off, leaving everyone a little unsteady. Among them, only the helmsman noticed the numbers in the corner click down to zero.

The communication officer spoke up. "Lieutenant Commander Cross, the *Gagarin* requests a visual."

"Put him on, Casco." Cross adjusted his tunic and ran a hand through his hair in the moments before the pickup activated. The bridge of the other ship was a flurry of activity behind the captain's chair. The commander nodded in his direction.

"Well fought, *Washington*. The rolling broadside was a useful

tactic, one we will better defend against in the future, and one we will use against other less innovative Union ships." Cross cringed at his maneuver being used against his own side, but that back-and-forth exchange of technology, strategy, and tactics was a hallmark of the war between the divided children of Earth. "We require nothing from you at this time. Help has already arrived."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Family, friends, and coworkers: thank you for bearing with me during this process. You are appreciated.

Most memorable comment, from Todd: "It ended and I still wanted more, so that was irritating." It's good to know that I can always count on my friends for support.

Editing: Tracey and Charlotte, you do great work.

Cover: Deranged Doctor Designs, who have been fantastic at dealing with a clueless new author.

Parting comment:

Dylan: "Is your book like Harry Potter?"

Me: "No."

Dylan: "I probably won't read it then."

Thanks, kid.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TR Cameron is an emerging author of Science Fiction Adventure. By day, he teaches things to people. By night, he writes and edits and tries to be a decent partner and parent.

Once upon a time, he played World of Warcraft far too much, and remembers the days when Molten Core was everything. When he finds time to play now, story-heavy games are always at the top of his list.

His personal favorite authors range from Douglas Adams to David Weber, Anne Bishop to Jacqueline Carey to CJ Cherryh, Matthew Woodring Stover to Stephen R. Donaldson.

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The Suicide Run (Stories from the Chaos Shift Cycle 1)

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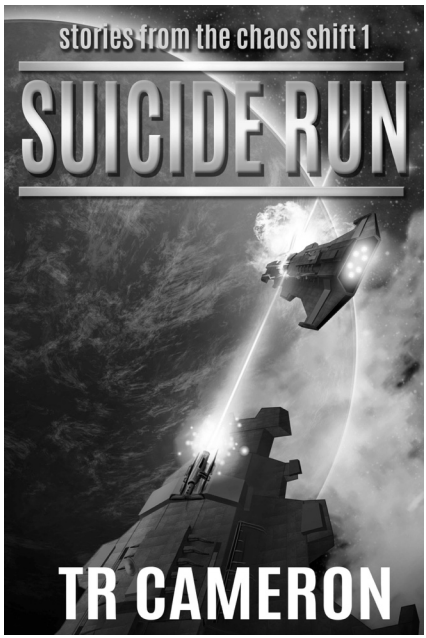

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