

S E I K A I T R I L O G Y

CREST OF THE STARS

RETURN TO A STRANGE WORLD

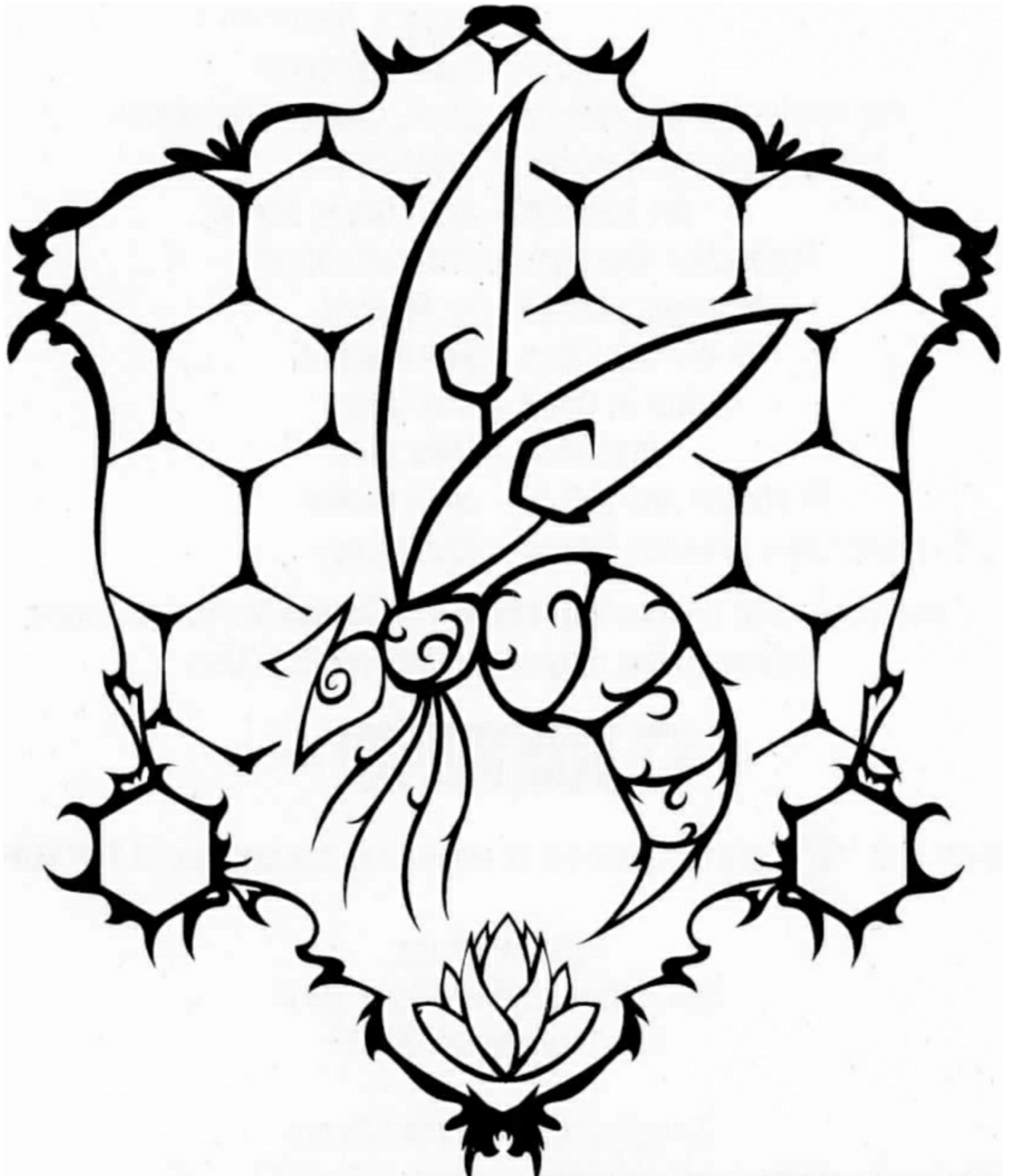


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HIROYUKI MORIOKA

SEIKAI: CREST OF THE STARS

Return to a Strange World



Characters:

Jinto

Son of the President of Planet Martine

Lafiel

Pilot trainee in the Abh Empire Star Force; granddaughter of the Empress

Entoryua

Inspector at Luna Vega City Police Criminal Investigation Department

Kite

Captain in the United Mankind Peace Preservation Force's Military Police

Marca

Comrade in the Anti-Empire Clasbul Front

Minh

Comrade in the Anti-Empire Clasbul Front

Daswani

Comrade in the Anti-Empire Clasbul Front

Undertaker

Comrade in the Anti-Empire Clasbul Front

Admiral Trife Abh Empire Dispatched Fleet Commander

Vice-Admiral Spoor Abh Empire Reconnaissance Half Fleet Commander

O stars —

Please grant the wish of thy short-lived kin:

To perceive the future rained down by thee.

— From a verse in the Humankind Empire of Abh national anthem

1 Investigation (Nateimukoth)

As always, Inspector Entoryua Rei of the Luna Vega City Police Department was in a foul mood.

“Just three hotels left for us to investigate. Why do I get the feeling we’re not going to find the suspects in any of them?”

“So, what’s the next step?” asked Kite, a captain in the occupation’s Military Police.

Exasperated, Entoryua shrugged. “Search every house, I guess.”

From his tone, Entoryua made it perfectly clear he was not fond of the idea. In fact, he felt he shouldn’t even be involved with this investigation. Luna Vega City already had almost every member of its criminal investigations department on this case — a measly automobile theft.

True, stealing a floating car (Uusia) was a felony. But that hardly warranted such a rigorous search.

Entoryua divided his men into fifteen teams. Four kept an eye on the airport, two rested, and the remaining nine conducted searches of every room in every hotel in the city of Guzornyu. They didn’t wait for any warrants — the occupation army took care of it. (No matter how many times Kite suggested it was a “liberation army/” Entoryua couldn’t bring himself to think of it that way).

Reviewing a list of lodgings in the area, Entoryua skimmed over a list of names of guests who lacked proper identification. There were about twenty people on this list.

Most citizens of Clasbul carried wallets at all times, which they also used as their identifications. Most of the time, fake names in a hotel register were no big deal, usually just a cover for celebrities trying to stay off the radar or people having extramarital affairs. In most cases, Entoryua’s men let the impostors go.

They took one petty crook into custody, but his crimes (pickpocketings) were completely unrelated to those of the Abh car thieves. So far, that single

misdemeanor arrest was the only fruit of this massive labor.

“Inspector, this is the Condorin squad,” crackled a voice into the communication device stuck in Entoryua’s ear. “We’ve finished our search and await your instructions.” The inspector weighed the options. “Just take a break for a minute,” Entoryua decided. “Hang out with the reserves and stand by until further notice.”

“Roger.”

“Isn’t there some way to narrow the search? Can we create a profile for the kind of person who would harbor an Abh?” Kite inquired impatiently.

“We already know exactly what kind of person would help the Abh, but it won’t do us any good, because they’re all rotting in your ‘democracy schools’ “

“Don’t start that again,” pleaded Kite forlornly. “Just remember, we’re doing our best.” “Inspector,” Police Chief Ramashdi interrupted through Entoryua’s communications device, “we’ve got some more men stuck at one of the occupation army’s inspections.”

“Tell me you’re kidding,” grumbled Entoryua.

Impeding the investigation on numerous occasions, the occupation army could not seem to get it through their heads why so many of Luna Vega City’s police were traveling into Guzornyu City.

Entoryua nudged Kite. “I think this is your department, Captain.”

Nodding, Kite said, “Have him put my army’s commander on the phone.”

As the language of the foreign, incomprehensible conversation wafted through Entoryua’s ears, his mind drifted to more important matters, such as how nice it would be to take a nap.

“Done.”

“What?” asked Entoryua, returning to reality.

“Police Chief Ramashdi is cleared.”

“At least until the next time.”

Kite shrugged disapprovingly.

“There’s got to be some way to make this simpler. The right hand ought to know what the left hand is doing!” griped Entoryua.

Kite shrank a little. “Yes, we could stand to be more organized.”

Wow, marveled Entoryua, although he seems like a real firecracker, he can be pretty meek sometimes.

Kite’s mobile terminal alerted him to an incoming message.

He stole a peek at the display terminal on his hip. After running his eyes over the screen, Kite paled and his whole body sagged.

“The rest of the Military Police just moved out — they’re going to arrest the Abh.”

“Does that mean we’re off the hook?” Entoryua asked like a puppy catching its first whiff of a treat.

“Not so fast. The Military Police are still counting on our investigation — they just want to make the actual arrest. So, when we discover where the Abh’s hiding, we’re to report to HQ, and they’ll move in to make the collar.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. The Army’s Military Police will make the arrest.”

“We’re not six-year-olds playing cops and robbers here!” raged Entoryua. “Can’t you say something to your superior officer?”

“I wish it were that simple,” Kite explained. “Initially, headquarters thought the Abh girl was someone who escaped from the orbital mansion, so they weren’t too concerned with her. But now, they think there’s a high probability she came from a small ship that crash-landed here.”

“I don’t see why that matters,” declared Entoryua bluntly.

“It means there’s a chance that this girl was a crew member aboard an enemy vessel that our army battled in Plane Space. And if so, there’s a good chance she might have vital intelligence.”

“What kind of vital intelligence?”

Kite searched for the answer. “No idea. But even if I did know, I wouldn’t be

allowed to tell you.”

“Probably.” He didn’t mind too much. If it wasn’t a military secret, it probably had to do with the interstellar nations’ governments and didn’t really concern him.

“But you see why,” Kite said, “the Abh girl is so important to us.”

“Maybe you guys just don’t like the idea of a local police force getting all the credit.” Though it was not a new phenomenon for Entoryua to do all the work and receive none of the accolades, it still irked him to no end.

“It’s not you,” Kite blurted. “They don’t want *me* to succeed.”

“What? But you’re their main man! I mean, you’re so young and already a captain!”

A smile formed on Kite’s handsome face. “How old do you think I am, Inspector?”

“Um ...” Entoryua eyeballed Kite for minute. “Maybe twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Standard years.”

The smile grew. “In standard years, I’ll be forty-nine in six weeks.”

“No way! That’s older than me! But you look... oh! Genetic modification?”

Kite nodded. “The Abh don’t have a patent on the technology you know.”

“But, I thought your propaganda broadcasts said genetic modification was the devil’s work.”

“Yes. The United Mankind considers human genetic modification is a serious crime.” Kite sighed. “That’s the simple version, at least.”

“What’s the long version?”

“Have you heard of a nation called the Silesia Republic?”

“No, sorry.”

Crossing his arms, Kite gazed out the window.

He stared off into space until Entoryua couldn’t take it anymore. “Tell me about the Silesia Republic already!”

“Oh, right. The Silesia Republic.” Kite spoke haltingly. “It’s the broken nation that caused the Battle of Silesia about a hundred and twenty years ago. That’s when it became a part of the United Mankind. Prior to that, it was a military dictatorship with a thousand families running the whole show. Those families genetically modified their children — not as significantly as the Abh, who change hair color and add that freakish extra organ. We just got the anti-aging DNA.”

“But you’re too young to be one of the children,” pointed out the Inspector.

“Right. My grandparents received the altered genes and passed it on from there.”

“How could the United Mankind hold that against you? It was three generations ago!”

“The passage of time doesn’t change anything; my census form clearly classifies me as Silesian longevity race.”

“Harsh.”

“Tell me about it! I can’t even get married, because a man with the longevity gene and a woman without invariably have children with congenital cancer.”

“Couldn’t you genetically adjust the children?”

“It’s not allowed — not even in the case of gene abnormalities. In fact, genetic inspection at the fertilized egg state is illegal.”

“Wow.” Entoryua couldn’t believe it.

“Thus,” groused Kite, “I am still a bachelor, and probably will be forever. The gene will most likely die out with my generation.”

“Whoa.” Entoryua found it all rather disturbing. “But that still doesn’t explain why you can’t advance in your career.”

“Just forget it. It’s none of your business.”

“It is my business, if you guys are going to rule this planet!”

“We’re not here to rule you. We’re building a citizens’ society with you. We’re friends now.”

“Friends,” Entoryua pushed, “don’t keep secrets.” “Touche.” Kite sighed, exasperated. “It is widely believed that the Silesian longevity race cannot understand the true nature of democracy. I suppose they just don’t trust me.”

Poor guy, Entoryua couldn’t help feeling sorry for any victim of racial discrimination, even if it happened to be Kite.

Entoryua said he would quit the police force if he ever felt that underappreciated. Kite responded that he needed no one’s approval more than his own.

The inspector grunted, and tried to stop himself from asking the question that followed. “And you find that fulfilling?”

“Of course,” answered Kite instantly, as if from rote.

“Inspector, this is Police Chief Kyua,” said a voice in Entoryua’s earpiece.

“Go ahead, Kyua.”

“We’ve got a lead on two suspicious persons in the area of Rimzeil Mansion.”

“Why are you telling me? Enter it in the Datykirl!”

“The problem, Inspector, is that they’ve already left.”

“They escaped?” Entoryua exclaimed with no effort to mask his displeasure.

“No,” countered Kyua, “they were gone when we got here.”

“What makes them so suspicious?”

“It was a man and a woman using fake names.”

“Hmm.” Entoryua wasn’t sold yet. True, they were looking for a man and a woman, but they really didn’t have a lot to go on. A lot of men and women used fake names while making the kinds of trips they didn’t want their families to know about. “What names did they give?”

“Lena and Jinto Sai.”

“Unusual. What did they look like?”

“An employee tells us they looked extremely young, and ‘acted really weird’.”

“Weirdoes, huh?”

“Apparently, they were mostly holed up in their room the whole time. The employee says she never saw the female leave the room.”

“Let me get this straight. Two young people, a man and a woman, check into a hotel with fake names then spend an awful lot of time in the room. You’re right — I’ve never heard of anything like that in my life,” teased Entoryua.

“There’s more. The employee said the woman wore a man’s hat, which she never took off.”

The Inspector looked at Kite, who listened intently. The three goons who reported the stolen car said the woman wore a man’s hat.

“Tell me they got a look at her face.”

“Yeah — thin face, black eyes, fairly tan. Pretty good-looking, they say.”

“A world-class beauty?”

“And apparently a terrible tipper.”

“You don’t say.” Now, the police chief had Entoryua’s interest. That was strange behavior — a gratuity went a long way in getting hotel staff to help keep a low profile.

“Send me an image recording of this couple,” directed Entoryua.

Kyua informed him that there weren’t any image recordings — the director of the hotel had deleted them as soon as the guests left. Entoryua reminded Kyua that it was illegal to keep the image recordings for less than a year after a guest’s departure. Fully aware of the law, Kyua did not understand why Entoryua was telling him this when it was the hotel director who had made the infraction.

“The director is suspect,” Kite announced. “Was he ever previously accused of sheltering an Abh?”

Entoryua shrugged. “It’s possible. Kyua, give me the name and citizen number of the Inn’s director.”

“You got it.”

And just like that, Kyua transmitted the data to the command car’s computer

crystal. Accessing the police database, Entoryua brought up all the information he could find on the hotel director.

“Strange.” Entoryua stared at the screen. “This man is a member of the Independence Party.”

“What’s that?” inquired Kite.

“It’s a political party that, in accordance with its name, advocates the rejection of the Fapyut and secession from the Frybar.”

“It’s a secret society?”

“No, it’s a legitimate political party. They’ve got a headquarters and parliamentary seats and all that.”

“That kind of political party exists?”

“Yeah. I thought you guys would know about them — they’re right up your alley.”

“You’re telling me anti-Empire political parties are... legal?”

“Yes. Everyone is represented. It’s not a crime to oppose Frybar rule. They’ll never rise to be Seif Sos, though, because the Fapyut would never allow it.”

“Of course. It’s all a ruse!” scoffed Kite. “They’re still just operating within the framework of the Frybar. It’s pseudo-resistance.”

“You’re not the only one who thinks so; the Independence Party has never won a major election. Consequently, its constituents always get frustrated and split off. There must be forty different offshoot factions. Hmm... looks like the director of the hotel is allied with the Anti-Empire Clasbul Front.” Entoryua retrieved some data on the group. “Crap. We don’t have a lot of info on these guys. It says they planned to occupy the Arnej about twenty years ago, but then they all got arrested and have kept out of trouble ever since.”

“What exactly do these factions do?”

“Not a hell of a lot.” *Especiallly compared to what you guys are doing*, Entoryua added mentally. “Sometimes, they’ll set the Loebeje’s plantation on fire, blow up the Labule’s Banzorl Ludorlt, stuff like that. But when they break the law,” Entoryua smiled proudly, “we keep them in check. We try to keep an

eye on them and their supporters to prevent crimes. As far as I know, though, the Labule's never made any attempt to regulate the Independence Party or its offshoots."

"That doesn't make sense. They must have done something. Maybe the Abh don't know about them."

"Well, anything's possible. But the Independence Party isn't an underground resistance — they're in plain sight."

As Kite stuttered and searched for words, Kyua interrupted. "Inspector, what do we do?"

"Oops, I almost forgot. Um, detain that director."

"Take him to the station?"

"No, no. We can't arrest him just for violating the Travel Inn Law. Just ask him if he'll wait around and cooperate with us. If he leaves, though, have someone keep tabs on him. He hasn't made any calls, has he?"

"Not since we got here."

"Good. Keep it that way. And tell him that the occupation army will cover any damages this causes his inn."

"Any truth to that?" Kyua chuckled.

"Hey — if he never gets paid, at least we're not the bad guys. We're on our way."

"Ten-four."

"Over and out."

Leaning over the front seat, Entoryua addressed the driver of the command car. "Rimzeil Mansion, please."

The idle engine roared to life as the car began to move.

Looking troubled as he gazed out at the passing scenery, Entoryua eventually spoke. "Although your superiors gave you the order to not arrest them, they're not in charge of our local police department. So until the end, we're going to do everything we can to nab these car thieves."

“Good.” Kite smiled. “Do you really think the hotel director could be hiding the Abh?”

“Anything’s possible.”

“It doesn’t add up, though, if he’s a member of the Independence Party.”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“You don’t think the political party is just a front, do you?”

“A front for what?”

“An underground group that helps Frybar citizens escape in times like this,” Kite suggested with building enthusiasm. “They’re diabolical enough to implant a group like that, if they had the foresight to anticipate our liberation.”

“I didn’t realize you were a conspiracy theorist,” Entoryua said indifferently.

“Well, what other explanation could there possibly be for a member of the Independence Party hiding an Abh?”

“The Abh are really unobtrusive. Members of the radical organizations are always complaining that they’re not oppressed enough.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“I agree. I don’t understand why they would ever want to pick a fight with the Frybar, which doesn’t care enough about this planet to get involved in the first place.”

“If the Frybar doesn’t care about planets, why does it conquer them?”

“Because they want to keep us out of their domain-space.”

“There must be more to it,” Kite said.

“What else could it possibly be?” implored Entoryua playfully.

Looking at the mobile terminal on his hip, Kite announced that they would have to return to the discussion later. He attached an accessory that was able to read Imperial-made memory sheets (Jeish).

“May I have the Jeish with the investigation data, please?” he requested.

“Here you go.”

“I’m adding the possibility that the Independence Party is a front.”

“There’s really no possibility of that,” pointed out the inspector.

“That works out better for us,” Kite said.

“How’s that?”

“The Military Police won’t understand your local matters. They’ll investigate the most conspicuous target. If I send this information, they’ll be too busy checking out the Independence Party to get in the way of us arresting the Abh.”

2 Flight (Deiheroth)

“This is Undertaker’s place?”

Marca nodded. “I know it’s filthy, but please come in.”

“I prefer the mess.” Undertaker pouted.

About ten blocks away from Rimzeil Mansion, Undertaker’s apartment was in one of the buildings that outwardly resembled a tree.

Jinto and Lafiel followed Marca and Undertaker up into the house, with Minh, Bill, and Daswani trailing behind them.

“You know,” Bill pointed out, “it would be really easy for us to pounce right now.”

“Oh, you’re right,” acknowledged Jinto — he hadn’t considered that.

“You’ve got to think about these things,” Bill pressed, “while you’re playing bodyguard.”

Jinto shrugged; he knew he wasn’t anybody’s bodyguard — if anything, Lafiel was protecting him. He didn’t feel like explaining that to Bill, however.

Meanwhile, Lafiel entered Undertaker’s apartment like she owned the place. She plopped in the most comfortable-looking chair.

“Oh no you don’t! That’s *my* chair,” Undertaker whined.

Glaring at Undertaker, Lafiel kept quiet. “Listen up, Abh. You’re the hostage, here! You’re lucky you’re not tied up on the floor right now.”

Lafiel watched the man with the interested curiosity of a scientist observing an exotic animal.

“I know what you’re thinking,” ranted Undertaker. “You’re here by your own free will, you have guns, blah blah blah! You’re still a hostage, and that’s how I’ll treat you. Your gun and your marksmanship — your amazing, amazing

marksmanship skills — don't frighten us." He thought about it. "You can sit there ... for now."

Undertaker sulked his way over to a couch and sat down. Jinto surveyed the room.

Although Marca called it "squalid" on multiple occasions, that was far from true. It looked pretty big, possibly because there wasn't much furniture (no tables — just a few chairs and a couch). There was a painting on the wall, an abstract design that resembled a flaming eruption.

"Undertaker, did you do this?" Jinto asked about the painting.

"Pretty good, huh?" Undertaker smiled for a split second, then soured again. "What is wrong with you two? Acting like you're here for a birthday party or something. You're hostages. *Hostages!*"

"Please sit down, Jinto. I know it's fun to get Undertaker riled up, but he's starting to get on my nerves," said Marca.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to," explained Jinto. "I really like the artwork, that's all."

"Hostages should be too worried about their own lives to think about paintings!" Undertaker hollered.

Jinto took a seat next to Lafiel.

"So," Jinto addressed Marca, "what do we do now?"

"In the morning, we'll smuggle you out of the city in the back of a freight truck."

"I'm a truck driver," Bill added. "I take meat from the cultivation plant over to a town called Di Segon every day, so I know about all the inspections. The occupation army guys all know me by now, so it won't be a problem."

"You transport meat? Is the car... refrigerated?" asked Jinto.

"Well, yes. But I'm not going to take any meat tomorrow, so I'll turn it off."

"Good. I'm not a huge fan of being packed in ice for long periods of time."

The more he thought about it, the more Jinto decided escaping the city in a

semi-truck seemed like a great idea. Lafiel would never make it through a normal inspection; even though she'd dyed her hair, she did have an extra sensory organ (called a Frosh) in the middle of her forehead.

But Jinto also had second thoughts. "We can't agree to the plan. I'm sorry, but we just can't trust you."

"Why not?" asked Marca.

"You guys tried to kidnap us. We're 'hostages' remember?"

"He finally gets it!" Undertaker barked. His victory was short-lived however, as Marca silenced him with an icy look.

"We'd never sell you out to the occupation army," continued Marca indignantly.

"I can't think of any reason why you *wouldn't*," Jinto countered.

"Those guys are even worse than the Abh," noted Bill. "At least the Abh leave us alone."

"They shaved my head!" cried Minh. "Just because I dyed it blue! They said I was 'emulating the Abh' when really, I had to do it to complete this trifecta of hair color amazingness!" He ran his fingers along his moustache, which was half yellow and half red.

"And oddly enough, my business is drying up, despite the large number of casualties in this conflict," lamented Undertaker.

"All together," Marca summarized, "we have no reason to like the occupation army. Besides, the Abh won't lose the war in space. It would be fruitless to cooperate with the occupiers."

"So in spite of everything, you're counting on the Frybar?"

"Just its military might," corrected Marca.

"The more you explain yourselves, the more confused I get." Jinto scratched his head. "If the Frybar is really that powerful, do you honestly think you'll be able to secede?"

"We have to try," said Minh. "Right now, the Empire pretty much ignores

Nahen, but who's to say how long that'll be the case? Suppose they suddenly decide to infringe on us — how would we be able to resist? They could just shower us with antimatter bombs all day and watch us burn!"

Weird, thought Jinto. *If they don't want the Abh to start dropping bombs, the worst thing they could do is launch a resistance!* "Um, don't take this the wrong way or anything, but you're like children who run away from home because you're afraid of your parents. But as soon as your parents find you, the punishment's going to be worse than anything you ever imagined."

"If you don't like our plan, you'll have to stay here until we can think of something else," said Marca. "It's going to be very difficult to leave the city due to all the inspections."

"You've got to be kidding!" Undertaker leapt from his seat. "They're not seriously going to stay in my house, are they?"

"What's the problem? You've got a spare room."

"But they're mean to me! Especially that one," he added, indicating Lafiel.

"We don't have a choice," Marca said, switching to the Clasbul language. "You're the only one of us who lives alone. If I take them with me, what am I going to tell my husband and daughter?"

"Tell them it's your long-lost nephew or something," proposed Undertaker.

"I can't lie to my husband."

"Baloney! You still haven't told him you're a radical!"

"Undertaker's a scaredy-cat," Minh teased. "Scared of what the occupation army will do to him if he gets caught."

"Shut up — am not!" Undertaker retorted.

"Would you guys be riding with us in the storage area of the truck?" Jinto intervened, out of the blue.

Blinking once or twice, Bill processed the non sequitur and replied, "Of course. I can't get five people in the cab; it's a two-seater."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Jinto grinned. "That'll be fine, then. As long as

we can keep an eye on you guys...”

“You’re still not quite grasping the ‘hostage’ concept,” grumbled Undertaker.

“When do we leave?” Lafiel spoke for the first time since entering the room.

After checking her watch, Marca said they would depart in just over three hours.

“Good. That’s plenty of time for a nap.” And for the first time since the “kidnapping” had occurred, Lafiel smiled.

3 Battle at Safignoff Gate (Laishakal Wek Sordal Suiagnaum)

“What am I looking at, here?” demanded Admiral Trife, pointing at a cluster of blinking lights on his map of Plane Space (Ja Fad).

“There’s a ninety-nine point nine seven percent chance that’s an enemy fleet,” answered Kilo-Commander (Shewas) Kahyuul.

“I’m not an Onyu!” scolded Trife. “Looks like we’re spread out enough to give them a good idea of our troop strength.”

“More than adequate, sir,” agreed the Chief of Staff (Was Kasaler). “Then they should know they have absolutely zero chance of winning.”

“Maybe that’s giving their commander too much credit?” suggested Kahyuul.

“He can’t be that big an imbecile... Why would they loiter there, between our Byr and Sord Sufagnaum?” It made Trife a bit uneasy. “Hmm. You said there’s a ninety-nine point nine seven percent chance it’s the enemy, right?”

“Yes.”

“So that means there’s a point zero three percent chance it’s not the enemy.”

“There could be counterintelligence, a simultaneous breakdown of all our sensor equipment, or some unknown natural phenomenon. So, it *could*.”

“Do you really think any of that is possible?” “The probabilities are extremely small.” “Forget I asked.” The Commander-in-Chief (Glaharerl) firmly gripped his chin and paced around the bridge’s command seat (Gahorl Graw).

“I take it Lonyu wants to battle,” Kahyuul guessed. “Darn straight,” acknowledged Trife, “but it’s not very exciting when victory is assured. What’s your guess as to why they’re stopped there, Kahyuul?”

“I can think of three possible explanations,” Kahyuul said instantly. “One, the

enemy might think they could win.” “Preposterous!”

“For one thing, their individual warships might have abilities far greater than we think.”

“You’re suggesting they’ve got technology we don’t?” Trife didn’t like to think of the Empire lagging behind in anything.

Shrugging, Kahyuul smirked. “Hard to say. Remember — our information comes from Spaude Rirrag.”

Trife struck his palm with his fist. “Of course. I’d forgotten.

Communications Staff Officer (Kasalia Drokia) Nasotoryua said nothing, his expression resigned.

“In all seriousness, Spaude Rirrag is doing a good job,” clarified Kahyuul. “The chances are close to zero that we underestimated the enemy that significantly. Therefore, if they think they can defeat us, they are either ignorant, arrogant, or crazy.”

“Yes.” Trife scratched his chin. “It’s a shame — there’s no glory in fighting a madman.”

“Back to my reasons for their being there. Number two: it could be a trap of some kind.”

“What kind of trap?”

“They could have a large fleet lurking on the Dath side of a nearby Sord. They just wait there, like bait, until they lead us into the jaws of a waiting shark.”

“What?” Trife half shouted. “Do they think I’m an Onyu? There is not a single Lodairl with a Putorahedesorf who would charge that foolishly into a Sord.”

“In their defense, sir, the enemy wouldn’t have any way of knowing that you are the Glaharerl of this Byr. They can only act on their general impressions of the Rue Labule. They might just be acting on old stereotypes.”

“Oh yes, the arrogant, ruthless, and reckless Abh,” recalled Trife. “Well, they might have gotten two out of three, but we’re certainly not reckless.”

“Exactly. If they did any research, they wouldn’t plan a campaign like that.”

“If this turns out to be a trap, we’ll have to take the enemy commander alive, and give him a history lesson.”

“Regardless, we won’t fall into a trap like that, so there’s no real danger there. Now, the third, most likely reason the enemy — “

“Why would you save the most likely for last? You already bored us to death before we’ve heard the real explanation!”

“Sorry,” Kahyuul apologized, unfazed. “The main fleet there is United Mankind. Their commanders are notoriously obdurate. It is highly probable the enemy commander received orders to protect Loebehynu Sufagnaum to the death. Now, if we assume this is the case, it would be most reasonable for us...”

“That’s the most likely scenario?” interrupted Trife.

“Yes.”

With a *harrumph*, Trife walked off. The more he mulled it over, the more he was sure of what they had to do. The enemy was not up to something; they were merely responding to an incoming threat with all the troops at their disposal, the same way Trife traveled with all the troops at his disposal. The only difference between the two was that Trife had permission to walk away from this battle, if he chose.

It still didn’t make sense that the enemy had used such a small fleet for the full-scale invasion of a Frybar territory. He wondered if the whole occupation of planet Clasbul could be a diversion from a larger attack. Regardless, that was not Trife’s concern; the headquarters (Ryuazornyu) at the Imperial Capital (Arosh) would deal with that situation if it arose.

“Yes, that’s it,” Trife raised one of his fists in the air. “I’m sure of it. My mind is free from the web of doubt! Victory is certain. Thank you, Shewas Kahyuul!”

“I’m honored,” Kahyuul said in the same emotionless way he said everything.

Staring at the Ja Fad, the Glaharerl clucked. “It’s sort of a shame, don’t you think?”

“Do not feel sorry for them,” replied the Chief of Staff.

“You’re right. We warned them. No holding back now.” Waving his command

rod (Greu) excitedly in the air, he announced, “We’ll do the turning pincers!”

“We’re too close to the enemy now,” argued Kahyuul. “They can see every move we make. If we split up to execute a turning pincers movement, we’ll be subjected to individual attacks and increase their odds of winning. There will be a lot of unnecessary casualties, even if we win.”

“What do you think, Shuriil?” the Glaharerl asked his Operations Staff Officer (Kasalia Yokusurot).

“Sadly,” said Bomowas Shuriil, unable to meet Trife’s eyes, “I agree with the Was Kasaler.”

“I see.” It was definitely a disappointment to Trife, but he had to respect the opinions of his Staff Officers. Their whole jobs consisted of calculating the odds of every possible battle situation. If they said that a turning pincers movement would cause needless loss, then indeed it would.

“I suppose we’ll attack head-on, then?” The commander slumped.

“That is the most appropriate strategy.”

“Okay, display the battle formation plan.”

The Ja Fad disappeared, and a hypothetical battle formation quickly took its place.

Normal Labule assault half fleets (Jadbyr Ashal) consisted of three assault squadrons (Sov Ashal), one escort squadron (Sov Methgeil), one strike squadron (Sov Vortout), one support squadron (Sov Dikporlei), three patrol ships (Resii), and a handful of communications ships (Longia).

On the display screen, the four Jadbyr under Trife’s command fanned out.

The front line of each half fleet was its escort squadron, the main purpose of which was to do its best impression of a shield and stave off enemy mines (Hoksath).

Directly behind the Sov Methgeil were the strike squadrons, which comprised battleships (Alek). These ships carried and fired mines. The Jadbyr Vortout *Bask Gamryuuf* stretched across the three assault squadrons, augmenting their combative abilities.

There was an assault squadron trailing each HQ Squadron (Sov Gurarl), and the infamous recon half fleet (Jadbyr Usem) Futune spread itself into three groups laid in between the Sov Gurarl.

Each half fleet (Jadbyr) had a support squadron, which combined forces in the very rear of the battle formation to make up the Jadbyr Dikporleil Ashumatoshu.

All in all, it was a very orthodox, no-nonsense battle formation.

“Looks good,” praised Trife. “Have everyone fall into this formation at once.”

Kahyuul saluted.

Shortly, several communications ships disembarked from the flagship, relaying the orders to each Jadbyr’s headquarters (Glagaf).

This set off a reactionary flurry of activity among the enemy Flasath, most likely their communication ships as well.

“The enemy Flasath are separating!” shouted the Reconnaissance Staff Officer (Kasalia Ragurot).

Countless smaller time-space bubbles emerged from the enemy ships, flying straight toward Trife’s fleet.

“Ninety-nine point nine nine six percent...” reminded Kahyuul.

“You can quit crunching numbers now!” roared Trife.

“Those are Hoksath,” Kahyuul noted, ignoring Trife’s outburst.

After a moment of grinding his teeth, the Glahareri smiled. “It’s started.”

And just like that, the curtain came up on the first real battle of an epic war, the Battle of Safugnoff Gate (Raishakal Sordal Sufagnaum).

“Initiate Hoksatjocs Mejiyot!” ordered Trife.

He knew that the enemy was out of range (the enemy was in an area of high density, which was the “high ground” of Dath), but he thought they might at least be able to blow up most of the enemy Hoksath. As soon as the flagship let loose a volley of mines, all the battleships followed its lead.

The two sets of mines charged toward each other.

“Flash group contact. Direction three-oh-five. Distance sixty-five. Contact range widening,” the Kasalia Ragurot commented.

When the clusters met, the Labule Hoksath attempted time-space fusion (Gor Putarloth) with the enemy mines. Rather than suffer the indignity of fusing with Labule mines, the enemy mines exploded.

Some of the enemy Hoksath were coerced into reluctant Gor Putarloth. When the time-space bubbles fused, the mines exploded, throwing out large quantities of time-space particles (Supflasath). Plane Space (Fath) rippled like the surface of a pond, as large waves of Supflasath spread outward in rings, shaking nearby Flasath.

The enemy mines that broke through the initial resistance closed in on Trife’s fleet. The Leit squadron came forward to intercept them, forming one Flasath with a half dozen (Syuuf) ships armed with innumerable small-bore mobile cannons.

The escort squadron marched boldly forward and fused with the enemy Hoksath. The mines did not resist, as their initial mission was to make Gor Putarloth with ships in order to blow them to smithereens.

However, the mines that achieved time-space fusion received overly warm laser beam (Klanraj) and anti-proton beam welcomes.

While the escort squadron destroyed the mines, the fleet marched through Dath, closer and closer to the enemy.

“Distance from the enemy, one forty-two. Their front line is within firing range,” announced the Kasalia Ragurot.

“Excellent. Commence firing offensive Hoksath.” The defensive mines ceased, and a new gaggle of Hoksath charged full-speed at the enemy. While this was primarily a good thing, it also meant an increase in the number of enemy Hoksath that made it through to the escort squadron.

Inevitably, there came reports of escort vessel destruction.

Doggedly, enemy mines approached the battleships. “Distance from the enemy ships: one hundred.” “Good,” assessed Trife. “Let’s set Futune loose on them.”

Vice Admiral (Roifrode) Spoor Aron-Sekpat Archduchess Letopanyu (Niif Letopan) Peneij was Commander (Lesheik) of the reconnaissance half fleet, Futune.

“Spoor” was a great family name, denoting status barely beneath that of the Imperial family (Fasanzoerl). There were over five hundred members of the Spoor family holding court ranks (Sune).

The Archduchess Letopanyu (Niifyuunyu Letopan) had three inhabited planets in her territory, making hers the wealthiest domain in the Empire.

In other words, her blood was as blue as her hair.

If I were her, thought the Futune’s Aim Kasalia, Hecto-Commander (Bomowas) Cufadiss, I’d retire and live the life of a great noble.

True, Sif do have an obligation to join the Star Force, but she’s been here longer than necessary.

Whenever she talked about missions or responsibilities, Cufadiss couldn’t help thinking that what she actually meant was *hobby*.

Cufadiss was new to Futune’s Glagaf; he came in just one month earlier, when his predecessor took unexpected maternity leave. Now, after a month aboard the ship, he still wasn’t totally acclimated.

This is the weirdest thing. Cufadiss still couldn’t get over the Roifrode’s command seat (Lesheikibash), a canopied affair with ornately engraved marble pillars. The canopy looked hand-embroidered, too. It must have cost Spoor at least three years’ salary.

On the back of the command seat, there was the Imperial National Badge (Rue Nigla), the Gaftonosh, the half fleet banner (Guraw Jadbyr) Futune, and the Spoor family crest, Golden Crow (Gatharss). Of course, they were arranged in a triangle, with the Gaftonosh at the top. However, the Golden Crow was much larger than the other two.

It’s just so out of place, he decided about the command seat.

The appointed pilot (Sedraleia) sprawled lazily on the elegant couch, in a

manner quite contrary to the crispness of her uniform (Serlin). Her blazing blue hair, elegantly tied up, looked more appropriate for a dinner party than for being squished under a double-winged tiara (Alpha Matbrar).

I know an Imperial-appointed pilot gets special privileges, but this is ridiculous.

Shortly after his appointment, Cufadiss asked her if she didn't mind acting "a little more like a commander." She pretended to consider this for a moment, before refusing.

What's next, he thought, a beefcake waiter feeding her grapes and Rinmo all day? I wonder if that's why I'm here. He shuddered.

"Lonyu," he said. During periods of inactivity, he often tried to talk to her.

"Yes?" she asked languorously. Her red irises shifted around in her almond-shaped eyes. "Spoor red eyes" (Kireifu Piana Spoor) were a well-known family characteristic (Wariit).

"Do you know Lonyu Loebbar Sufagnaum?"

"Yes, I know him. It's a small galaxy."

"What kind of person is he?"

"Quite nasty, actually," she said bluntly. "I detest the thought of damaging any of my ships to rescue that kind of man."

"Oh." Cufadiss was dumbstruck.

"Don't worry; I keep my personal life out of Frybar directives."

Yeah, right, thought Cufadiss, laughing at the ostentatious Lesheikibash and her use of the phrase "my ships." His silence and the look in his eyes betrayed his thoughts.

"Don't look at a superior officer like that, unless you want to be scrubbing Gorv."

"Sorry."

Before the situation could get any more awkward, orders arrived. "Drosh Facterder from Glagaf," announced the communications staff officer, turning around from his control console (Kuro).

“Read it,” Spoor said.

“Yes, ma’am.” He cleared his throat theatrically.

” ‘Crush them.’ “

Spoor laughed. “This is my first job under Frode Trife, but I have to say I already like the way he gives orders. Okay; single-ship Flasath numbers one through six, Noktaf Bata. Arrange the Sov in a vertical formation, at the front of the fleet.”

In addition to the HQ Squadron, Futune comprised six reconnaissance squadrons and one Sov Dikporleil. The Labule tacked a number onto the name of every Sov. However, the numbers were unwieldy, so Spoor just assigned her own numbers to the ships, calling the Sov Usem one through six, and the Sov Dikporleil number seven.

At that time, one Flasath held the whole half fleet. In sequence, the battleships separated from the main time-space bubble, in their own individual Flasath. Accelerating one point seven three times faster than the rest of the fleet, they fell into a vertical formation.

“Sov Gurarl, Skobrotaf. Aga Asparlot. Announce number three dense formation.” Spoor said calmly.

The three ships that made up the HQ squadron lined up in a triangle, with the flagship (Glag) *Heirbyrsh* out in front.

Five lines formed behind the triangle.

“What’s taking Number Four so long?” asked Cufadiss. The other squadrons were already moving to the side of the escort vessel squadron, while the fourth loitered in the area of the battleships.

“Lazy,” clucked Spoor. “No matter. They’ll come with us. We’ll strike with the remaining five Sov.”

“But...” Cufadiss had too many objections to this plan to actually voice any of them.

The logic of Spoor’s decision was sound, in its own way. If they spent a long time worrying about the concentration of their troops, and waited for Number

Four to get its act together, they would give the enemy just as much time to organize its defenses and counterattack.

I know time is of the essence, Cufadiss realized, but it still seems a little bit rash to me.

“The remaining five Sov are done forming ranks.”

“Good. Tell the Sarerl. Noktaf Bata. Course three hundred ten. Keep sending the Aga ‘follow me.’ “

“Got it.” Cufadiss relayed the commander’s orders to Communications Staff Officer (Kasalia Drokia).

And Jadbyr Futune moved out. The enemy adjusted its formation accordingly and sent a cluster of Hoksath at the imposing half fleet.

Switching his Alpha to external input, Cufadiss plugged it into the *Heirbyrsh’s* sensors.

Instantly, his face tightened. At a rate of about one cluster of mines every five seconds, the enemy was pulling out all the stops. *Heirbyrsh’s* cannons fired equally voraciously, destroying incoming mines.

If just one cluster of mines gets through... Cufadiss shivered.

Like most officers (Bosnal) in the Labule, Cufadiss had never been in a battle before. For the first time, he felt the very distinct awareness of his own mortality.

How can the commander be so calm? he wondered. Is she humming? Does she understand the gravity of this situation?! She’s either the bravest person in the world, or the dumbest!

“Lonyu,” Cufadiss implored, “shouldn’t we perform Hoksatjocs Mejiyot?”

“Where were you stationed before this?” asked Spoor, wiping at a smudge on her Greu.

What does that have to do with anything? “I was Aim Kasalia at Sov Vortout Kigagona.”

“Aha! Then you wouldn’t know. A Resii doesn’t have mines to spare for

defense. The patrol ship's Hoksath are for one purpose only: war fleet destruction. Remember that." "But..." "But nothing. No reason to panic. It's routine.

Remember, this is the Future."

At a loss for words, Cufadiss couldn't tell whether or not she was bluffing. He did notice that her tiara was plugged into the external sensors.

"Drosh Flacteder reports from Squadron One Resii *Kyuubyrsh*," said the Kasalia Drokia. "The damage is bad; the Irgyuf and forward mobile cannons are inoperable. Squadron One retreating to the rear."

Not only did Spoor maintain the same nonchalant expression, she ratcheted up the volume of her humming.

The enemy's front line of ships began to split apart, creating an opening for the Jadbyr Future. It made sense— the enemy's vanguard was likely an escort squadron, which could hardly match the firepower of a patrol ship.

"The enemy has taken evasive action. Should we pursue?"

"Are you actually that much of an Onyu, or are you just pretending?" sniped Spoor.

"Sorry." Cufadiss did not expect such a harsh response.

"No, seriously. Which is it?" pushed Spoor.

"Just a joke, I guess." Suddenly, he found the floor worthy of intense scrutiny.

"Know what I think? I think you wanted to find out whether or not your Sedraleia knows what she's doing."

Cufadiss paled. "Not at all!"

For a moment, Spoor said nothing, letting her red eyes speak for her.

Unable to take it, words exploded out of Cufadiss' mouth. "I'm so sorry. It won't happen again!"

"I'll forgive you this time," Spoor said wryly. "Just don't do it again. Next time, I won't let you off the hook so easily."

"Yes, Sedraleia."

“Okay, maintain course. Our targets are the Alek. The people in the rear can handle the small potatoes like the Leit.”

Without further incident, the fleet passed through the enemy’s front line. Almost immediately, a swarm of Flasath zipped toward them.

“Based on their masses, those are individual Gel Flasath!”

“Aren’t you glad we saved those Hoksath for an occasion like this?” Spoor teased the Aim Kasalia, raising her Greu overhead. “Commence left Hoksatjocs.”

Each of Futune’s ships fired at least one mine in the direction of the enemy Flasath. One by one, red dots on the Ja Fad disappeared.

“They’re coming from the right, too! At least three Resii-sized Flasath!”

After a moment of deep thought, Spoor tapped her cheek with the command cane. “Let Number Four deal with them. We’ll hold our course.”

To compensate for its previous underperformance, Sov Four switched from a vertical to a horizontal formation and made quick work of the enemy. Soon, there were no red dots on the Ja Fad. The *Heirbyrsh* was temporarily out of danger.

“I don’t know about you, Aim Kasalia,” grumbled Spoor, “but I’m bored.”

“What?” Surely, Cufadiss’ ears were broken.

“I said I’m bored,” reiterated Spoor. “I spend so much time waiting and waiting to get into battle, and then when we finally do, it’s so anticlimactic. I should have been a Sarerl. Being a Sedraleia sucks all the fun right out of it.”

“Are you for real?” Cufadiss had just enough Gahorl experience to know that the dangers of being a ship’s captain scared him.

“Yes; as a young girl, I always dreamed of becoming a Resii Sarerl and engaging in epic, cosmic dogfights with ignoble enemies. But, while I was Captain, there wasn’t a war. And now that there is war, the Labule needs me here. So, I can’t afford to be selfish. Not until the war’s over, at least.”

It is a hobby for her.

"I thought I told you to not look at me like that," quipped Spoor.

A fresh batch of enemy troops charged toward them. An assault ship began to fuse time-space with the *Heirbyrsh*.

Clang clang! An alarm (Duniit) sounded on the Gahorl Grawl, and a vibration announced the firing of the ship's Irgyuf.

The assault ship exploded instantly, leaving only a shower of particles.

Visibly shaken, Cufadiss wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Spoor yawned.

*

"Excellent work, Roifrode Spoor!" Trife praised her.

The enemy's front line was wide open, and the Jadbyr Futune wreaked havoc on the ships at the center of the enemy formation, marching deliberately right through them.

"Send the Hoksath in here." Trife pointed with the Greu. "We can't let those enemies seal that opening and surround the Futune."

*

"Enemy Flasath group! Direction zero one zero. Distance thirty. About three hundred of them. We're on a collision course."

"It appears to be the enemy's main force," Cufadiss said loudly, trying to speak over the sound of his pulsing heart. "They're throwing everything they've got at us! Initiate evasive action, immediately!"

"Calm down, Aim Kasalia," pleaded Spoor. She pointed to a cluster of Hoksath on the Ja Fad. "Are our mines going to get there in time?"

Pouting, Cufadiss calculated. "Yes."

"Maintain present course," ordered Spoor.

As projected, Trife's mines caught up to the enemy Flasath.

An elaborate dance began; the Hoksath attempted to create time-space fusion and the enemy Flasath taking steps to avoid it. When enemy ships

stumbled, the Hoksath stepped in, blowing them to smithereens.

Releasing several minutes' worth of air in one breath, Cufadiss realized just how tense he was.

As enemy ships blew up all around, the Futune closed in on the main cluster of Alek.

*

"There's almost no threat to our main force," stated Kahyuul. "See? They're sending all their Alek at the Futune."

"Good. Then, let's get ready to blast them with everything we've got," concluded Trife. "The *Rokeil* will destroy all the enemies on the starboard side, and the *Wakapeil* can take care of those on the port side. The *Byrdeif* and *Kitiil* should come with us. We'd better hurry, or else the Futune will have all the fun."

*

Perhaps sensing the grimness of their situation, the enemy's last line of defense began to retreat.

"Sorry, guys. Too late," said Spoor. "Break into units of half Sov, and destroy those ships. Aim Kasalia?"

"Yes?"

"I can't be bothered with the details. Be a dear and send the targets to each Sov?"

"Yes." Grumbling the whole time, Cufadiss assigned each squadron a certain number of target Flasath.

"Sadly, the situation does not necessitate this ship's participation," lamented Spoor.

"Check." After a few seconds, Cufadiss finished the job. "So, are we going to fall back and become battle reserves, then?"

"Hold on. Let me see that thing," she commanded, indicating the Ja Fad.

There was one enemy ship that troubled Spoor, lurking behind all the others.

“It’s got to be an Isath, Lonyu,” began Cufadiss as he double-checked his battle data, “because it hasn’t fired a single Hoksath since the battle started.”

“That’s exactly why we mustn’t ignore it. It waits. And waits. Then, as soon as we’ve forgotten it’s there,” the Niifyuunyu paused for dramatic effect, “*Ka-POW!* Guns blazing! Fiery Frybar death! No, better to strike it down before it gets the chance.”

“Very good,” conceded Cufadiss. “The Sov have all confirmed receipt of their targets.”

Nodding, Spoor picked up her Greu. “All ships: move out!”

Upon her command, the rectangular formation of Jadbyr Futune came apart into several groups of three patrol ships, which went in search of their respective targets.

Since the ships had to spread out, Drosh Flacteder became largely impossible. Thus, Roifrode Spoor retained direct control of only three ships.

“Call the Sarerl and change the course to zero one five,” she barked. “Maintain Noktaf Bata!”

With two Resii in tow, the *Heirbyrsh* cut a path straight toward Flasath six hundred sixty one.

“Flasath six six one is retreating,” reported Navigation Staff Officer (Kasalia Rilbikot). “No other response. Gor Putarloth is possible by seven eighteen, ship’s time.”

“Should we take attack formation, Roifrode?” asked Cufadiss.

“Unnecessary. Just keep going,” replied Spoor.

After a few moments, the Kasalia Rilbikot announced Gor Putarloth was only ten minutes away.

“Prepare for Dadjocs,” Spoor ordered, to no one in particular. Her attention snapped to Cufadiss. “The enemy hasn’t issued Aga Leigakot; if it were an Isath, it would have surrendered by now. My guess was correct.”

“Then why don’t they launch any Hoksath now that we’re on to them?”

“Good question,” shrugged Spoor. “There must be some explanation.”

“Gor Putarloth with Flasath six sixty one!” shouted Kasalia Rilbikot.

“Here we go!” Spoor smiled.

“Uh-oh. Looks like we have six Gel-class Flasath headed our way with a relative velocity of three hundred seventy-five Digrl.”

Spoor arched one of her eyebrows. “Hoksath?”

Her only answer was a nod.

Temporarily distressed, Spoor asked how many mines they had between the three ships in their party.

“Let’s see... Four on this ship, four on the *Bogbyrsh*, and five on the *Hasunbyrsh*.” The Kasalia Rilbikot paused. “That would be thirteen altogether.”

“Gee, thanks.” Spoor rolled her eyes. “Fire ‘em all. Initiate forward Hoksatejocs. Let’s mow them down.”

The three Resii released their mines simultaneously. The enemy Flasath fell victim to this barrage, and the three Labule ships held their course as if nothing had happened.

“Aim Kasalia,” Spoor quipped, “what do you think is the worst crime a Lodairl can commit?”

“Opposing his superiors?” ventured Cufadiss, instantly hating himself for being a suck-up.

“Wrong. It’s being an Onyu. Loyalty and a sense of responsibility mean nothing if you’re going to act like a moron, specifically the kind of idiot who would send six puny Gel to fight three Resii!”

“Indeed.” Cufadiss nodded solemnly.

“I might enjoy this a little too much,” admitted Spoor, “but I’m not an Onyu. My subordinates won’t die for no good reason.”

Cufadiss swallowed his thought, and it grew into a profound respect for Spoor’s ability to command the fleet.

“I don’t tolerate idiots in here. I prefer to have ‘playmates’ in my Glagaf.”

The heat of Roifrode's Kireif Piana Spoor made Cufadiss sweat. "I'll do my best to play with you, Lonyu."

"Maybe there's hope for you after all."

"One minute until Gor Putarloth!" the Kasalia Rilbikot reminded them.

"And still no Aga Leigakot," added Communications Officer.

"Kasalia Rilbikot, see if you can have all three ships fuse at the same time."

"No problem!"

"And let everyone know: as soon as we fuse, hit them with everything we've got." Roifrode Spoor smiled, anticipating the battle. "I can't wait to see what's in that Flasath — it's like unwrapping a present!"

"Ten seconds!" yelled the Navigation Staff Officer. "Eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. Gor Putar — "

Irgyuf blasts cut him off.

As soon as they fused with the enemy ship, the range of Cufadiss' Frokaj expanded. He could sense that the enemy's ship was huge. Luckily, it traveled solo.

"Aga Leigakot!" shouted the Kasalia Drokia. "A surrender signal transmitted through Drosh Dem!"

"Cease fire!" Spoor opened her eyes, and rose. "All ships, cease fire! A mark of shame on the name of Spoor to destroy a ship that already surrendered."

A mark of shame on the name of the Frybar, the name of the Labule, the name of all Abh-kind, Cufadiss added mentally.

Too late; the *Hasunbyrsh* fired its electromagnetic projection cannon. Fortunately, the shells blew themselves up before they reached the enemy ship.

"Honestly," Spoor complained, "why didn't they send the message via Drosh Flacteder? Were they trying to cut and run, or what? Get the *Bogdyrsh* on the line — tell them to receive and inspect the enemy vessel. The *Hasunbyrsh* will come with me."

As it turned out, Flasath six hundred sixty-one was actually a large transport

ship.

“Wow, we nearly blew it to smithereens,” reported Cufadiss.

“Yes,” acknowledged Spoor, concealing her disappointment that they hadn’t.

“Awaiting course directions,” said Cufadiss.

“Course one-sixty. Reconvene with the rest of my ships.”

Saluting, Cufadiss relayed the message to the ship’s Sarerl. He watched the Roifrode. It was impossible to tell what kind of person she was. Was she possessed by some kind of demon, or was she just crazy? Or neither?

“Looking at your commander like that could get you in trouble,” said Spoor sharply.

Cufadiss nodded.

Sighing, Spoor read Cufadiss’ questioning gaze. “You know,” she said, playing with her neatly arranged hair, “occasionally — rarely — my hunches can be wrong.”

*

Just like that, the battle was over. Only allies and surrendered ships remained on the battlefield.

“There’s a Pelia here from Futune,” Shewas Kahyuul noted.

“Why?” inquired Trife.

“It seems they’ve taken some prisoners of war, sir. Enemy officials.”

“Excellent. Promotions all around,” he joked. “I don’t understand why the bureaucrats were on the battlefield, though.”

“Apparently, it is the United Mankind’s custom to send a Front Line Disciplinary Officer and a Press Officer along for the ride. They were in a huge Isath headed to Sord Sufagnaum.”

“Weird.” Pacing around the bridge, Trife contemplated the oddness of the United Mankind. He stopped. “So... we won, right?”

“All signs indicate yes.”

“Great... but it seems too easy. Send out an order for the whole fleet to assemble.”

“Got it.”

“Once that’s done, we’ll have the Futune do one more job for us. We’ll re-supply it, then send it into Sord Sufagnaum. If there aren’t any forces left, we’ll have them take control of the territory. Hmm. Who did the least amount of work in this battle?”

“All the Jadbyr carried out their duties to the utmost — “

“No one’s getting a spanking — just give me an estimate.”

“Well, if I must...” Kahyuul leaned back to think. “The destruction ratio of the *Byrdeif* was pretty low.”

“Okay. Then leave the *Byrdeif* here to mop up.”

“Yes, sir.”

All in all, it was an overwhelming success for the Imperial Star Force.

Once the battlefield cleanup was over, the flagship *Keildij* fired two Hoksath. Instead of antimatter explosives, however, these mines contained fireworks signaling victory.

Frode Trife conducted a moment of silence for those lost in the fray, both enemies and allies.

*

When the wreckage of the battle was cleared, Trife requested a damage report. Byr Toraimu lost twenty-four Leit, seventeen Gel, and one Resii. Fifty-one Leit, forty-seven Gel, and five Resii were badly damaged. Ninety-five escort vessels, one hundred seventeen assault ships, nineteen patrol ships, and seven Alek incurred at least minor damage.

The ships (Menu) that were only slightly damaged could be repaired by the construction ships (Dausuia), so the fleet lost one-hundred and forty-five spacecraft. Though it could never be called a small loss — just ask the families of those aboard the vessels — it wouldn’t significantly hinder the fleet in battle.

There were originally nine hundred Menyu in the United Mankind Peace Preservation Army Dispatch's Fleet A. Of those, only a scant twenty-seven retained even partial functionality — and those had all surrendered to the Labule.

4 The Imperial Battlefield (Yukulaav Frybaral)

“You must think we’re crazy,” said Marca, out of the blue.

“Why would I ever think something like that?” joked Jinto.

A walking machine carried the group (except for Bill — after he dropped them off, he’d decided to use his delivery truck to make a few legitimate deliveries to avoid suspicion) up the side of a mountain.

Rickety and spiderlike, the machine precariously ambled up the mountain, relying on footholds that looked unstable at best. The closest thing to a path was the narrow section of craggy road that was not completely covered by slippery-looking plants.

Although the machine did its best to keep its occupants upright, at times, it could not cope with the severe angle of the slope, making the ride as jarring as a flight in a ship with no gravity control.

When the members of the Anti-Empire Clasbul Front started to get green in the face, Jinto prayed he wouldn’t have to see what they ate for lunch. Lafiel, accustomed to unusual motion, looked perfectly comfortable.

From time to time, Jinto felt a tad queasy, but manageably so.

“You must think we’re crazy,” Marca repeated, “because we’re keeping you as hostages, even though the Empire won’t grant us independence.”

“I didn’t realize you knew that,” said Lafiel.

“What we really want is a spaceship,” Marca explained.

“It’s a different approach.” Minh shrugged. “Not the avenue of choice, if you ask me.”

“No one asked you,” Marca rebuked Minh, before turning to Jinto. “Minh thinks we should put all our chips on the table and try to get independence all at once. I, on the other hand, am smart enough to know that the Frybar will

never grant us independence in exchange for your lives. That's ludicrous idealism."

"Not entirely," protested Minh.

"If you want to be on a spaceship, you should become a Lef," suggested Lafiel, effectively extinguishing the argument.

Undertaker belched loudly, covered his mouth, and took a moment to quell his nausea. "We don't just want to *be on* a spaceship. We *want* one. Our own ship — urp.' — so we can be free. Not an intra-star system ship, either. We want the real deal — an intergalactic machine."

"That's impossible," Lafiel responded truthfully. "The Frybar's Menyu all belong to Spunej Erumita. Even high nobility don't own personal interstellar ships."

Marca's eyes narrowed. "Nonsense! I see Gareur and Voda flying into the Bidaut all the time!"

"Loaners," explained Lafiel. "The crew are all Rue Kasobeirlash. The size of the ship and terms of the lease are up to the renter, but the Kasobeirlash selects the crew."

"That's crazy talk! Listen, I've looked into the Rue Razem. There's not one word in it forbidding the private ownership of Menyu."

"It's custom, not law."

"You—*urp!*—don't say! The Frybar's secrecy baffles the mind!"

"It's not a secret," Lafiel said defensively. "And it's not our fault if you don't know it."

"Then what about our dream?"

For a moment, the conveyer belt provided the only noise as the question hung in the air. Unable to stand it, Jinto broke the silence. "We understand if you want to, you know, release the hostages. It's no trouble, really."

"Shut up." Marca tapped her cheek.

Jinto felt a twinge of conscience. "I didn't think you guys were serious. I mean,

you never properly explained your objective ...”

“I thought I told you to shut up!”

“Essentially,” Minh began, his eyes boring a hole in Jinto, “you thought it would be easier for us to get total independence than obtain a spaceship.”

“I thought you were kidding about the spaceship,” he explained.

“Why would we be kidding? We are *not* funny!”

“Shut up, everyone!” Marca snapped. “No matter. There are exceptions to every rule.”

A circular building came into view, sharing glints of light from its position on the hillside.

“Ah,” sighed Minh, “there it is; my vacation home. Originally, we were going to imprison you, but it seems like it might just be a vacation instead.”

“I don’t care what you do,” said Lafiel.

“Jeez, you Abh sure are arrogant, huh? That’s not just a stereotype for no reason, is it?” Undertaker seemed to forget his queasiness for a moment.

“You see what I have to put up with?” whispered Jinto to Undertaker, who nodded empathetically.

“Look at that!” yelled Marca.

Following Marca’s direction, the group saw two objects emerge from the shadow of the mountain and float toward them.

“Minh, what are those?”

“Heck if I know,” answered Minh.

The two unidentified hovering objects came to a stop in front of the walking machine.

“They look like United Mankind aerial troop transports,” said Lafiel.

Doors opened, soldiers emerged — hypothesis confirmed.

“State your name and business,” said one of the officers, through an overly loud translation machine.

“You first,” shouted Minh.

“As you wish. I’m Major Aranga of the United Mankind Peace Preservation Force. Your turn.”

Minh pointed at his vacation home. “That’s my house. I’m throwing a party for my friends.”

“So you’re Citizen Minh Kursap of the Independence Party?”

Slightly taken aback, Minh hesitated for a moment, before he said, “Actually, I left the party three years ago.”

“Are you Citizen Minh?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be arresting you then,” announced Aranga.

“On what charges?” Minh paled considerably.

“We found a significant number of weapons in your home, there.”

“And?” Minh probed. “The Kairia and Ribwasia? Is that it? Those are practically toys.”

He looked to Marca for an explanation, but she just shrugged.

“We have reason to believe the Independence Party is actually just a front for a group that carries out resistance movements on behalf of the Frybar. We,” Aranga indicated his men and their ominous-looking guns, “appreciate your cooperation.”

“Unbelievable,” Undertaker mumbled.

It would definitely be hard to explain the presence of the Abh woman in their company. And of course, for Jinto and Lafiel, no amount of fast talking could get them out of this.

Jinto stole a look at Lafiel. In her right hand, she clenched two laser pistol light-source magazines (Yapeil). They began to make the *ji-ji-ji* noise indicating they were in their “grenade mode.”

Uh-oh, Jinto thought. She’s going to fight.

Jinto reached out his hand to stop her, but before he could, she dove forward, spreading her arms like a bird flapping its wings.

The two Yapeil arced through the air. Apparently, Lafiel was already acclimated to the planet's gravity; the shots nailed their targets. One hit the forward transport, and the other sailed into the open door of the other machine.

Flashes of light, then screams. Explosions. Angry shouts.

"Holy..." began Minh.

"Run!" yelled Lafiel as she bounded away from the walking machine. By the time she had hit the ground running, she somehow already had her Klanyu drawn and ready.

She didn't have to say it twice. The remaining occupants of the walking machine scrambled out and ran.

"Over there!" commanded Lafiel, pointing to an area of particularly dense brush.

They ran for cover in the bushes.

Aranga furiously barked orders. Gunfire erupted all around, tearing down the walking machine, splitting entire trees in half.

Without breaking stride, Lafiel dropped Aranga with one incredible shot. "Hurry up!" she called.

"Shit!" Minh yelled. "Thanks to the Abh, I'm a damn fugitive!"

"Silence. I'll take your complaints later."

The enemy soldiers seemed to have sorted out their initial confusion, and were more than a little bit agitated.

"Son of a... ! Everybody over here!" called Minh, leading the others through the foliage.

"Look!" yelled an aberrantly animated Daswani. He pointed at the sky.

The personnel transporter that hadn't blown up now teetered unsteadily in the air, revealing an imposing gun on its underside.

With a monstrous blast, the gun eradicated a handful of surrounding trees.

“Follow me!” Minh called, running through the flaming wreckage.

Jinto couldn’t see through the smoke, but he felt a hole barely large enough for one person to enter. Lafiel shoved Jinto through it, then followed him in.

After sliding for a moment along a surprisingly smooth stone tunnel, Jinto felt the brief sensation of weightlessness. Something nice and cushy broke his fall.

“Clear the way!” yelled Minh.

Quickly rolling toward the voice, Jinto managed to avoid the next body that came crashing down. “Owww,” Undertaker moaned.

Jinto remembered his Klanyu’s illumination capability, and pulled it from his backpack to light up the area.

They were in a cave, about six feet in diameter. A big, shock-absorbing mat sat on one side. Undertaker and Daswani were still tangled in a heap on the mat.

“Everybody in?” checked Minh.

“Looks like it,” said Marca.

“Good. Come with me.” Minh pointed into the cave.

“What is this?” asked Jinto as he walked alongside Minh.

“It’s a lava tunnel,” said Minh. “This was an active volcano up until a few hundred million years ago.”

“Was that slide always part of it?”

“That’s my addition. Don’t worry about it.” He turned to Lafiel. “Did you really have to blow all that stuff up? They know who I am, you know.”

“Apologies,” Lafiel said calmly. “I’m sorry to involve you all in this. We simply cannot be arrested.”

“I once knew a man,” Undertaker lamented, “who jumped from the second story of a building into a tangle of brambles for no apparent reason. He was completely messed up. I mean, he had to be covered in a systemic regeneration stimulant and everything. Well, when I visited him in the hospital, I asked him

why he did it. Know what he said?”

“What?” asked Marca impatiently.

“He said, ‘it seemed like a good idea at the time.’ ” “So you think it was a bad idea to take an Abh hostage?” Marca huffed. “And you want me dismissed from my position as cell leader, too, I’ll bet.”

“Maybe. If we survive,” said Minh.

They arrived at a fork in the tunnel.

“Turn right,” Minh instructed, “and we’ll come out into the main current.”

A short time after they turned right, they could hear faint, rhythmic footsteps behind them.

“They’re following us,” Marca whispered.

Eventually, they came to another fork and choose a path without a second thought.

“Will we be able to escape?” wondered Lafiel. “If we can just get out into the main current, we can slip into another tributary, where there will be numerous paths to the surface.”

“Then you guys go ahead. We’ll stop them,” the princess promised. “Say what?”

“I don’t want to cause you any more trouble. Go on ahead.”

“For crying out loud!” hissed Undertaker. “We’re the kidnappers here. We can’t let the hostages save our butts! Jeez!”

“It’s okay, Undertaker,” said Minh. “If we keep going like this, they’ll kill us all.”

“Exactly,” said Lafiel. “Please go.” Marca sighed. “Okay. Let’s go. This girl’s mind is made up.”

“Thank you,” said Lafiel. “I’ll stay, too,” volunteered Daswani. “That’s not necessary. You’re not even armed. You’ll be of more use to us if you escape.” “She’s right, Daswani.”

“It’s a complete disgrace!” Undertaker announced. “Hurry up. They’re getting

closer.” Due to the nature of the cave, there was no way to tell *exactly* how close the soldiers were just based on the echo, but they were definitely gaining ground.

“Very well. If you live, perhaps we’ll meet again,” said Marca.

“Thanks,” said Lafiel.

“Stop it!” Undertaker insisted. “We abducted you!” The Anti-Empire Clasbul Front wandered further into the cave, and Undertaker grumbled the whole way. Jinto shut his light off in hopes of surprising the enemy.

“Jinto, you don’t have to stay, if you don’t want to.”

“You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Darn,” Lafiel joked. “The way you shoot that gun, it’s doubtful you’ll hit anything anyway. Just try to not die, okay?”

“You’re always brightening my day,” Jinto said, then grimaced.

“Hand me my Kreuno and Alpha.”

Using the lowest illumination setting on his laser pistol, Jinto retrieved her Kreuno and control tiara from the rucksack. They had eight Yapeil left, and they split them up evenly.

“Good thing we didn’t bury this,” said Lafiel as she put on the Alpha.

Jinto cringed to think she had been right. He switched his gun into its firing mode, and waited.

The cave was narrow enough to give Jinto and Lafiel good odds. Unless, of course, the soldiers had heavy weapons.

“If they use the big guns, we’ll be buried alive.”

“Don’t worry,” Lafiel said confidently. “How can the Kasarl Gereulak die underground?”

“Uh, yeah. Good logic.” And, in spite of the impending battle, Jinto chuckled.

5 Lady of Chaos (Loj Labyrna)

“Hmm. This could be a setback.” Entoryua kept a straight face as he lit a cigarette on a smoldering personnel carrier.

A few United Mankind soldiers ran around, roping off the area, glowering at Entoryua and his men. Those wounded in this battle were already at a field hospital somewhere.

Kite heard from one of the soldiers the story of the unexpected battle during their attempt to apprehend Citizen Minh Kursap of the Anti-Empire Clasbul Front.

“Well?” asked Entoryua, when Kite came running back.

“It seems Citizen Minh Kursap is a very high-ranking member of the Independence Party. They found a sizeable stockpile of weapons here.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Having recently read the case file on the network (Eifu), Entoryua frowned. “It’s been at least three years since Minh was a member of the Independence Party.”

Kite shrugged. “Want to hear the rest?”

Entoryua took a languid puff on his cigarette and grunted. “Probably not.”

Kite explained how the simple arrest morphed into a gun battle that enabled the suspects to escape. It was unclear whether one of the suspects was Abh, and also where they went.

“Can we find out?” Entoryua dropped his cigarette and ground it out.

Nodding, Kite peered at his communication equipment screen. “Holy... Listen to this. ‘At eight seventeen, standard military time, Citizen Minh and six accomplices escaped underground from point R-C-19-3-4-01. Five soldiers died, including Military Police Major Aranga. Two others were seriously wounded. Eight soldiers gave chase under the command of Lieutenant Muhammedov. At

eight thirty, standard military time, they requested backup, and HQ dispatched three infantry platoons, who are still engaged in the pursuit/ “

“Standard military time? Is that different from our clocks?”

“Yes, it’s now nine thirty-five.”

“It’s twenty-one minutes slower?” Entoryua sighed. His brain could hardly handle the conversion — he couldn’t remember how many days it had been since his last good night’s sleep.

“What should we do, join the pursuit?” “Nah, we’d just get in the way,” answered Entoryua. “So, we just give up, then?”

“No, of course not. They’re in the Guzornyu Big Cave. Criminals and thrill-seeking kids have been disappearing down there for years. It’s like a playground for the Guzornyu police; they even have guys on the payroll called hole divers. We can probably get some good intel from them, don’t you think?” Kite smiled.

“It’ll be different if the Abh is cornered down there, but we should still act on this. Are your friends using interior-trace and temperature-source detection?”

“I’m sure they are.”

“Great. Then we should be able to figure out the Abh’s destination. Can you determine the current location of your men down there?”

Kite nodded excitedly. “Of course.”

“You know,” Entoryua paused to take a deep breath, “there’s still a chance the Abh isn’t with them — the caves could be a dead end.”

Kite groaned.

*

The glowing numbers on Lafiel’s Kreuno were the only source of light in the dark cave. Using the computer crystal’s heat source detection function, they were able to devise a rough estimate of the soldiers’ position.

“Just a thousand Daj away,” Jinto whispered.

Lafiel nodded.

The enemy had no lamps, implying that they might be using night-vision

goggles or some other special technology. Even though Lafiel had her Frokaj, the enemy would have a distinct advantage.

Ji-ji-ji! Instantly, countless beams of light ripped through the darkness!

Fortunately, due to their position next to a fork in the cave, the bullets didn't reach Jinto and Lafiel. But they were close enough to send little chunks of rock flying through the air.

"Get down," Lafiel urged him.

As soon as Jinto obeyed, Lafiel threw the Yapeil she was holding, temporarily disrupting the darkness with a sizeable explosion.

The enemy fire stopped for a moment.

"Run."

Running deeper into the cave, he could see the mouth of another small tunnel up ahead. The light from Lafiel's attack waned, and darkness settled upon the cave again.

"Let's wait here," Lafiel instructed him as they reached the small passage.

"You want to ambush them?" asked Jinto, his voice trembling. He was momentarily ashamed of his fear, before realizing that it was a perfectly natural reaction.

"Yes. Get low and have your gun ready. When I signal, shoot it that way, fanning the shots from low to high."

"Okay, but I probably won't be able to hit any enemies since I can't see them."

"You wouldn't hit them if you *could* see them."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Now!" Sensing the enemy with her Frokaj, Lafiel started squeezing off shots all over the place.

On cue, Jinto did the same, spreading his shots out as he was told.

Screams.

Oh, heavens. I'm shooting people.

This battlefield was truly bizarre. There was no anger, nor guilt — just an overbearing fear that initiated all response.

Klanraj were invisible to the human eye, but the points of light they made burning through human flesh temporarily lingered in the darkness like fireflies.

Due to their position, it was much easier for Jinto and Lafiel to shoot the enemy soldiers than the opposite.

Bodies piled up.

Jinto felt sick.

A shot struck the wall startlingly close to Jinto.

Instinctively, Jinto returned fire.

“Gyaaaah!” yelled a soldier, flailing backward.

At least my aim is improving, thought Jinto. Man, I'm thirsty. I'd trade my Sune for a glass of water right now.

Amid the sparkle of death, a soldier's hand moved, and something flew through the air.

“Move!” Lafiel kicked Jinto in the side.

Perfectly understanding her direction, he rolled into the small cave. Lafiel slid in after him, not a moment too soon.

As they dove for safety in the cave, an explosion propelled them forward. The enemy grenade made their Yapeil look like toys.

Behind them came the sounds of collapse. It was a cave-in.

“Hurry!” Jinto rose and pulled Lafiel to her feet.

Large chunks of rock struck them as they retreated deeper into the cave. Finally, the debris ceased falling.

Jinto looked around, but it was too dark for him to see anything.

“How does it look?”

“The cave is blocked.”

Jinto used his gun's illumination mode to check it out. The cave was completely blocked. Jinto couldn't tell whether or not he should be relieved.

On one hand, they can't get to us. On the other hand, he thought, we might be stuck in here until we run out of air and suffocate.

"Well," Jinto said, "may as well keep going and see where it leads."

"Yes. That's all we can do."

Replacing the spent Yapeil in his Klanyu, Jinto pressed into the unknown.

*

"Enemy fleet discovered! Point twelve light seconds away. Direction one-oh-five, oh-one-oh. Relative velocity: two hundred seventeen Wesdarj per second. About twenty ships total."

Concentrating on his Frokaj, Cufadiss sensed the planet Clasbul. A group of Resii from the Jadbyr Usem Futune loomed on its perimeter.

The enemy ship group was behind the Futune, apparently heading for Sord Sufagnaum.

"Enemy ship model comparison complete. Looks like twelve large Isath, one Resii, and six Gel," described the gunnery staff officer (Kasalia Torashot). "The probability of victory is, in my opinion, ninety-eight point seven percent."

"Perhaps we should advise them to surrender?" sought Cufadiss.

"Not necessary," said Lesheik Roifrode Spoor. "If they were going to throw in the towel, they would have done it already. Instead, prepare for Dadjocs. Get everyone into close formation number five."

Saluting, Cufadiss did as he was told.

The enemy ships did not deviate from their course, but continued cruising toward the Sord.

"Incoming signal from the enemy, Lesheik," said the Kasalia Drokia. "Holograph message with a twenty-three second time lag."

"Let's see it."

The image appeared on the Gahorl Grawl.

Surprisingly, the man who appeared in the holograph was Abh! He was filthy, and he wore no Alpha, but the Frosh, blue hair, and unearthly good looks were unmistakable.

“I didn’t know you were the Lesheik, Niif Letopan.” He smiled weakly. “What a coincidence.”

“It’s been a long time, Loebe Sufagnaum,” Spoor hailed him. “I didn’t expect to see your face coming at us from the enemy ship. What’s happened?”

“I’m a prisoner of war. They threatened to kill my children in front of my eyes unless I give you a message.”

“Very well.” Spoor’s face hardened. “Let’s hear it.”

“There are twenty-one Abh on this fleet: my family, my Gosuk, and the Lodairl from the Byr *Drokeil*. If you value our lives, please hold off your attack, and let this fleet pass safely through Fath.”

Spoor shook her head. “Even if we agreed to that, what would become of you?”

“We’d probably be sent to a concentration camp, Niif.” He grew quieter. “They must know the battle odds, to even think about trying something like this.”

“Fascinating.”

“Yes.” The marquis nodded. “Niif Letopan, this is goodbye. I trust you’ll do your duty. Take care.”

“You too, Loebe.”

The hologram blipped away.

Spoor chewed on the joint of her little finger. Finally, she rose from her lavish seat and asked the Kasalia Drokia to prepare to send a voice-only message. The communications officer told her to dictate whenever she was ready.

“Greetings, this is Jadbyr Usem Futune’s Lesheik, Roifrode Spoor,” she began. “The Labule is generous; I’m giving you one more chance to surrender. You have until a relative distance of point zero eight light seconds.

“It goes without saying that you are not to harm any of our citizens. If you make a foolish decision, we will be generous enough to let you die alongside Abh nobility. We will disintegrate each of your bodies into elementary particles that will spend an eternity swirling through the vacuum of space.”

The speech caused quite a commotion on the Gahorl. “Go ahead and send it to all the ships under their command. Broadcast it to the whole universe, if you must.” “Roger.”

“They’ve been warned. If they don’t surrender before we reach a relative distance of point eight light seconds...” she paused dramatically, “... attack. From that point on, accept no Aga Leigakot; destroy them completely. Even if they’re Weiko. And if anyone questions this action, I’ll take full responsibility.”

“But, Commander,” Cufadiss began, walking to the command seat.

“Yes, Aim Kasalia?” Spoor shot back. “It would bring great shame to the Labule and the Frybar to kill an enemy who attempted to surrender.”

Roifrode Spoor’s reddish eyes glowed with a particularly burning intensity.

Resolute, Cufadiss wouldn’t back down. “I know it’s not my place to say so, but there would forever be a stain on the Ajh of Gatharss.”

This seemed to strike a chord with Spoor, who sat somewhat dejectedly on the Lesheikibash, mulling it over.

After a moment, she looked up at Cufadiss, smiling dubiously. “You’re right, Aim Kasalia. We must accept surrender, at any time.”

“Thank you for listening to reason, Lonyu,” said Cufadiss earnestly.

“Remember, though, that it’s up to me how we transport any captives.”

“Right.” *So what?* he added mentally. “How many are aboard the enemy ships?” “In twelve large Isath? Probably twenty-five thousand, if they’re full.”

“All captives will be transported in one Talth-class Isath.”

“But, Commander...”

A Talth-class Isath was one of the smaller models of transport ship used in the reconnaissance half fleet. Sometimes used as a troop transport ship (Reivath),

its capacity was just fifteen hundred people. Sometimes, when they filled every room, even the cold storage rooms, with people, they could cram ten thousand in there. Cufadiss thought they might have to fold a few people in half to get twenty-five thousand in there.

“Do some math for me. How long would it take to transport twenty-five thousand people on a Talth-class Isath through Dath to the Arosh Lakfakalle? Don’t worry about factoring in deceleration — it’s okay if it uses up all the fuel on acceleration, which should be set at two Daemon.”

“Not through Fath?” Cufadiss clarified.

“Right. Crunch those numbers.”

He began the complex calculations: factoring in the acceleration and final velocity, the rotational velocity of the galaxy, the distance to the Arosh, and other such factors.

“Distance from the enemy: point one light seconds,” somebody announced.

“Fifty-eight thousand, three hundred years ...”

“Yes,” Spoor said, “they won’t like that at all, will they? Okay, let’s shorten the time. Take away the Flasatia and the Roilaga. We won’t put any Souk on board, and we’ll leave off the Wameria. That’s got to lighten the load some.”

She looked over his shoulder. “Hmm. Still heavy. Did you include food and water in the calculation?”

“One year’s worth, plus the minimum possible water and agricultural facilities to sustain — “

“They don’t need agricultural facilities. Go ahead and drop those.”

“So, just provisional food and drinking water. Should I also cut out the atmosphere purification equipment?”

“We don’t want them to *die*, you savage! What does it come out to now?”

He punched the new numbers into his complex formulas.

“Forty-nine thousand one hundred years.”

“How about that! We shaved off almost ten thousand years!”

“Yes, but...”

“Kasalia Drokia!” Spoor pointed him out with her Greu. “Tell all ships: we will respect the enemy’s surrender whenever it comes. Additionally, those who surrender after the battle starts will be transported according to my designs. Please inform our opponents what that means.”

“Please, Lonyu.”

“Shut up, Aim Kasalia.” And that was that. “My mind is made up. Further outbursts will be held against you.”

“Loj Labyrna...” began Cufadiss.

“Oh ho!” Spoor laughed. “My favorite Traiga!”

Cufadiss fell silent.

“Distance from the enemy: point zero nine light seconds.”

Switching his focus to his Frokaj, Cufadiss pitied the enemy ships. Suddenly, though, the enemy ships stopped accelerating; only the Futune’s ships advanced.

“Aga Leigakot,” clarified the Kasalia Drokia, sounding slightly relieved. “They’re requesting civil treatment.”

“Of course,” Spoor sounded annoyed. “When have I ever been uncivil?”

If that was her idea of civility, I don’t want to get on her bad side, reasoned Cufadiss.

“Set their minds at ease. We’ll send them through Fath, at a reasonable speed. If they play nicely, they’ll probably even see the soil of their homeworlds again.”

“Good. I’ll let them know,” said the communications staff officer. He began clacking away at his Kuro.

She directed Cufadiss to coordinate the inspection of enemy ships and the transfer of personnel.

“Good. Now you understand why I had to be so strict, right?” She waited for him to nod. “Good. But I don’t like being interrupted — especially while giving

orders.”

*

Two hours later, the Jadbyr Usem Futune began to spread out just twenty Sedaj above Planet Clasbul.

Their surface recon surprised them with the data that there was still a large number of United Mankind land battle units present. In fact, only one had been captured aboard the ships.

Although land battle was conspicuously absent from the Futune’s long list of capabilities, it wouldn’t be hard for the Futune to reduce the whole planet to rubble. Consequently, Spoor advised the enemy army to surrender and cede control to the territorial citizens.

However, powerful jamming waves disrupted their communications, so they had no way of knowing whether or not their message even made it to the surface.

With no other options, the Futune waited for land battle reinforcement units, keeping a vigilant eye on the surface for any signs of an attack from below.

“What poor sports.” Spoor sighed. “Nahenjocs is so ungainly. Oh well. At least I don’t have to get my hands dirty.”

6 Grand Pursuit (Vorluekoth)

An earthquake-like rumble shook bits of rock loose from the ceiling. Jinto picked up his pace. “Are they trying to blast their way through the cave-in?”

“I don’t know. Did you want to go back and have a look?” asked Lafiel.

It had been more than an hour since the battle, after which Jinto and Lafiel continued plodding through the meandering, snaky tunnel. They were ascending slightly.

A few million years ago, concluded Jinto, lava must have flowed up through this tunnel into the main branch.

The blasts kept coming.

Boom! Rumble!

The cave narrowed.

Jinto feared it would become too small for a person to pass through — it was already too small for two people to walk side by side.

The light from his Klanyu confirmed his worst fear: dead end.

“What’s wrong?” asked Lafiel. “Why did you stop?”

“Dead end. What...?”

The cave’s wall was too smooth to be natural rock. Jinto ran his hand over it and deduced that it was actually crystal ceramic. There was a vertical seam down the middle.

“It’s a door!” Jinto exclaimed. For the next few minutes, he hit and pushed the door, but could not get it to budge.

“Hey, what’s this?” Lafiel pointed at a button (Borsh) to the side of the door. It was labeled “Emergency Use.” Jinto pressed the Borsh.

Whoosh. As the doors parted, a beam of glorious light assaulted Jinto and

Lafiel.

Squinting, Jinto stepped into the glow. “What is this place?” asked Lafiel as she entered. Happy calliope music drifted through the air. In front of them, there was a stone building from which children squealed with delight.

People and cartoonish, anthropomorphic creatures walked through the sprawling flowerbeds in front of Jinto and Lafiel. The animals juggled, stood on one leg, laughed and played with the families.

A small train *choo-chooed* in an endless oval loop. Its conductor, a boar in a clown suit, waved at Jinto and Lafiel. Animatronic animals hung from ropes attached to the ceiling, ascending and rappelling with delighted children in their arms.

“It appears to be an amusement park,” assessed Jinto in disbelief.

The door behind them closed. The sign on the door read “No exit.”

Jinto caught a glimpse of Lafiel in the light. “Wow. You look terrible.”

Sadly, it was true. Her skin, hair, and clothes were barely visible under layers of mud and sand and general grime.

“And you don’t?” Lafiel replied. “You look like someone rescued you from a dumpster.”

“I’m sure I do,” confessed Jinto, brushing the small rocks and dirt out of his hair.

The heavily populated theme park gave Jinto a sense of security. With this many people around, the chances of the United Mankind doing something totally unreasonable decreased.

“Let’s go. Maybe we can find some new clothes.”

As soon as they began to walk, however, a booming voice addressed them from above. “Stop. You two entered this park illegally. Stop.”

Looking up, Jinto saw that the voice came from a giraffe.

“No way!” Jinto took off.

“Stop! Stop!” The gangly mammal gave chase, barely managing to keep its

feet.

“Attention guests,” began a broadcast throughout the park, “there has been an emergency, and we must temporarily close Guzornyu Amusement Park. Please exit in an orderly fashion. You will receive a partial refund of your admission. We look forward to seeing you again. I repeat, there has been an emergency...”

“I wonder what that’s all about,” said Lafiel.

“I think I have a pretty good idea,” puffed Jinto, “judging by the guns in our hands, and our long-necked friend.”

*

In planet Clasbul’s infancy, there had been a lake of lava, with several offshoot lava rivers. When the planet reached puberty, the lava dried up and hardened.

People built a city nearby. Fascinated by the large, hollow space, they racked their brains over how to use it.

Eventually, they came up with the idea of a zoo. All they needed was to put a dome down there. Then they could construct a simulation rain forest and a grassy plain where animals could roam free.

But then, they realized that live animals didn’t do tricks, wouldn’t speak to children, and definitely smelled bad. In the end, they decided to use mechanical cartoon animals instead.

Now, Guzornyu Amusement Park was in its seventieth year of operation.

*

“Just as we thought, there they are!” said Inspector Entoryua, clapping his hands. “Strange, though. Some of them are missing.”

“One of them is definitely Abh,” said Kite.

“True. But aren’t you worried we’re blowing this out of proportion? I mean, just look at them; they’re barely older than the rest of the kids in this park.”

“Those two ‘kids’ attacked, wounded, and killed our soldiers. They are

ruthless assassins.”

The controller in the surveillance room looked confused.

“Don’t worry,” Entoryua said. “The occupation army will recover.”

“If they can last long enough ...” the controller began, but stopped when Kite shot him an evil look. “You know, thirty minutes ago, all our electromagnetic birds went crazy. We sent the mechanic out, and he said there was nothing wrong with the birds, but there was a disturbance in our electromagnetic waves. Since then, we haven’t been able to use wireless telephones, either.”

“And?” asked Entoryua, eager to see where this was leading.

“There’s no time for this, Inspector,” interrupted Kite. “Let’s go make the arrest.”

“Are you crazy? They’re armed. We have to wait until the customers finish evacuating.”

“What if they sneak out the exit with the customers?”

“With this kind of surveillance? And with our guards at the gates? Impossible. Now, Controller, if you would, please continue.”

“I can only think of one thing that would cause that kind of disturbance. Know what I mean, Inspector?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Well, since there’s no wireless telephones, I have to control the machines manually. Check this out — I’m going to bring up the Giraffe’s eye cameras.”

He tapped at his Kuro for a moment. The screen became a blanket of crackling static.

“Interesting.” Entoryua looked over at Kite. “Has there been a change in space?”

“How would I know? I’ve been with you the whole time, Inspector!”

“Yeah, but you’ve got that handy personal terminal on your wristband. Don’t tell me you didn’t sneak a peek at it every once in a while. Did they inform you of the reason for the electromagnetic interference, or what?”

“This terminal is for the purpose of inter-army communications, and the messages I receive on it are none of your business. With all due respect.”

“Don’t hold out on me, Kite. We’re in this together, whether you like it or not.”

Kite sighed. “Fine. At eleven fifty-five standard military time, which was thirty-seven minutes ago, it said ‘initiate electromagnetic interference at twelve hundred hours. “

“They didn’t say why?”

“No. They didn’t.”

It was frustrating to have to speculate, but there was only one plausible explanation Entoryua could think of for the interference: the Abh were back.

*

“Please stop,” said the white rhino.

“Please stop,” echoed the emperor penguin.

“Please stop,” requested the puma.

No matter which way they fled, Jinto and Lafiel could not ditch the throng of robotic fauna.

“Back off!” yelled Lafiel, pointing her Klanyu right at a beaver’s head.

“Please stop,” the beaver responded, whistling through its oversized teeth as it spoke.

“You’re robots, right?” she asked.

“We do not have free will, if that’s what you mean,” lamented the beaver. “Please don’t tell the children. They believe.”

“It’s creepy, Jinto. I’m killing it.”

“But they’re so cute,” Jinto whined.

Lafiel blasted the beaver.

“Warning!” shouted a chorus of animals. “Destruction of Guzornyu Amusement Park property is a felony! You will be tried in a court of — “

Lafiel silenced a puma, reducing it to little chunks. “If you don’t want us to destroy you, then get out of here.”

The fearless animals just moved in closer.

“Oh man. Sorry,” Jinto said feebly as he blasted a hyena. He took a small amount of comfort in the fact that the hyena was the scariest-looking creature in the park.

*

“Such carnage,” said the controller, as he watched the valuable animals get slaughtered.

“We’re dealing with some twisted individuals here,” said Kite.

But the controller wasn’t listening; he was too busy trying to get the animals to abandon their mission and run away.

Eventually, he canceled the order, and the animals moved away from the intruders. The shooting stopped.

“Good. Have them clear the area entirely. If they stick around, they might interfere with the arrest,” directed Entoryua.

“Due to the electromagnetic interference, I can’t do it from here. A mechanic will have to go to the site and input those orders manually. What I don’t get, Inspector, is why you’re still hanging around in here, when the bad guys are clearly *out there*, blowing up my furry friends!”

Entoryua shrugged. “Remember when I told you to let me have my men wait by that emergency exit? And remember when you said it would be bad for the park’s image?”

“Yeah, yeah, you were right. What do you want, a cookie? Go get the bad guys already.”

On the terminal’s screen, the display clearly indicated that over a hundred twenty children were still ambling toward the exits. Taking their sweet time, too.

“Like I said, it’s too dangerous until the customers are all out. We can’t take chances like that with people’s lives, even if it means losing a few ‘animals’ “

“But all the people are gone from that sector,” argued the controller.

“He’s right,” agreed Kite. “Let’s go bring them in. Since the telephones are unusable, it’s really the only option.”

“Whose fault is it that the telephones don’t work?” Entoryua put out his cigarette in his typical, violent way. “You’re right, though. Let’s go get them.”

The otter sulked as he gave Jinto directions out of the maze.

Jinto felt kind of silly thanking the otter as he left the store, but he did it anyway.

Somewhere in the distance, there was an explosion.

*

The animals no longer attempted to apprehend Jinto and Lafiel as they ran through the park. However, they also made no effort to get out of their way.

“Oof! Sorry!” Jinto yelled as he ran into a squirrel.

“It’s my fault,” conceded the squirrel.

Lafiel and Jinto were in some kind of maze, the walls of which were lined with goods for sale. Everything — stationery, knickknacks, pens, clothes, even diapers — had some kind of animal picture on it. Jinto paused for a second in front of some clothes, examining his own filthy bodysuit (Sorf).

What am I doing? I don’t have time for this!

The alleys and throughways were becoming increasingly difficult to follow. Jinto looked up at the ceiling, hoping it might give him some kind of indication where the exit was. No dice.

“Hold on!” Jinto called to Lafiel.

Up ahead, Lafiel stopped. “What?”

Jinto walked up to an otter shopkeeper.

“Hello, young man. May I recommend this otter-face nail clipper? At this low, low price, you should really buy two!”

“No, stop,” interrupted Jinto. “Do you know where the exit is?”

“Leaving so soon?” the otter seemed hurt. “What’s the rush? Stay and have fun with me! Have you seen my otter nail-clippers yet?”

“Just tell me how to get out of here.”

*

“What moron’s blowing stuff up?” demanded Entoryua. “Was that your friends?”

Kite shrugged dejectedly. “Could be.”

Entoryua pondered his next move. *Maybe we should split up. This would definitely be easier without Kite and his army. But I don’t want them to arrest me, too, just for doing my job. Ah, screw it. We tracked them this far. Maybe it won’t be so bad watching someone else put the cuffs on.*

“Hurry up!” Entoryua poked the car’s driver.

“I’m going as fast as I can,” the young man replied while he honked the horn. “These critters just don’t understand the rules of the road.”

“Crap. I knew we should have brought an Uusia.”

“You want me to radio for backup?”

“There’s no time!”

Crash! Behind them, a patrol car attempting to avoid an armadillo plowed into the side of a building.

Entoryua sighed.

*

“This way to the exit!” yelled Jinto. Almost immediately, he ground to a halt.

A line of forward-creeping Uusia blocked the path.

Lafiel reached for her gun, but Jinto stopped her. “It’s no use. Not here, at least. Let’s go back into that market maze.”

Lafiel cocked her head instead of her gun. Then she nodded. They turned and fled.

“Halt! This is the police!” boomed a threatening voice.

When the police say that, Jinto pondered, how many people actually stop?

He certainly didn't.

*

"Inspector, this is getting ridiculous!" complained the frustrated driver, slamming on the brakes.

In front of him, the road — which was, in actuality, not a road at all — narrowed so severely that it was barely wide enough for three people to walk side by side. There was no way a car could fit.

It would be a different story if they could just plow through all the shops. Unfortunately, that was not an option for these policemen if they wanted to keep a shred of their public image intact.

"Evacuate the workers!" sounded the internal broadcast. "Everyone with third-tier engineering classifications, please adjust all animals to hibernation mode."

"Okay, men. Move out!" Entoryua ordered.

Irritated at the inability to issue orders over the telephone, Entoryua jumped out and ran to the car behind his, and told them to proceed on foot.

About twenty policemen lined up on the little road. The suspects were already out of sight, having ducked around a corner.

"Be prepared to fire. The suspects are armed and considered dangerous."

Everyone, including Entoryua and Kite, drew their Kairia and toggled off the safety switch.

"After them!" Entoryua charged into the alley. Approximately twenty adrenaline-juiced policemen followed suit.

*

"Out of my way!" Jinto crashed through a turtle's display shelves, knocking all sorts of turtle merchandise to the floor.

The lugubrious reptile shrugged lethargically.

"Sorry," apologized Lafiel as she ran through. "Jinto, we're backtracking now,"

she added, panting to catch her breath.

“Hm... You’re right.”

“I thought you two were leaving,” said the otter Jinto had met earlier. “Maybe you changed your mind and want to buy something after all? Yaaay!”

“Are you selling an air car or a spaceship?” asked Jinto sarcastically.

“Of course,” beamed the otter.

Jinto stopped and turned to see the otter waving a toy spaceship emblazoned with its picture. Jinto was about ready to shoot the otter when he caught a glimpse of a policeman peeking into the shop.

“Freeze, you two!” hollered the policeman.

Jinto pulled Lafiel into an alley that led to an expansive lawn beyond which loomed a large, stone building. Jinto envisioned the hail of bullets and laser beams that would surely make scrambling across the wide-open lawn a short trip.

But, as much as he feared the danger of running out into the open, he feared the certain doom of staying in the alley even more.

He could hear the heavy breathing of the policeman. The lawmen called for Jinto and Lafiel to freeze.

But they had other ideas, hiding in the dead angle of the alley — a little nook, just out of the policemen’s sight.

There was a shout from another direction. Looking for the source, Jinto saw a greenish-brown uniform.

Even worse. Enemy soldier.

Casually, Lafiel fired a shot that took the soldier down. “He saw us, Jinto. We need to get out of here!”

Sighing, Jinto began to run again.

For now, the closest thing they had resembling a plan was to run toward the large stone building. Although the stone walls would probably crumble like cardboard under the enemy’s explosives, Jinto thought they might be slightly

more stable than the plywood storefronts.

Jinto and Lafiel weren't even halfway across the lawn when enemy soldiers spotted them. Without breaking stride, Lafiel sprayed lasers at them as the soldiers struggled to get into good firing positions.

Pulling a Yapeil from his pocket (Mosk), Jinto switched it into its detonation standby state. Tiny vibrations in the palm of his hand reminded him of its destructive potential.

Although Jinto had a pretty good arm from years of playing Minchiyu, the soldiers were an awfully long way away.

He decided to chance it and lobbed the grenade.

Boom!

Men flew into the air along with chunks of earth.

Score!

But as soon as a soldier fell, a new one immediately took his place.

Ji! Ji! Still a step ahead of Jinto, Lafiel continued firing over her shoulder. Despite the fact that she wasn't even looking at her target, her aim was impeccable.

Of course, realized Jinto. *Frokaj.*

In this situation, her Frokaj was an enormous advantage, essentially giving Lafiel a three-hundred-sixty-degree field of view by emitting a series of ultrahigh-frequency waves that sensed movements in her surroundings. That was why she didn't have to turn around — she knew exactly where they were the whole time.

But the bullets kept coming, and their enemy's attacks increased exponentially.

A huge clod of smoking dirt flew into the air a mere five Daj from Jinto.

Just keep running, he told himself. *You're almost there.*

*

"What's wrong?" Kite asked Entoryua, who lay facedown on the ground.

So, that's the difference between this army and the police, Entoryua thought. They'll charge headfirst into the biggest gun battle Clasbul's ever seen!

Shamefully, Entoryua was too scared to get up.

"Withdraw," he decided. "We're going back."

"Inspector!" Kite protested, "You're throwing in the towel?"

"Hell yes, I am!" Entoryua said. "I don't know how it is where you're from, but there isn't a single police force on this planet equipped for this kind of carnage. Chasing them equates to signing our own death warrants, and I'm not about to forsake all these men. If you still want to capture the Abh, be my guest, but the police are backing down."

Punctuating this last sentiment, an explosive round flew by and obliterated one of the animals.

"Watch where you're shooting, you twits!" Entoryua knew that they couldn't hear him over the gunfire, but he didn't care. "Why are you all still standing around? Retreat. Now! Keep low! Go, go!"

*

Jinto slid in through the door.

"Glad you could make it," said Lafiel.

They were in some kind of theme restaurant populated with waggly eared rabbit waiters. There was one more door in the room, which, Jinto guessed, probably led to the kitchen.

Lafiel held her position by the front door, intermittently squeezing off a few shots.

"Let's go." Jinto tugged on her sleeve.

"Okay." Lafiel fired a couple more Klanraj for good measure.

"Just two today?" asked one of the rabbits.

"Not hungry, thanks," said Jinto as he moved toward the employees-only section of the restaurant. Through a window, Jinto caught a glimpse of the soldiers preparing to fire a really big gun.

“Get down!” Jinto yelled.

Lafiel hit the deck, but the rabbits weren’t up to speed on the nuances of gun battle — they just stood there, wagging their ears, pretending to chomp on fake, oversized carrots.

Boom!

The stone wall wasn’t as thin as Jinto had feared, but it was much too weak to withstand the soldiers’ ammunition. The wall crashed to the ground. A series of explosive rounds flew through the new opening.

Pieces of rabbit flew in all directions.

“Warning! Warning!” said one of the decapitated rabbit heads. “Destruction of Guzornyu Amusement Park property is — “

A small explosion shut the rabbit up. Permanently.

“Lafiel, let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah.”

“Attention, guests!” said a mostly intact rabbit. “This place is dangerous. We should evacuate at once!”

Then the rabbit took a sniper’s bullet to the face and flopped to the ground in animatronic agony.

“Crap!” Jinto said angrily. *Was that really necessary?*

Keeping low, they ducked through the kitchen door, which was entirely undamaged. They ran past cooking machines and found another door that led to a long corridor lined with doors on both sides.

Lafiel collapsed.

“Lafiel!” Jinto ran to her. “Are you wounded?”

“Oh, no.” An embarrassed smile seemed out of place on her face. “I hate to admit it, but I’m exhausted.”

“Ha ha! How about that? The indestructible Abh is human after all.” Jinto sympathized with her — it was an extremely rare set of circumstances that would lead to an Abh having to run for long periods of time, let alone on a

planet with two times the Abh standard gravity.

How long had they been on the move? Three hours? Four? True, they walked some of the time, and jogged some, but the last thirty minutes had consisted almost entirely of full-on sprints.

Of course, rather than admit to being physically taxed, Lafiel pretended to be fine until she had used every last drop of strength in her body.

“We can’t say here. Come on, I’ll lend you a shoulder.”

“Sorry.” Lafiel reached out to take his hand.

“Would you rather ride piggyback?”

“Shut up.”

“Ah, there’s the Lafiel I know!” a relieved Jinto commented. “Don’t worry, the enemy soldiers are probably just as worn out.”

As Lafiel used Jinto’s shoulder for support, Jinto’s thoughts moved in a completely different direction. In the past, Lafiel wouldn’t have accepted this kind of help from Jinto — she would have given him the *Gosroth’s* log and insisted he go on without her.

Even if they didn’t make it out alive, Jinto could at least count that as a small victory.

7 Amusement Park Horse (Warf Gyumhyun)

Jinto and Lafiel went through the first door they saw.

It was another, smaller kitchen that appeared to be just for drink preparation.

The building rattled beneath their feet, reminding them that the enemy wasn't going to give up. The fact that the foes kept firing from afar was fortunate. Jinto doubted he and Lafiel would be able to fend them off if they charged. For the time being, at least, the building kept them safe from long-range attacks.

Jinto deposited Lafiel on a countertop. "Sit here for a second."

Ransacking the cupboards, Jinto procured a couple bottles of water. He handed one to Lafiel. "You're probably dehydrated."

Clutching the bottle with both hands, Lafiel guzzled the water. It dripped down her chin onto the front of her uniform.

In one continuous gulp, Jinto downed half a bottle of water. He felt as if the liquid never reached his stomach; rather, it evaporated somewhere along the way.

"If the Lartei's Was Beikebreil saw this," Lafiel said, wiping some of the water off her face, "I think he'd have a conniption fit."

Jinto pulled two glasses (Suinyuuk) from the dishwasher. "Is that person a stickler for etiquette?"

"Yes. I used to get scolded all the time. But when the situation arises, I always act very elegantly."

"Sure you do," Jinto chortled, looking for anything else useful in the room.

"Shut up. I'm always elegant."

He continued to snicker.

“If you don’t stop that, I will destroy you.”

“I’ll pass, thanks,” Jinto said. He placed the Suinyuuk into a crevice in the wall labeled “Grape-Flavored Sugar Drink Concentrate.” A viscous liquid plopped into the glasses.

Jinto took a sip. Pure syrup. True, it smelled kind of like a grape, but it tasted like a candy-coated sugar cube. Strangely satisfying.

He handed the other glass to Lafiel. “Try this.”

She took a slug and grimaced. With incredible resolve, she downed the rest of the goop in one chug. Shuddering, she washed the taste out of her mouth with some water.

“Okay, let’s go.” Jinto offered Lafiel a hand.

“I’m okay now. I feel better.” Lafiel staggered to her feet, leaning on the wall for support.

“Even an Abh can’t recover that quickly,” said Jinto, rushing to catch her.

Something exploded remarkably close by. The door to the hallway twisted in its frame.

They squeezed through the warped door and made their way out the back door of the restaurant. Pleased to find the back of the shop deserted, they exited the building onto a wide, gravel road.

Lafiel drank some more of the bottled water, then offered it to Jinto. He declined.

She tossed the bottle on the ground, and it rolled along the path.

“Littering is bad!” said a horse, as it leapt onto the path in front of them.

“Sorry,” said Jinto automatically.

“Travelers, do you want a ride?”

“Are you serious?”

“Well, I am a horse.”

“We’re in a big hurry.”

“I’m a horse. I’m very fast.”

“Great. Thanks!”

Jinto helped the Lartneir onto the horse’s back, then handed her back her Klanyu. He climbed up behind her.

“You’re very large children!” exclaimed the horse. “You weigh as much as adults!”

“Yes, sadly, we are both morbidly obese.”

“I’ve never given a ride to two children your size before.”

“Are you saying you can’t do it?”

“No. I can do it. I’m a horse.”

“Okay, great. Then, please, take us to the exit.”

“Shouldn’t we find your mother or father, first?”

“Our parents didn’t come with us,” Jinto said truthfully.

“Very good. Then off we go!” The horse trotted along the path, as fast as a person running at full tilt. Rather needlessly, Jinto grasped the reins as the horse ran alongside a rather long building.

Lafiel readied her Klanyu.

When they got to the edge of the building, there were about ten soldiers waiting for them. The soldiers were quite surprised to see them atop a galloping horse.

Before the soldiers’ jaws could finish dropping, Lafiel started firing. They ripped through the narrow gap and ran alongside another long building.

“Can you go any faster?” Jinto asked the horse.

“Yes, but you might fall off.”

“We’ll be okay, I promise.”

“Just tell me if it gets too dangerous.” And the horse picked up the pace to nearly five Wesdaj per hour!

It was more dangerous than Jinto expected. Unlike on Uusiya and Frelia, the

horse ride was rife with jolts. Jinto thrust his feet into the stirrups and tightened his grip on the reigns.

“Jinto, lean back,” said Lafiel.

As soon as he did as he was told, he imagined he felt a laser beam graze his chin.

From his new, upside-down perspective, he saw the enemy soldiers, concealed in the shadows of the building, firing their guns wantonly.

Jinto’s heart tightened in his chest; it was a terrible feeling to know that he couldn’t do anything except hold on and hope to not die.

Lafiel shot back, temporarily silencing some of the soldiers.

As they passed more buildings, the enemy’s gunfire eventually ceased. Straining, Jinto sat back up to his original position.

The horse cut to the right, headed directly at a group of enemy soldiers. They were pretty far off, but probably not out of firing range.

“No, no, wrong way!” yelled Jinto.

“This way is the shortest,” replied the horse.

“I don’t care! We need to take a different route.”

They rode out onto a straight road lined with pink buildings. Up ahead, there was a large group of enemy soldiers, who began to fire in unison. Lafiel wasted no time shooting back. Proud of the fact that he still hadn’t dropped his gun, Jinto raised it and pulled the trigger a few times.

The enemy fire was all over the map, but at least one shot struck the horse. Luckily, it wasn’t a mortal wound.

Small explosions, showers of gravel, the smell of gunpowder.

“What’s happening? Running seems hard.”

“Faster!” yelled Jinto.

The horse tapped its remaining strength, and they covered two-thirds of the distance to the plaza before there was any more fire.

“Jinto!” warned Lafiel. “On the roof; four o’clock!”

As Lafiel resumed shooting, Jinto tried to reposition himself. As he did so, a Klanraj grazed his arm, tearing his uniform, making a nasty red welt on his arm.

“Gah!” Jinto gritted his teeth.

“On our tail!”

When Jinto managed to turn around, he saw three enemy soldiers on horseback.

“I’ll let you take care of them,” said Lafiel, still trading fire with the bogeys on the roof. “I’m otherwise occupied.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Although the slipshod cavalry was gaining ground on Jinto and Lafiel, they were not skilled enough at riding horses to shoot their guns with any accuracy. As they bounced in their saddles, bullets and laser beams flew all over the place.

Of course, Jinto was in a similar boat, having never ridden a horse before. To boot, he was in an extremely unnatural posture. Tucking the gun under his arm, Jinto pulled out a Yapeil.

“Close your eyes, Lafiel,” advised Jinto as he lobbed the light source magazine. It definitely wasn’t going to reach the enemy.

A flash of light!

Jinto heard the extremely gratifying sound of two soldiers crashing to the ground in agony. He turned around to see the third man pulling up to help them.

“What did I tell you about littering?”

“Sorry. I’m a very naughty boy.”

“Here we are,” the horse said, stopping in front of a line of glass doors. “The end of the line.”

“Thanks!” Jinto leapt off the horse’s back.

“Run, Jinto!” Lafiel sprinted for the exit.

“Thank you for coming to Guzornyu Amusement — “

An explosive round ripped through the horse’s stomach, leaving a gaping hole that bled sparks. “I feel pretty bad,” said the horse before it collapsed and died.

“They’ve crossed the line.” Jinto smoldered. He stopped near the exit, where there was a small hall with gift shops, information booths, and about ten sets of stairs.

“What are you doing?” demanded Lafiel, who was already climbing up the stairs.

“Just give me five seconds.”

Ah ha! He found what he was looking for — three square Borsh beneath the words “Emergency Interruption Door.” Jinto pushed the buttons according to the pictorial instructions. They lit up and began blinking.

“Warning! Anyone who opens the interruption door in a non-emergency situation will be subject to civil and criminal repercussions.” Ignoring the voice, Jinto mashed the three buttons.

“Danger! Interruption door is closing. Please step away from the door.”

The glass doors all swung shut at the same time. Simultaneously, a steel door lowered from above, like a giant metal curtain.

“Now we can go.”

The escalators were incredibly long; if they were inside a building, they would have risen at least five stories. After running all the way up, their chests heaved for air.

“You okay?” inquired Jinto.

“Yeah.” Lafiel, more pallid than ever, managed to smile.

“Good. Let’s get back to the city and hide until the Frybar reclaims this planet.”

It was dark out, and the road shimmered in the moonlight. They had barely begun to run when police cars came at them from both sides and approximately twenty cops jumped out with guns drawn.

Lafiel's gun hand twitched.

"Don't." Jinto said firmly, grabbing her wrist.

The police had them completely surrounded and also had the added cover of their cars. Their odds of winning were essentially nil.

"Are you giving up?" she whispered.

"Yes. It's better to be caught by the Sos police than the enemy," reasoned Jinto.

"What if they hand us over?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. But if we fight now, we're toast."

Biting her lip, Lafiel reluctantly lowered her gun.

A man got out of one of the Uusia, chomping on a cigarette. "I'm Inspector Entoryua," he declared. "I have good reason to believe you're behind an Uusia theft that occurred five days ago."

"Are we under arrest?" asked Jinto, staring down the Inspector.

"Hey, you speak Clasbul language?" Entoryua smiled. "Excellent. My Abh is not so great. You're not under arrest, per se, but I'd greatly *appreciate* your cooperation with our investigation. I don't really know who you are, but I could arrest you *in flagrante delicto* for property destruction and possession of illegal firearms."

"Everything we did was in self-defense."

"You'll notice I didn't add murder to list. It would still be easiest for everyone involved if you cooperate."

"We're not under arrest?" Jinto clarified.

"Not yet, at least."

"What about the property damage and the weapons?"

"Honestly, in agreement with the Frybar, we let these matters be decided in the courtroom. We understand you may have special circumstances."

Jinto nodded slowly.

“Good. Please throw down your guns.”

Jinto’s Klanyu fell to the ground, followed by his last Yapeil. Lafiel kept a death grip on her laser pistol.

“The Abh girl, too.”

“Do as he says, Lafiel,” urged Jinto.

“I’ll do it because *you* asked,” Lafiel said to Jinto.

Relieved, Entoryua sent some of his men over to retrieve the weapons. “Good. Now, please put your hands in the air and walk slowly toward us.”

They did as they were told.

“You’re making a mistake!” said a man in a United Mankind uniform, hopping out of one of the cars.

“You tricked us!” Jinto pounced on the policeman who held his gun.

“Wait, this is a misunderstanding!” pled Entoryua. “Just calm down, and I’ll explain.” Jinto froze.

“This is Military Police Captain Kite, who’s cooperating with us,” clarified Entoryua. “Don’t worry — I’m still in charge here.”

“Absurd!” Kite proclaimed. “You can’t trust them. They might have more weapons.”

“Inspector and Captain,” Lafiel implored, “this may not carry any weight here, but I swear on Bar Lepenu: we don’t have any more weapons.”

“You can’t trust her! She killed at least fifty men! We’ve got to conduct a more *thorough* search,” Kite said.

Jinto stepped in front of Lafiel. “If you lay one finger on her — “

“Out of the way, slave!” Kite yelled, shooting at Jinto.

“Gah!” A laser beam scorched Jinto’s shoulder, causing him to stumble backward into Lafiel, who caught him.

Since it was a laser pistol, there was no blood loss, just an intense burn. Jinto began to sweat from the pain. He felt faint.

“That was unforgivable.” Lafiel roiled beneath the surface, and gave Kite his first terrifying look at the infamous “Abh Smile.”

8 Victory Dance (Wadroth Sathoth)

Entoryua couldn't decide which was more disturbing — the Abh girl's creepy smile or Kite's inexplicable state of frenzy.

"So what if you don't forgive me, you lousy excuse for a human," spat Kite. "You people have no shame! If your little pet means anything to you, you will cooperate."

Cradling Jinto, Lafiel's gaze was more intense than any Klanraj. She attempted to set him down.

"No, Lafiel. Let it go," muttered Jinto, standing between her and Kite like a very wobbly human shield.

Uh-oh, thought Entoryua, I wonder if the Abh girl intends to fight Kite empty-handed.

Entoryua knew whose side he had to take. He put his Kairia to Kite's temple. "Cut it out."

"What the hell are you doing? Don't tell me you're scared of Frybar retaliation. We will regain our footing in space, and until then, it's our duty to maintain order and justice here."

"Which is exactly what I'm doing," the inspector broke in. "I don't care who rules space; on Clasbul, our laws and justice are paramount. Your conduct has stepped beyond the realm of acceptability according to our standards, Captain."

"I'm just using the appropriate strictness."

Entoryua motioned for one of his men. "Someone take this clown's gun already."

"You're making a huge mistake, Inspector. Our army will not treat this lightly!"

"Abh girl," Entoryua began, ignoring Kite, "I apologize for this blockhead. He's

not part of our squad. Please, just come with us — that boy needs to see a doctor.”

Lafiel’s black eyes stared at the inspector for a moment.

Wow. What a pretty girl. Such dignity! Entoryua didn’t know what else to say or think. True, she was positively filthy, but somehow her natural beauty shone through the dirt, brighter than ever. *We always think about the Abh living above us in space, but they kind of live above us on land, too.*

Entoryua took another look at the wounded kid. *Even though he just came through a gun battle that was too intense for us, he looks like a typical city boy.*

Kite’s lunatic laughing continued. “Don’t bother protecting the Abh, Inspector. We’ll extract her from your prison, whether you like it or not.”

Knowing Superintendent Aizan, conceded Entoryua, this bastard’s got a point. We’ll hand her over in an instant. On the other hand, if there’s one thing Aizan’s good at, it’s pandering to higher-ups-if the Abh are coming back, I doubt he’ll continue to cooperate with the occupiers.

“I trust you, Inspector Entoryua,” said Lafiel.

“Good. Then-“

With a puff, three smoke bombs erupted thick, white smoke.

“Fog bombs!” shouted one of the policemen.

Right before he lost all visibility, Entoryua saw an Uusia roll over the embankment at high speed.

Why are we in this cloud? Jinto wondered, slightly delirious from pain. *Am I dead?* He felt Lafiel standing behind him. *Is she dead, too?*

“Abh! Lef!” a familiar voice cut through the fog.

Minh, recognized Jinto, instantly.

“Quickly! There’s no time!”

Guiding Lafiel by the shoulder, Jinto moved toward the voice.

“Hold your fire, everyone!” Entoryua ordered. “In this fog, we’d just shoot ourselves.”

The floating car appeared in front of Jinto. As soon as he neared the open door, Lafiel shoved him through it. “Where are *you* going?” Jinto managed to grab her wrist.

“Let go of me.”

“There’s no time for this!” Marca barked. She helped Jinto pull Lafiel into the car. “Go, Bill!”

“Already going!”

The floating car weaved through the confused mass of policemen and squad cars and exited onto a road.

“Let go, Jinto,” Lafiel demanded. “I have unfinished business out there.”

“Ow! Careful — I just got shot, remember?” Jinto winced. “What do you have left to do?”

“I can’t let him get away with that. I’m going to turn him into a gust of Gunau blowing around space, which is a better fate than he deserves.”

For whatever reason, Jinto was glad Lafiel was so upset on his behalf. “How are you going to do it, without a weapon?”

“I’ll steal one.”

“Save it for later, Lafiel, when we’ve got more time.”

“Wow, I didn’t take you for the kind of person to slowly torture someone,” teased Minh.

“You know what I mean.”

“This is all very interesting,” quipped Bill, “but could you two clam up and shut the freaking door, please?”

Groaning, Lafiel complied. Finally, she had a moment to examine Jinto’s shoulder. “Are you okay, Jinto?”

He downplayed the wound’s seriousness, calling it “just a scratch.”

“Hardly!” said Marca. “His collarbone’s shattered. The whole left arm has to be regenerated.”

“Please,” Jinto begged, “don’t tell me that stuff.”

“See what you can do, Doctor Daswani.”

Marca switched seats with the large man, who applied a local anesthetic and a blood coagulant to Jinto’s shoulder. He rubbed on a regenerating salve, wrapped Jinto’s arm in some bandages, and sprayed on a hardening agent, effectively stabilizing the limb.

“It’s okay to thank us now,” said Undertaker.

“Yeah, thanks,” said Jinto. “Are you legitimately taking us hostage now?”

“Of course!” answered Marca. “We’ve got to get a spaceship somehow.”

“It’s a bad idea,” Undertaker declared. “We’re in enough hot water as it is.”

“Then why would you come back for us?” Jinto asked. “Why not run away?”

“Right after Bill picked us up, electromagnetic wave interference began,” explained Marca, “and all the soldiers conducting inspections returned to the city.”

“Which means?”

“Look.” Marca pointed through the window.

In the sky, six points of light danced and dodged in complex circuits.

“Only the Abh would fly in such meaningless orbits.” “It’s not meaningless,” refuted Lafiel. “That’s the Wadroth Sathoth. It means we’ve gained control of the sky. It’s telling us the Labule’s back.”

*

“Into your cars, guys. Follow them!” roared Entoryua.

Although the fog cleared somewhat, the policemen still had to grope and fumble for their cars.

Then, the earth shook. Gusts blew through the fog.

“What now? Everybody, shake a leg. I’ve got a feeling it’s about to get a lot more complicated around here.”

Before the policemen could depart, a chorus of rhythmic footsteps rang in

their ears.

“Stop. All of you!” boomed a powerful voice. “We will shoot anyone who moves.”

“We’re police!” answered Entoryua. “In the middle of a pursuit!”

“Police or not, we will shoot you.”

A horde of men clad in the greenish-brown uniforms of the United Mankind surged into the fog, looking through the police cars.

“We were told you’re working with one of ours?”

Kite saluted. “Military Police Captain Kite. May I ask who you are?”

“Lieutenant Sleet. Did the Abh come this way?”

“She got away,” Kite admitted.

“Got away? From this many police?”

“They were useless — lapdogs to the slave democrats.”

Realizing his automatic translator was still on, Kite switched it off. Although the Clasbul police couldn’t understand the rest of the conversation, Entoryua had a bad feeling about it.

“Inspector,” Kite said with a fake smile, “I’m afraid we’re going to have to pursue the Abh.”

Entoryua grunted and started to get into his car.

“No, Inspector. You won’t be coming. We’re commandeering your vehicles.”

“What?”

“We’re taking the cars, and we’ll also need to borrow your drivers.”

“Under whose authority?”

“Mine,” replied Sleet, shoving the barrel of his gun into Entoryua’s cheek. “Please excuse us; we’re really in a hurry.”

“Yes. Maybe we should bring the inspector with us, to be our guide. One more thing.” Kite smirked, clearly enjoying this role reversal. “I’d like my weapon back.”

“How did you know we’d come out through the park?” wondered Jinto.

“It was a fifty-fifty chance,” mused Minh. “If you’d come through the main branch, that would have been much more difficult, because there’s a lot of exits there. When people started evacuating from the amusement park, we knew what was up.”

“You guys couldn’t have come for us *before* I got shot?” teased Jinto.

“You weren’t the only ones in danger,” snapped Undertaker.

“I have a question for the Abh girl,” Marca declared, out of the blue.

Lafiel turned around from watching the Wadroth Sathoth.

“What is it?” she asked.

“As we went into the cave, I couldn’t help but notice your ears. At the time, we weren’t really in a place where I could ask this, or anything — “

“What’s the question?” demanded Lafiel.

“Are people outside the Fasanzoerl allowed to have Nui Abliarsar?”

“No,” answered Lafiel plainly.

“Might I ask you name then, Feia?”

“Abliar Nei-Dubresk Borl Paryun Lafiel.”

Taking a moment to digest this stunning nugget of information, the Anti-Empire Clasbul Front sat in aberrant silence.

“Now that the cat’s out of the bag,” said Jinto, “I may as well tell you who I am, too.”

“Nah,” Bill said dismissively. “We don’t really care.”

“I knew there was something fishy about you,” said Minh. “I looked into it; Loebe Sufagnaum has two Jarlum, but the oldest one is only eight.”

“What I don’t understand,” Undertaker began, “is what a Frybar Lartnei is doing here in the first place!”

“Hear that, Jinto?” Lafiel ribbed. “Even Sos know the difference between

Ruene and Lartnei.”

“Give me a break already!” said Jinto.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” said Undertaker.

“We were on a Resii,” Jinto offered the explanation. “And it got attacked. Since I wasn’t a Lodairl — “

“Sash?” guessed Bill.

“No. I was just catching a ride.”

“Catching a ride?” Marca repeated. “How does one ‘catch a ride’ on a Resii? I didn’t know that was possible.”

“It’s possible if you have a Sune,” boasted Jinto casually. “So when the attack came, I had to evacuate the battlefield. But I’m not capable of flying a Pelia, so they assigned Lafiel to do it, because she was the only Bene Lodair on board.”

“Wait a minute, are you telling me you’re Sif, too?” clarified Marca.

Jinto nodded.

“Wow. You’d never guess it, to look at you.”

“So I hear.”

“Okay, okay, let’s see if I’ve got this straight. We’ve got one Fasanzoerl and one Sif for hostages. And you said your name was Nei-Dubresk, right? Any relation to the Spunej?”

“She’s my grandmother. And Jinto is Jarluk Dreur,” explained Lafiel. “But we have no intention of becoming your hostages.”

“Ha ha. Maybe we can ask for independence after all.”

“Because you people have done us more than one favor,” Lafiel said, “I will be honest with you. The Frybar does not, under any circumstances, negotiate for hostages. If you threaten the Empire, you’ll be lucky if they kill you.”

“I’d believe that,” lamented Undertaker.

The window lit up. In the distance, the peak of a mountain glowed like a beacon. Lightning rained from the sky to the mountain peak.

“It’s an Abh attack,” murmured Minh, as if the others didn’t know that.

“Probably Dembuus,” Lafiel guessed.

“Those are like bugs, right?” Suddenly, Minh seemed very interested.

“Yes. They’re microscopic machines with the ability to replicate themselves. They’re a real nuisance to exterminate.”

“Cool. Do the Abh attack cities?”

“Not unless we’re commencing a full-scale land attack. Before that, we would destroy all the transportation and communications systems. We don’t usually go straight for a metropolis.”

“Why, where are we going?” asked Jinto, suddenly worried that the Labule might inadvertently destroy them.

“Undertaker’s house.”

“I still say it’s a bad idea,” griped Undertaker.

“Then how about your office?”

“I’m not the only person with a house or office, you know.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“What about Minh’s villa?”

“Are you kidding?”

“They probably wouldn’t think to look there, since we just came from there.”

Marca laughed. “Okay, it’s settled. We’ll go to Undertaker’s.”

“First thing’s first,” said Bill, glancing in the rearview mirror, “we’ve got to lose these coppers on our tail.”

*

“Eh kon! Eh kon!” yelled Sleet.

After winding through swerving mountain passes for a while, the road straightened out into Guzornyu city. Up ahead of them on the straight road, they saw a car.

“Does this vehicle have any built-in weapons?” asked Kite.

“No, nothing like that.” Entoryua crossed his arms and leaned back on the seat, putting his feet up on the seat in front of him. “We don’t need them, here. Our men are just that good.”

Kite stuck his gun into Entoryua’s gut. “You’d better fix that attitude, Inspector, now that you’re in our custody.”

Entoryua raised one eyebrow. “I thought I was just a guide.”

“Don’t talk back!” roared Kite. “You’d better behave, slave democrat!”

“As you wish,” Entoryua caved in, lowering his feet.

“Eh Brik!” Sleet barked.

The soldiers leaned out of the windows and started firing.

*

“Those aren’t police! Look at those guns!”

Although the soldiers were still too far away to hit the car, they fired myriad small-caliber bullets, which exploded as they landed.

“Should we get off the main road?” proposed Undertaker.

“That would just slow us down,” said Minh. “And besides, they can track us with the equipment in those cars.”

“What about the electromagnetic wave interference?”

“The bands used for communications equipment and their detectors are completely different, you ignoramus.”

“All I’m saying is they’re going to blow us to bits if we keep going straight down this road.”

“Based on the current distance, their speed, our speed, the atmospheric pressure and temperature...” Minh calculated, “they shouldn’t be able to hit us. But then again, I’m not familiar with their guns.”

“As the resident military expert, do you have anything to say?” Jinto asked Lafiel.

“I’m no Nahenjocs expert,” Lafiel said with a slight air of disgust. “But I suggest getting your Klanyu ready. At this distance, there’s not much attenuation.”

“Any other idea, Minh?”

“We could try a smoke bomb. The old Camintail Republic Army-issued K-2-11. Its electromagnetic wave bsorption ratio is still considered the highest in the known universe.”

“Why didn’t you use that earlier?” cried Undertaker.

“Do you know how hard it was for me to get one of these?”

“Please, let’s use it,” implored Marca.

Reluctantly, Minh extracted something resembling a canister from his bag. He threw it out the window.

“Ooh. I almost forgot about these.” Minh pulled a handful of disc-shaped objects from the satchel and scattered them on the road.

“What are those?” asked Bill.

“Perception mines.”

“How does a maniac like you get these things?” asked Bill.

“I made those. Just wait until you see them in action,” Minh said proudly. “Actually, scratch that. I hope you don’t see them in action. Keep your eyes on the road.”

“You guys never let me have any fun. We’ve achieved maximum speed, and are actually gaining ground.”

*

“Can’t you go any faster?” Sleet bellowed at his car’s driver.

Entoryua stood up for his cowering underling. “He’s going as fast as he can. This is a command car — not exactly built for high-speed pursuit. You should let one of the patrol cars take the lead.”

“Shit! Why didn’t you tell me that sooner?”

“You didn’t ask,” answered Entoryua.

Kite clubbed the inspector with the hilt of his gun.

What a jerk, thought Entoryua as he wiped the blood off his lip. *True, we weren’t exactly nice to him, but we definitely never hit him.*

Suddenly, there was a wall of black in front of the car, and the driver braked hard.

“Don’t slow down, it’s just a smoke bomb,” insisted Sleet.

As directed, the car plowed straight into the plume of black smoke. Thick gas rolled in through the open windows. Entoryua covered his face with his hand, trying to shield his eyes and nose from the smoke.

Pop! Pop! Although the explosions sounded like toys, the whole car sagged very suddenly to its left.

“Mines! The electromagnets on the front left side are totally kaput.”

No one really heard the driver; they were too busy shielding their ears from the ungodly sound of metal scraping along the pavement.

“Stop the car!” yelled Sleet.

“Don’t stop,” Entoryua told the driver. “Just pull over. Unless you want the cars behind us to rear-end us and cause a huge pileup.”

Following Entoryua’s directions, the driver pulled off the road and slid to a comfortably bumpy stop in the middle of a field.

However, Entoryua’s efforts to save the following cars were futile — as they entered the smoke, the mines blew apart one car’s rear electromagnet, propelling the front end into the air. The car’s velocity pushed it end over end, until it skidded to a stop on its roof. The next car in line slammed into it.

Another car came into the pileup, and another barely avoided it before hitting a mine and spinning to a stop on the side of the road.

The very last car, hearing the crazy noise, pulled off the road before entering the smoke. Soldiers and policemen crawled out of the severely damaged cars, which the police always regarded as particularly tough automobiles.

Amazingly, no one was seriously injured.

As often happened with accidents on Clabul, the hydrogen fuel in one of the cars caught fire. The ensuing blast singed the eyebrows of all the men scrambling for cover, and the filthy smoke of burning metal mingled with that of the putrid smoke bomb.

It was enough to make Entoryua, the smokiest of smokers, cough.

*

“Police car pileup,” Undertaker commented gravely.

“You can never be too careful on the road.” Bill snickered, turning completely around to make the joke.

“Something’s coming,” Lafiel pointed out, squinting to see what was approaching from the horizon.

Guzornyu, the sparkling city, lay just ahead.

Something shiny and covered with blinking lights flew toward them, towing five smaller flying objects.

It passed right overhead. The sparkling crest on the underside of the largest flying object betrayed its identity.

Marca sighed with relief. “Don’t scare me like that. It’s just the fire department.”

“Maybe so,” Jinto noted, “but it was *flying*. And if the army wasn’t shy about commandeering police cars, what makes you think they won’t take to the skies in the those fire trucks?”

9 Soaring Through Heaven (Robiash Sesura)

This guy didn't get enough hugs as a baby, Entoryua decided, staring at Kite's expressionless profile.

When the occupation army commandeered the fire department's aerial extinguisher vehicles, Entoryua thought they would leave him out of it, but when Kite insisted they bring Entoryua with them, Sleet grunted indifferently.

Now, five Wesdaj in the air, they scoured the area for the Uusia. Since the electromagnetic interference was still in effect, they had to rely on flickering light signals, beaming flashlights from the window of one fire truck to another.

This is ridiculous, Entoryua secretly opined. *To expend so much effort chasing after children and small-fry radicals! They seem intent on sending their whole army after these people.*

"It's kind of silly to bring me as a guide," Entoryua said with a sigh. "I'm a Luna Vega City cop. I was born and raised there. I don't really know much, or anything, about Guzornyu."

"You're a guide for the Abh, not us."

"Say what?"

Kite smiled coldly. "Who better to lead her down the path to Hell?"

"I'm not sure I follow your logic. I don't even know her," reasoned Entoryua.

"Then you'll die quickly. But those who've supported the Abh will experience a much more miserable and prolonged death. Especially that boy — I can almost hear the sonata of screams. Of course, we'll have to think of something appropriately horrid for the Abh."

Is he serious? Or is he just trying to scare me? Who is he kidding — he doesn't have the authority to decide that kind of thing. There are higher-ranking officers in Guzornyu.

Who knows what his superiors will do, though; after all, insanity is highly contagious.

*

As soon as the group entered Guzornyu City, they abandoned the car and proceeded on foot. It was a wise move — the car had since been blown to smithereens.

They also changed out of their filthy clothes, purchasing all new duds from a vending machine with the money in Marca's wallet. Lafiel stowed her Kreuno and Alpha and hid her Frosh under a large hat.

"This way!" Marca pulled Jinto into the shade of a tree-building, just as an armored troop transport ship landed nearby.

"Let's use the underground walkway," proposed Minh.

"Good call."

Descending a staircase, the group came into a brightly lit underground city. Approximately the same width as the illuminated highway above it, it was lined with automatic shops. People milled about, laughing, talking, moving along at a jogging pace.

The group got onto one of the moving sidewalks.

"Somehow, this has all gotten quite out of hand," assessed Jinto.

"That's because you two trod on their honor with your muddy feet!" scolded Marca. "Now they're desperate!"

"Maybe you guys should give up," suggested Lafiel. "After all, they're chasing us, not you. There's no reason for you to get into any more trouble."

"They know my name, remember?" reminded Minh. "I can't go home, unless I want my family to be involved, too."

"Yeah, for all the sacrifices we've made," Marca concluded, "we need to reap some kind of benefits."

"Both independence and a Menu are out of the picture, but Lartei Kryb will surely offer some proof of its gratitude for your assistance thus far."

“Abh gratitude,” griped Undertaker. “Piles of money and treasure, when all we want is a Menyu.”

“I told you, that’s not going to happen.” Lafiel appeared confused.

“What about a loaner?” proposed Jinto. “I’m not sure what they want it for, but as long as they’re not going to pick a fight with the Frybar, is that doable?”

“Maybe. That *might* be possible.”

“That’s as good as we’re going to get. What do you guys think?” inquired Marca.

“I still want a crack at piloting a Menyu myself,” complained Bill. “But, I mean, whatever. Maybe I’ll still get a chance to noodle around with the steering equipment.”

“The question is — would we be able to fly where we want?” Minh waited for Lafiel to shake her head *no*. “Well, we’re flexible.”

Daswani nodded.

“Is it still possible to get some of that money and treasure as well?” hoped Undertaker.

“Peanuts compared to a Menyu,” Lafiel assured him.

“Then give us your word, Princess,” insisted Marca, “that you’ll loan us a Menyu for free, for an indefinite period.”

“I can’t make that promise,” Lafiel admitted. “I can only promise to ask Spunej Erumita to consider granting that request.”

“Close enough.”

“Assuming I live long enough to have another audience with her, I will most assuredly ask. Now, come on, Jinto.”

And with that, Lafiel leapt onto a moving sidewalk going the opposite direction. Jinto shrugged and followed.

Surprisingly, Marca joined them.

“I’m going to make sure you live long enough for that to happen,” Marca whispered. “We’re coming with you, and we’re going to get you back into

space.”

“How?” wondered Jinto.

“Undertaker really is an Undertaker,” she answered cryptically.

*

“That signal,” intimated Kite, pointing out the window, “means we’ve taken over the transportation department. Shortly, the underground walkways will be stopped, and our soldiers will be able to move in and apprehend the Abh. There’s no way for her to escape this time.”

Entoryua rolled his eyes. He couldn’t handle Kite’s endless jabbering. For some reason, his running commentary updates always concluded with “There’s no way for her to escape this time.”

The more Kite spoke, the more his voice induced a wave of dread in Entoryua, because it served as a constant reminder of his impending execution.

Soaring Through Heaven (Robiash Sesura)

He looked out the window of the fire department’s ship and saw a smattering of fires on the ground below. The occupation army simply blew up all cars that looked even remotely similar to the suspects’ Uusia.

There were also tiny flashes of gunfire.

An air tank flew around, alerting the citizens to the situation, requesting everyone’s cooperation.

“See that?” Now, Kite pointed to the edge of a cluster of tree-buildings, from which soldiers beamed more flashing light signals. “They’ve searched all the rooms in that city-tree, and are moving to the next building. There’s no way for her to escape this time.”

“Searching without a warrant? That’s every policeman’s dream,” joked Entoryua.

“This is all your fault. If you were more respectful of democracy and God’s Providence, we could have done this in a more civil manner.” Kite sighed. “We’re a liberation army, you know.”

“What are you liberating us from? We didn’t ask you to come here. Can you at least admit that?”

“It’s really a shame, Inspector. I had hoped we might be able to understand each other.” Kite’s gaze wandered to the window.

*

Chaos ruled the streets.

Most of the citizens were already cognizant of the Abh’s imminent return. Thus, they were reluctant to cooperate with the occupiers.

Most of the Sos on Clasbul weren’t passionately opposed to the occupation army; they merely regarded it as an eccentric and bothersome houseguest. When the guests took over their government, made them shave their lue hair, and sent some of their loved ones to “democracy schools,” it planted little seeds of hate in their hearts, but the anger hadn’t grown beyond that.

Then, in a span of about thirty minutes, the army caused those seeds to bloom, fertilizing them with blocked streets, unannounced searches, extreme rudeness, quickness to fire weapons, callous automobile destruction, and other such things.

“Citizens, the Abh girl is responsible for all of this disorder. Find her, and we will restore order,” insisted the voice from the flying tank.

But the people of Clasbul were smart enough to see that the zealots running around shooting guns all over the place weren’t wearing the black Serlin of the Abh. The people of Guzornyu weren’t armed, but mobs did form to beat the stuffing out of several soldiers and take their weapons.

Of course, many people fled for their homes, attempting to avoid the soldiers at all costs. That’s exactly what Jinto, Lafiel, and the others were doing.

Fortunately, Marca had extensive knowledge of Guzornyu geography, and had even memorized the spots where soldiers were likely to be. At certain times, she led them out of the crowd, through back alleys and along deserted roads. They weaved a trail underground and above, using the elevated walkways that connected the buildings.

As they passed from an elevated walkway into the plaza of a building, they split up into two groups and pretended to not know each other. Jinto was with Marca and Daswani as they entered.

Two enemy soldiers wearing jetpacks descended right in front of Lafiel and the others.

“You! Girl! Take off your hat!”

Marca quietly pressed a Ribwasia into Jinto’s hand.

Undertaker pretended to be drunk. “Who are these guys? Did they see my niece’s nice, new hat? We bought it.”

“A great hat!” seconded Bill. “We paid for it! I still have the receipt.”

“Really!” said Undertaker. “Hey, is anybody else hungry? I’m staaaaaaarving.”

Lafiel played the part of an innocent girl, acting frightened, clinging to Bill.

Jinto, Marca, and Daswani moved past, pretending not to know the others.

“Just take the hat off!” One of the soldiers pushed at the brim of the hat with the barrel of his gun.

Marca and Daswani made their move at the same time.

Jinto was a second later, but he still managed to stick his Ribwasia to the nape of one soldier’s neck and squeeze the trigger. The sudden movement reminded him of his wounded shoulder.

Lafiel, Bill, Undertaker, and Minh hit the deck. The movement caused Lafiel’s hat to fly into the air.

“Gwah!” moaned one of the soldiers, as he scattered some bullets harmlessly into the sky. The other soldier fell silently.

Like children who break a window while playing in the street, everyone knew to run.

“Remember that guy I told you about?” Undertaker wheezed as soon as they stopped to catch their breath in an underground walkway. “The one who jumped into the thorn bush?”

“You’ve only told us a million times,” responded Marca.

“Well, there’s a sequel. About a month after he got out of the hospital, he did it again. I visited him at the hospital again, and asked him why he did it. He said he just wanted to make sure it wasn’t a good idea after all.”

Rolling her eyes, Marca informed them that their destination was just ahead.

*

“Got her.” Kite read the blinking signals. “They’ve found the Abh.”

“Did they capture her?” Entoryua counted the minutes until his impending demise. *It was a short lifetime, I guess. I never even got to tell my daughter what a blockhead she’s about to marry.*

“No, not yet. Apparently they’ve wounded some more soldiers. One of them says he definitely saw her Frosh. There’s no mistake.” Kite smiled creepily. “There’s no way for her to escape this time.”

And Kite began issuing instructions to the pilot. The ship turned around and headed for the northwestern part of the city. Beyond the cluster of tree-buildings, there was a group of steeples.

“What are those?” inquired Kite.

“I told you, I’m not that familiar with Guzornyu.” While it wasn’t technically a lie, Entoryua knew what the steeples were, and the intentions of the people with the Abh.

“We’ll find out soon enough.”

*

Guzornyu Municipal Undertaker. Temporarily closed, due to armed conflict.

The sign on the door clattered as Undertaker unlocked and swung the door open with a practiced movement.

“You’d think all this fighting would be good for business, but when the occupation army came, the government panicked and closed it,” explained Undertaker.

“What was the city afraid of?” asked Jinto.

“They thought the enemy might mistake this for an anti-orbital weapon,”

explained Minh.

This only made Jinto more confused. “Weapon?”

When they entered the small building, Jinto saw the colorful spires that ran along both sides of it. He remembered catching a glimpse of these as they entered Guzornyu.

“So, these are huge graves?” asked Jinto.

“You’re confusing a graveyard and a funeral hall,” said a visibly disgusted Undertaker.

“Sorry. If they’re not graves, then what are they?”

“Coffins. You know, it’s criminal how little you know of our customs.”

“Forgive him,” Lafiel excused Jinto. “He has no common sense. When people die, they often want their remains to float in Dath.”

“Right. If we were Abh, we’d just toss them out the window or something. But since we’re not in space, we have to blast them off from the bottom of a gravity well.”

“In my home world, bodies are cremated or buried,” Jinto justified his ignorance. “If you want to float them in Dath, wouldn’t it be easier to do it from the Arnej?”

“Never been to a funeral, have you? It’s as much about the ceremony as it is about the goal.”

“I just assumed funerals should be, I don’t know, quieter.”

Lafiel shrugged. “That’s just a stereotype. Maybe this is because of our Abh origins, but we find the idea of floating in space forever comforting.”

“I’m not opposed to that idea,” Jinto said. Then, he realized what was happening, and shuddered. “Wait a minute. We’re not going to ride these into space are we?”

“Of course!” they all said in unison.

“I misjudged you, Jinto — you have even less common sense than I thought.”

He was crushed.

“Am I going to be able to pilot one of these ships?” Lafiel asked Undertaker. “I’m not familiar with them.”

Surprised, Undertaker replied, “You don’t have to fly it. It just goes up. That’s it.”

The blood drained from Lafiel’s face.

“I misjudged you, Lafiel.” Jinto seized this opportunity to score a point. “You have even less common — “

The look in Lafiel’s eyes made Jinto shut up and question his sanity.

“Is it at least airtight?” Lafiel asked.

“Of course, and there’s twelve hours’ worth of emergency oxygen.”

At the end of the hallway, they descended a flight of stairs below the surface. Beyond the stairs, there was a room with a bunch of display screens.

“Initiate funeral preparations,” Undertaker said to one of the screens.

“The funeral hall is closed.”

“Didn’t you hear? We’re reopening.”

“I can’t confirm that.”

“I hate disobedient machines,” commented Undertaker. “Daswani, if you will, please.”

Daswani nodded, and pulled a keyboard (Segeisu) out of his bag. He connected it to the Kuro and began typing with lightning-fast fingers.

“Voice input is usually faster, but Daswani is pretty good.”

“I can type faster than I can speak,” Daswani drawled.

“That’s the longest sentence I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth,” Bill said.

“What kind of fuel does it take?” asked Jinto.

“Hydrogen.”

“Hydrogen? Is it a nuclear fusion reaction?”

“No — combustion,” Undertaker explained.

“Somebody catch me if I faint,” bemoaned Lafiel.

“Don’t worry,” Undertaker assured them, “it’s been ages since our last accident.”

“There have been accidents?” Jinto’s eyes ballooned to the size of dinner plates.

“Poor phrasing on my part. Although a few coffins have blown up in the past, none of the passengers ever died as a result.”

“Oh, great.”

“Quit fooling around, Undertaker,” said Marca.

He grumbled a little, until Daswani looked up from his Segeisu and gave Undertaker the thumbs-up.

“Initiate funeral preparations,” said Undertaker. The machine whirred to life and began to guide Undertaker through a series of preparations.

Meanwhile, Marca took Jinto and Lafiel to the launch tube. “Let’s go, you two. Our destiny is calling.”

*

Struggling to extract information from the Imperial-style terminal, Kite cursed. Entoryua took a cruel satisfaction in Kite’s distress.

Eventually, Kite figured out how to translate the data. He appeared disgusted.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Clasbul-style funeral launches?”

“You never asked.” Entoryua shrugged, anticipating a blow to the face.

Sure enough, Kite clenched his hands into fists. But instead of punches, he pelted Entoryua with guffaws.

“Do they really think they can get away like that? There’s no way for her to escape this time.”

Kite spoke to the soldier next to him, who promptly began to issue flashlight signals.

*

A red light came on above the door leading to the third launch tube.

“Please wait while the casket is fueled and adjusted for flight.” An automated machine brought the new coffin into the launch tube.

“When I was a kid,” Bill reminisced, “they used to launch them from the surface. But now, with the growth of the city, they do it from these underground tubes. It’s strange, because the funeral hall was here first.”

Eternally nervous, Jinto had a new concern. “Hey, will the Labule mistake us for a weapon?”

“A hydrogen-propelled ship?” Lafiel wrinkled her elegant nose. “It would only be a good weapon if you wanted the Labule to laugh themselves to death.”

“Oh.”

“Besides, my Kreuno emits a friendly signal. They’ll recognize us as allies.”

“Marca,” Minh’s voice came through a loudspeaker. “They’ve come for us in the fire department’s ship. Not to worry, though, our launch preparations will be done in one minute.”

“What will you guys do if the enemy comes after you launch us?”

“We’ll be okay.” Marca smiled. “We’ve made allowances. We know Guzornyu like the back of our hands; there’s no way we’re going to let those clods catch us. You’ll have to be careful — you’re vulnerable once you leave the launch tube.”

“How can we be careful? We can’t steer it!”

“I know the Abh are atheists, but what about you?” Marca asked Jinto.

“Presbyterian Fundamentalist. Not devout or anything, though.”

“Then, Jinto, it’s up to you,” said Marca, placing a hand on his shoulder, “to pray.”

*

“Where are the reinforcements?” Kite demanded for at least the fifth time.

“They’re here,” announced a relieved soldier.

“Finally.”

Five aerial ships cluttered the airspace over the funeral hall, and began flickering their flashlights at each other in coded signals.

“Just five?” whined Kite. “This place is huge! Those ships don’t even look armed.”

“They want to know where to land,” said the soldier.

“I don’t know. All we can do is look for the rocket that’s about to launch and destroy it upon sight.”

Entoryua knew that the funeral hall fired all its coffins from underground, and that the ones on the surface were purely ornamental, but he wasn’t about to offer that information.

Come on, Abh. Hurry up. If I’m going to die here, I at least want the satisfaction of knowing that you outsmarted their entire army.

*

The light above launch door three turned from red to green.

“Hurry. It’ll launch in thirty seconds,” Minh announced through the loudspeaker.

“Please, don’t forget our Menyu,” Marca requested.

“Yes, I’ll ask without fail.” Lafiel climbed into the coffin.

“You too, young man,” prodded Bill.

“Okay. Thanks again, for everything.”

“Just return the favor, okay?” Bill winked.

Jinto laid down next to Lafiel. Almost instantly, the coffin sealed itself and was sucked through the door. It was pitch black.

“How humiliating,” muttered Lafiel, “riding in a ship with no external Frokaj, no Gooheik — no lights, for crying out loud!”

“This isn’t a ship,” Jinto reminded her. “It’s a coffin. For dead people.”

“You’re terrible. Don’t touch me.”

“I can’t help it — it’s too small to not touch you. Ow! Watch it — I’m wounded you know.”

“I thought it was just a scratch,” Lafiel said coldly.

“I’ve been known to exaggerate from time to ti-yi-yi!”

The coffin shook violently, prepared for liftoff.

*

“There it is!” squealed Kite. “Somebody shoot it down, already!”

Soldiers on the ground seemed more concerned with fumbling with their flashing-light signals. The coffin continued its solemn climb, and eventually its tail cleared the surface. The blast of wind from the exhaust sent many of the light-flickering soldiers tumbling.

The rocket-coffin kept ascending. It neared the firefighting vessel.

“Collide with it, if you must!” Kite bellowed.

The volunteer firefighter in the pilot’s seat just laughed. That was definitely *not* in the job description. In fact, to avoid a collision at all costs, the pilot actually moved out of the way.

Leaning so far out the window he nearly fell to his death, Kite fired at the rocket. “Shit! Why isn’t anyone else doing anything? Where are the anti-air units?”

Hot fumes of exhaust blew through the open window with turbulent force. By the time the occupants sorted themselves out, the makeshift ship was already high above them, its blazing tail pushing it ever higher.

“Damn it! Damn it all!” Kite resumed shooting.

The troops on the ground chose that as the sign to commence firing. It was too late, though; the coffin was already nearing the stratosphere.

“It’s no use,” conceded the soldier in the front seat.

Those words created an impulse to laugh that Entoryua could not suppress. The knowledge that it might lead to his death flashed through his mind, but still,

he laughed and laughed. He cackled until his eyes watered and his stomach hurt.

“Why do they have all the luck?” whined Kite. “God must really hate us. He can’t even give us a single break. They are always the ones who win.”

Entoryua finally understood — although Kite was a product of the same genetic engineering as the Abh, the two races existed in entirely different contexts. Kite’s hatred of the Abh wasn’t personal; it was racial prejudice, plain and simple.

Although he felt a twinge of pity for Kite, Entoryua kept laughing.

*

“Please, Aim Kasalia,” Lesheik Roifrode Spoor interrupted Cufadiss as he rattled off a seemingly endless list of coordinates, “spare me the details.” “But, Lesheik-“

“I trust you completely to clean up the land targets.” “I know, but I still have to make ex post facto reports.”

“Well, the Lesheik says it’s not necessary.” Spoor turned away from him. “This isn’t a battle, anyway. It’s more of an extermination.”

Funny, I was thinking the same thing. Cufadiss regretted proposing the operation.

They’d already apprehended fifteen thousand people who were in airspace surrounding Loebeynu Sufagnaum and transferred those people to a transport ship. They’d also dismantled the enemy’s aerial HQ.

After that, they released almost three hundred million electromagnetic wave bugs into the planet’s city centers. The Dembuus picked up electromagnetic wave signals and latched onto them, transmitting their own static on that wavelength. Even though they were not very powerful individually, their output in great numbers was enough to cripple any communications system. Getting rid of them would be a real pain in the neck.

Basically, there were a bunch of soldiers running around on the planet with no discernible headquarters to keep them in line, and even if there had been,

they wouldn't have been able to communicate with it anyway.

On top of that, the Futune roamed around, striking at enemy bases outside the main cities. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

"I just ask that you seek my permission before you do anything that might harm any Sos."

"Right." Cufadiss' head drooped.

"How many hours until the main force arrives?" asked Spoor.

"Should be here in four hours and fifteen minutes."

"I see." The Roifrode sighed. "Excuse me. I'm going to the Shil Lesheikal."

"Very good." Cufadiss saluted.

The Kasalia Drokia cleared his throat. "Aim Kasalia, there's an urgent message for you."

"Transfer it."

Cufadiss' Kreuno beeped, informing him of the incoming data. After a cursory glance at the message's contents, he called out to Spoor.

"What now?" Spoor asked in her most exasperated voice.

"The Lardbyrsh's *Bodoemia* just rescued some drifting refugees from satellite orbit."

"And?"

"Well, they claim to be Feia Borl Paryun and Lonyu Jarluker Dreur Haidar."

"Feia Borl Paryun?" Spoor sneered. "What, did the little princess run away from home?"

"No, I heard Feia was a Bene Lodair on the Resii *Gosroth*, and that Lonyu Jarluker Dreur Haidar was just along for the ride. Then — "

Cutting him off with a loud sigh, Spoor returned to her Lesheikibash. "Lighten up, Aim Kasalia. You're too serious."

He blinked. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize when you've done nothing wrong!"

“Sor-” he swallowed it. “Okay.”

“Thank you. So, they’ve been living on a Nahen. What’s their condition?”

“I’ll ask the Salerl of the *Bodoemia*. I can decide directly whether they’re fit to report directly to this ship.”

“Oh no!” grumbled the vice-admiral. “The very elegant Commander Spoor has been at odds with the coarse Abliar family for some time now.”

“So, should I just have them wait on the *Lardbyrsh* until Trife arrives?”

“Why would you do a thing like that?” Her crimson eyes looked directly into Cufadiss’ soul. “Invite them over — it sounds like fun.”

10 Return to a Strange World (Saimoth Lothlortaj)

Jadbyr Usem Futune's Glaga's recon vessel alighted on the landing-departure deck (Goriaav).

"We're here." Jinto rubbed his wounded shoulder, and snuck a glance at Lafiel. "What's the matter?"

"The Lesheik of this Jadbyr is Archduchess Letopanyu, of all people."

"What's wrong with Roifrode Spoor?"

"The noble Abliar and dastardly Spoor have been at odds for some time now."

Jinto grunted.

"On top of the embarrassment of being rescued by a Spoor, it had to happen while I'm dressed like this." Lafiel pulled at the fabric of her Clasbul-style one-piece.

"Boarding preparations complete," announced a coxswain (Ponowas) with the rank insignia of Rear Defense Officer (Rinjer). "This way please, Lonyu, Bene Lodair Abliar."

Lafiel saluted, and Jinto bowed and moved toward the Yadobel.

There were already ten officers gathered on the Goriaav. In the center of the group stood a woman who reminded Jinto of a carnivorous butterfly, equal parts bewitching and ferocious. Judging from the rank insignia, Jinto pinpointed her as Roifrode Spoor.

As soon as they stepped off the recon vessel's steps, Jinto bowed and Lafiel saluted. Spoor acknowledged Lafiel's salute with a facial expression, then bowed in return to Jinto.

"Welcome, Feia, Lonyu. Please, Feia, act as a member of the Ruejhe while on this ship." "But-"

"I won't accept responsibility for a Bene Lodair." Lafiel squeaked another

protest. Then, Spoor hit her with the knockout punch, “Mostly, I just can’t fathom a Bene Lodair dressed like that.”

Lafiel indignantly finished her salute. “It’s been a long time, Archduchess.”

“Indeed. Since Feia’s Kenru acceptance celebration banquet, correct?” She waited for Lafiel to nod. “Well, I certainly congratulate you on your accomplishments, but I must say — you look very different from the last time I saw you.”

“It was Jinto’s — Jarluk Dreu Haidar’s — idea.” “Good heavens!” Spoor gasped. “You mean Jarluk Dreu made you wear those clothes and dye your hair black?”

“These clothes are actually slightly more acceptable than the ones he first got for me to wear.”

“Oh my.” Spoor’s red eyes devoured Jinto’s soul. Jinto wasn’t sure what to do. Would Her Excellency the Archduchess (Lonyu Nim) understand that it had been necessary for their survival to blend in with the Clasbul natives?

“Forgive me, Lonyu.” Spoor bowed reverently, despite the fact that she definitely outranked Jinto.

“For what?”

“When I first heard that Feia Larth Barker enabled the establishment of Dreuhynu Haidar, I thought he was a sentimental fool. Why make someone Sif who doesn’t know the Abh way of life? Planet Martine didn’t even have sufficiently intimidating weapons. No offense.”

“Sentimental?” Jinto was still a second or two behind.

“But I was very wrong. Lonyu’s accomplishments are totally deserving of the rank of Dreu.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Jinto wasn’t even sure what she meant. *What accomplishments?*

“To offend an Abliar is to become an object of legendary hatred. Feia Lafiel of Lartei Kryb is an Abliar among Abliars — I’ve heard the flames of her wrath could give the Big Bang a run for its money.”

“Niif,” Lafiel attempted to interrupt, but Spoor just kept rolling.

“And you have made the very same Feia Lafiel dye her hair black and dress up in that circus costume. Even though I’ve seen it with my own eyes, I can hardly believe it. Forget Dreu, I’ll lobby to get you the Traiga of Loebe — Leikur even. My admiration for you is boundless.”

Feeling slightly insulted, Jinto drooped.

“Don’t worry, Jinto,” said Lafiel spitefully, “she’s just using you to tease me. Her very soul is as twisted as a double helix. Niimje Letopan’s Lonyu Benegu is a Spoor among Spoors; she’s elevated the refined insult to an art form.”

“Ho ho ho!” bellowed Spoor.

“Would you please loan me a Serlin, Niif?” grumbled Lafiel.

“Of course. Right away. And perhaps a bath for that hair?”

“It won’t come out in a bath.”

“Then how will you get it out?”

“I don’t know.” Lafiel looked at Jinto, as if he might know.

“There might have been some instructions in the package, but I think we threw those away or buried them or something,” Jinto scrambled.

Their gazes bore holes in his will to live.

“We could ask someone from Clasbul,” Jinto proposed.

“I just had the disturbing image,” shuddered Spoor, “of the Lodairl of my glorious Futune traveling to a Nahen that is still under enemy control. After wiping out the enemy’s resistance, their Serlin spattered with blood, they would capture a frightened Sif just to ask how to *remove hair dye*.”

“Oh yeah.” Jinto’s shoulders slumped even further.

“How about this: I’ll take one of Feia’s hairs and send it to the Kreuria, so they can analyze it and figure out how to wash it clean. Sound good?”

“Yes, thank you. Also, please take this.” Lafiel produced a Jeish. “It’s the flight log from the Resii *Gosroth*.”

The officers all bowed toward the memory sheet.

After a brief moment of solemn silence, Spoor motioned for one of them to take it. "Aim Kasalia, if you would, please."

The very worn-out Cufadiss complied.

"Well then, Feia, Jarluk, please follow me to your rooms. Or perhaps the count's son should go to the infirmary first?" Spoor stared at Jinto's wounded shoulder. "I knew Feia had a temper, but that seems excessive..."

"I didn't shoot him!"

*

Thirty-seven minutes later, the Resii *Keildij*, Trife's Glaga Byral, gingerly floated into Dath from Sord Sufagnaum.

Immediately, it was hit with a massive communication from the *Heirbyrsh*. The *Keildij*, an information glutton, ate it up readily.

"Lonyu," hailed Shewas Kahyuul.

"Yes?" Frode Trife asked slightly impatiently.

"We hear Feia Borl Paryun and Lonyu Jarluker Dreur Haidar have been rescued."

Trife's jaw dropped. *Unbelievable*. He knew that they were on the *Gosroth*, but... *What the hell are they doing here?*

"Did the *Gosroth* survive somehow?"

"Sadly, the *Gosroth* was destroyed, as we surmised."

"That's really a shame. Well, why is Feia Lartneir here?"

Kahyuul relayed the story, and Trife was duly impressed.

"Feia Lartneir managed to hold on to the *Gosroth's* log. We've found something very interesting in it."

"What's that?"

"We know where the enemy came from."

"Where?"

“Sord Kikotosokunbina Keik. The *Gosroth*’s Sarerl determined that they used it by somehow carrying a closed Sord all the way to Vascotton, four point one light ‘ years away.”

“Bomowas Lexshu was a good Lodairl.” Trife paced.

“Yes. I think she’s probably right. Even though we just started to analyze the data from the enemy ship we captured, I’ve got a feeling it’s going to back up her hypothesis.”

A Ja Fad popped up on the Gahorl Grawl.

“Between here and Sord Kikotosokunbina Keik,” explained Kahyuul, “there are two Skor: Borskor Gamtek and Lyumusko Febdak. If it’s possible, we should dispatch a Byr immediately and evacuate the Fapyut and Gosuklash.”

“A detour to Sord Kikotosokunbina Keik, huh? Can you contact Dreuhynu Vorlak?” Trife stopped walking and thought.

“We should try. Should we send the Futune?”

“Don’t they need a break?”

“There’s no other Jadbyr that can endure this mission,” declared Kahyuul.

“You’re right,” Trife acknowledged. “Okay, we’ll send Futune.”

“Right, but we can’t make the two refugees go along.”

“Why do you even waste time pointing out such obvious things? Arrange a ship to transfer them at once!”

*

“The surgery’s finished,” said the Gairit, who also happened to be a lander. He removed the medical support machine (Kreurpok) from Jinto’s shoulder. “It was almost good enough to make this unnecessary. It’s going to be inconvenient for a while, but it should heal completely by the time you reach Lakfakalle.”

The Gairit wrapped Jinto’s shoulder in a bandage and used a mysterious solvent to harden it.

“Thanks.” From elbow to shoulder, Jinto’s arm disappeared into a cast.

“They’ve delivered some clothes for you. I hope you like the design.” The

doctor handed him a Sorf.

Specially altered to accommodate Jinto's cast, the left sleeve appeared to hang loosely near the waist. Jinto fumbled to put it on. Dressing with only one arm sucked.

As if on cue, an aviator (Fektodai) entered the infirmary.

"This Jadbyr has been reassigned," he reported. "Lonyu is to leave the ship."

"Already?"

"The Sarerl sends her regrets — she was looking forward to dining with you and hearing of your adventures."

"Please give her my thanks." Waving goodbye and thanking the doctor, Jinto followed the aviator out the door and to the Gorlaav. The man told Jinto he would be at the Arosh in about three days and was surprised to hear that Jinto had never been there before.

When Jinto boarded the shuttle (Kariik), Lafiel was already inside. Her hair was back to its icy blue, and she wore a Serlin.

"Hey, you're back to normal," Jinto said cheerily. Although he had gotten used to the figure with black hair in the one-piece, he thought her original look suited her much better.

"Not quite," Lafiel said. "The color's faded."

Upon second inspection, the hair seemed to be paler than it was prior to the dye-job.

"Well, it looks good anyway," consoled Jinto.

"I can't believe you didn't notice the difference."

"It didn't change *that* much," he argued.

But Lafiel didn't want to hear it; she turned up her nose at him, and didn't listen to anything else he said until breakfast the next day.

11 Imperial Capital Lakfakalle (Arosh)

No one ever drew a successful map of the Arosh, primarily because its buildings weren't stationary — they changed positions while rolling through a gravitational curve in space. The Imperial Transportation Office (Saude Bir Arok) kept tabs on the buildings' relative locations, which changed constantly.

Consequently, it was called the City of Chaos (Birort Kuneiguna).

Using the Gaftonosh as a metaphor for the entire Empire, the city was also known as Base of the Dragons' Necks (Sath Nosher), because it was the point at which all the navigation routes (Biil) of the kingdoms (Fek) intersected.

A more accurate name for the city was City of Eight Gates (Birort Gasoder). Many star systems had multiple Sords, but this was the only one in the known human universe that had eight. They were, of course, all imported long ago, when they were closed gates (Sord Leza).

Since the greatest Empire in human history began in the Arosh, some referred to it as Cradle of the Empire (Gyrsaug Frybarar).

Due to its gruesome track record, the city was also known as Unsinkable (Dawatosaria).

Because many of the Abh lived in orbital mansions (Garish) and Menyu, their population was quite spread out. Consequently, the number of opportunities to meet people was low. To compensate, the Abh customarily spent about half their lives in the city, and nicknamed it the City of Love (Birort Neg).

However, in conversations, people mostly referred to Lakfakalle as “native home” (Muraut). People fell in love there, lived there, and created their children there. And although they usually left to pursue careers or military service, they often returned.

In honor of the city-ship that first brought the Abh into space, they named the fixed star that lit their capital *Abriel*. The emperor always took on the Traiga of

Count Abriel (Dreu Abliarsar) and the star system was known as the Territory of Count Abriel (Dreuhynu Abliarsar). The etymology of the word *Abriel* was rooted in the Abh's origins. The race of people who created the Abh to be their space-exploring minions worshipped a sun goddess with similar sounding name.

From a distance, the star appeared to be trapped in a cage of narrow, twisting fibers. Closer inspection revealed that each of the belt-shaped structures was actually five hundred Wesdaj wide, and each side facing the star contained solar batteries that powered Baish factories. It was the largest Baish factory (Joth) in the Frybar, and also the largest antimatter fuel factory in the known universe. In constant orbit six Zesadaj from the star, the Arosh Lakfakalle was usually three hundred Sedaj in diameter, and most often took the curved shape of a scythe's blade. The capital comprised the Imperial Palace (Reubei), Royal Palaces (Lartbei), Imperial Capital Residences (Garish Arok) of the landed nobility (Voda), collective residences (Barsh) of landed gentry (Ryuuk) and Lef, space gardens (Deiu), shops (Ileiv), Labule facilities, shipyards (Lori), and so on. It was an enormous gathering of artificial worlds, with countless Ponyu popping in and out of various ports, docking here and there. Each facility had a certain amount of mobility, and they were programmed to avoid collision automatically.

The eight Sords were lined up at equal intervals in an orbit one thousand Sedaj out from Lakfakalle. Revolving in the opposite direction of the Arosh, the Sords each dragged along their own mobile air fortresses (Lonid Horka).

The ship carrying Jinto and Lafiel came through one of those Sords, bringing them squarely into Dreuhynu Abliarsar.

*

Unlike the Pelia, the Longia resembled a smaller-scale passenger ship (Resibath). It was usually associated with carrying important visitors or messengers, so there were twelve guest rooms, each fully equipped with a Gorv. There was also a small meeting room on the ship.

Jinto snuck a peek into the common room, and saw Lafiel there, for a change.

"Is your written report finished already?" he called in to her.

"Yes." Lafiel faced Jinto and pointed to a large display screen on the wall. "What do you think of Lakfakalle?"

The Arosh was like many cities at night — a dazzling conglomeration of lights and motion. It looked to Jinto like a miniature model of a galaxy.

“It’s amazing. Even better than I thought.”

Lafiel smiled. Jinto grabbed a coffee (Surgu) and sat next to her.

He hadn’t lied — the city was truly amazing. However, it inspired a more profound emotion in his heart.

Loneliness.

Although the journey from Dreuhynu Vorlak to the Arosh took a significant detour, it would soon be over. And that meant saying goodbye to Lafiel — possibly forever.

Despite their impending separation, she holed herself up in her room to draw up the written report, emerging only at mealtimes.

“Did you hear from the Manowas?” Lafiel asked.

“No, what?”

“We’re going to the Ruebei.” “Directly?” he said, taken aback. “Yes. Spunej Erumita has many questions.” “For you?” he hoped.

“No. Well, yes. But she wants to talk to you.” Jinto chuckled nervously. “It’s probably no big deal for you, since she’s your grandmother.”

“It’s been a year since I’ve seen her.”

“Then there’s certainly a lot to talk about!”

“There will be some catching up,” Lafiel stated, “but

Erumita is busy. Don’t forget, the Frybar is at war.” “Right. Have you heard any news about that?” She shook her head. “Why? Are you worried?” “Of course. Remember where my home world is?” Count Hyde’s Territory was on the other side of the

battlefield. Jinto wasn’t so popular there — the people called him “son of the traitor.”

Since Fek Irik was semicircular, there were still

communications to that area. But just the thought of his home world being occupied like Loebhynu Sufagnaum gave Jinto the shivers.

The people of his home world would probably be more cooperative with an occupation army than the Sos of Sufagnoff, just because of their intense hatred of the Abh. Jinto didn't even want to think about what would happen to his father if Martine were invaded.

Even though Count Hyde was basically not present in Jinto's life, he was still the only parent Jinto had left.

"Oh, right." Lafiel blushed.

"It's okay. I forgot, too, while we were on Clasbul."

"Well, you did have other things to do."

The nearest structure in the Arosh came into focus. It consisted of a number of spheres on top of each other and wriggling tubes that looked like antennae. All in all, it was a weird-looking beast of a building.

"That's Lori Beitur. That's where the *Gosroth* was built."

"Nice!"

"And that," she pointed to something beyond the shipyard, "is a Somulornyu. There are many of those in Muraut. It's a padded cell with no gravity, where children go to master the laws of action and reaction and learn how to use their Alphas. If we don't do this at an early age, when the brains aren't fully formed, then the Rilbido won't develop."

Playing the eager tour guide, Lafiel continued to ramble excitedly. In turn, Jinto kept responding with the appropriate expression of awe. But he couldn't help his mind from wandering to thoughts of whether she dreaded their approaching parting as much as he did.

*

Almost as soon as they landed at the Imperial Palace (Ruebei), grave-looking chamberlains (Beikeburia) appeared and pulled Jinto away from Lafiel.

The escorted separation gave Jinto flashbacks to the incident at Lyumusko Febdak, but of course, he had no reason to worry any longer. They took Jinto to a large Gorv, where he relaxed in a hot bath.

By the time he emerged fresh and clean, a change of clothes waited for him. As the Gairit predicted, his shoulder was completely healed — fresh skin covered the hole over the wound, and the bone underneath it no longer hurt.

He climbed into a Sorf and long robe (Daush). An Alpha and Kreuno sat out for him, replacing the ones taken from him in Lyumusko Febdak.

Fully dressed in an Abh Nobleman's (Bar Sif's) uniform, Jinto signaled for the chamberlains.

"This way please," said one of the men.

There was a mobile platform (Jazria) waiting for him in the hallway.

"Step on, please."

Nodding, Jinto got onto the platform.

The man punched some buttons on the platform's Kuro, and the machine lurched into motion.

"Where are we going?" sought Jinto.

"I'm to bring you to the waiting room of the Wabes Bezorlot."

"Wabes Bezorlot? I thought that was only for the most important business —"

"Yes."

"And we're going there because ... ?"

The chamberlain raised an eyebrow. "You really don't know?"

Nervously, Jinto tried to laugh it off.

If at all possible, he didn't want even more people to figure out that he had less common sense than a garden slug.

*

"Quit fidgeting, Jinto," chided Lafiel, sipping on something that smelled fruity.

“I’ll do what I can, but you might be asking too much.” Jinto was a nervous wreck. “What should I do? Is there special etiquette?”

“It’s not important — just behave courteously and use your common sense.”

“We all know how that’ll turn out!”

“Just follow my lead. Walk up to the foot of the Skemsorl and give a bold salute. Don’t speak unless spoken to. Nothing to it, really.”

“You say that now...”

One of the Beikeburia came in. “Sorry to keep you waiting. We’re ready.”

“Thank you.” Jinto stood and walked toward the man.

“Wrong way.” Lafiel laughed and pointed to a huge door. “It’s over here.”

“Great, I’m off to a good start.”

“Just stand next to me, and try to match my walking speed. Stand up a little straighter. You’re a hero.”

The big door opened.

Gentle morning light filled the Audience Hall. A number of beams crisscrossed the ceiling, supporting a dispersion screen (Shyunobezia). Crest banners of the Voda who were part of the Frybar hung proudly from the beams. Jinto couldn’t help but notice the brand-new Gal Guraw of Dreujhe Haidar in the very front.

Surrounded on both sides by Sash Idar, Jinto and Lafiel walked along the black marble floor toward the foot of the Imperial throne.

Military musicians (Sash Arovot) played the Imperial national anthem (Rue Ol). They didn’t sing the lyrics, but Jinto knew them anyway — stereotypical Abh verse, unapologetically brash and adventurous.

To avoid gaffes like the one he made upon meeting Lafiel, Jinto spent a large percentage of the journey in the coordination ship memorizing the faces of distinguished people he might encounter. Thanks to that effort, he recognized three of the people in front of him.

Lafiel’s grandmother Erumita Spunej Ramaj was in the back, rising from her jade throne. To the Empress’ left (on a platform one step lower than the one

holding the Skemsorl, naturally) stood Lafiel's father, His Highness Debeus, King of Kryv (Larth Kryb Feia Debeuser). The boy next to Lafiel's father was undoubtedly her little brother, His Highness Buhiir, Viscount of Wemdaisu (Borl Wemdaisal Feia Duhir).

The sight of Lafiel's family threw Jinto for a loop; they all looked young enough to be her siblings. Actually, Larth Kryb looked older than the Empress to Jinto. Strange. Jinto just had no practical way to guess an Abh's age. He wondered whether they could tell by looking.

There was a white carpet at the foot of the throne. Lafiel knelt on it.

Jinto nervously copied her movements.

"Please, Jarluk Dreu," said a nearby voice, "there's no need for you to kneel."

He looked up and was surprised to see the Ramaj had come down from the Skemsorl and stood directly before him.

"Please. Stand up," she urged.

Jinto nodded obediently and stood.

"Please accept the gratitude of the Abliars, Jarluk. The young one here," the Empress indicated Lafiel, "is endowed with enormous potential. If not for you, we probably would not have seen her alive."

"No." Jinto blushed, "I really didn't do anything. She's the one who saved me."

"Not true, Jarluk." Ramaj took Jinto's hand. "If you hadn't taught her the importance of choosing your battles, she would have fought until it brought about her destruction. Historically, our family's tragic flaw has been the inability to know when to retreat. On top of that, this one's temper is particularly ferocious. Also, you are an Abh who knew how to survive on a Nahen. Without that rare quality, you might not be standing here right now."

Jinto was quite embarrassed, but not too much to notice that the Empress really bore a striking resemblance to Lafiel.

"I would also like to thank you personally," said Dubeus. "For people like us who live on Lakfakalle, a Nahen is a very foreign place. Most of us are born and

die without setting foot on a land world. You may find this strange, but a Nahen is even quite intimidating and frightening to the Abh. I cannot express the extent of my gratitude for bringing my daughter back.”

“But,” asserted Jinto, “there are some good people on Nahen, too, and without their help, the enemy surely would have captured us.”

Dubeus smiled. “We don’t mean to say that people on Nahen are all evil, just that the lives of landers and those of the Abh are extremely different. Clasbul’s full of people who hate us, and without your help, my daughter would not be here today.”

“Yes,” Ramaj agreed. “Based on the Lartnei’s written report, I know about the people who ultimately helped you escape. And they have my eternal thanks as well. But do not diminish your own contribution.”

“Most of the time, Lafiel had to save me — especially in Kesath.”

“That was a duty given to her by Bomowas Lexshu,” At the mention of the commander, a grief washed over Dubeus’ face. “It was an order for her to help you through Dath, but nobody ordered you to help her on the Nahen.”

“You’ve done well, Jarluk,” said Ramaj.

“Yeah, thanks for saving my sister,” chirped young Duhiir sincerely.

Duhiir’s sincere and meek gratitude pleased Jinto very much. The Empress’ and King’s thanks were too dignified and sort of embarrassing. Jinto couldn’t reconcile the words they spoke with the fact that they were about him. It was just too weird.

“I’m honored, Feia.” Jinto bowed to the youngster. “And Erumita and Feia Lalt-I’m greatly honored by your too-kind words.”

“Don’t be so modest,” Lafiel advised him.

“He’s doing just fine,” said the Empress.

“Look how pale he is! He looks like he’s being tortured.”

“I didn’t realize you and Jarluk Dreu Haidar were such good friends, Fal Fryum,” mused Dubeus.

“We spent a lot of time together, and we became friends, Father,” replied Lafiel.

“I see.” Dubeus continued to grin deviously. “Lafiel, it’s been so long — won’t you take a walk with your dear father?”

“Please do, Lafiel,” said Ramaj. “I have some unpleasant business to take care of. Jarluk Dreu, come with me. I have to give you some unfortunate news.”

Somehow, Jinto got even paler.

*

Lafiel crunched through white sand behind her father.

In the distance, a serene brook burred through the sand. The walls and ceiling of the room were also white— there was not a single color to be found.

There were several white pillars, inscribed with innumerable tiny names; those who died in the service of the Frybar. A person with sufficient patience would find names like Abriel mixed in with the landed gentry (Ryuuk) and Lef.

The sentence “The Frybar will not forget you” (Frybar A Darl Fronede) wrapped itself around the top of each pillar.

Since they ridiculed all organized religions, the Abh thought of the Hall of Remembrance (Greish Fronetara) as the closest thing to a holy place.

Dubeus stopped at the base of one of the pillars. “Welcome back, Dorfryum. I’m glad you’re here.” He paused to think for a moment. “Though we’ve effectively prevented the body from aging, there’s nothing we can do to stop the soul from getting old. Youth cannot last nearly as long as its appearance. I’m still coming to terms with that fact. But, at least we experience those days of innocence.”

Sighing, Dubeus returned his gaze to the pillar, fixed on one particular spot.

Curious, Lafiel came closer and read the name on the pillar — Lexshu Wef-Robel Plakia.

“I’ve never told you this, Fal Nej, but I never touched your genes. They’re the natural combination. That’s why your ears are kind of small for an Abliar.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Of course, it wasn’t necessary. Plakia really gave me a wonderful gift. Even if I tried to change anything, how could a man like me possibly make you any more beautiful?”

“Thanks, Father.” Lafiel struggled to understand her own emotions. “I’m happy to hear that.”

“Really?” doubted Dubeus. “I always thought you were slightly bitter about the ears.”

“I might have been,” she confessed.

“Yes, I suppose that’s unavoidable, Nouon.” Dubeus quieted and stared at the pillar some more. Lafiel stared, too.

Finally, Dubeus broke the silence. “Those really were great times. We were near a giant star on its way out, at the very edge of the event horizon, in the middle of star fog that’s just about to birth a new star... And Plakia and I loved each other very much, causing each other all kinds of problems.”

“Problems?”

Dubeus just smiled. “I’m glad, Asog, that you’re still too young to be in love.”

“You think so?” she half protested.

“As those days wheezed to an end, I couldn’t believe it. I could not help but dread the departure of that wonderful feeling. Thus, I thought, at least...” he trailed off.

“Are you saying that you made me as a memento of your time with Kyua Plakeir?”

Dubeus traced Lexshu’s name with his finger. “She was everything to me then. It was natural for me to try to hold on to a part of that moment forever, Seria.”

“I’m not a souvenir!” Lafiel said angrily. “And I’m not a replica of Kyua Plakeir.”

“Of course not, Loliyuuk Isarlot; Plakia never raised her voice for no reason.”

“For no reason?” demanded Lafiel loudly. Almost instantly, she grew quiet. “I thought you loved *me*, Father.”

“Of course I love you. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t call you Fal Nej?”

“Maybe that’s what you used to call her.”

“I love you as you, Gunar Abliarsar.”

“It’s hard for me to believe you, Father.”

“I know better than to try to change your mind. But please, remember this — you were born as Wabeido

Plakeir, and although you now greatly resemble her, your insides are completely different. At one time, my love passed you by in favor of Plakia, but now, she merely reminds me of *you*.”

Lafiel was torn. She had nothing but respect for Bomowas Lexshu as a person and an officer. But she wanted her father to recognize her as an independent and separate human being. And although he claimed to, she couldn’t help thinking he was just placating her.

“Was it your idea for me to board Kyua Plakeir’s ship, Father?”

“That would be too convenient to be just a coincidence. I wanted her to polish the treasure I raised.”

“Did you put Jinto on the *Gosroth* too?”

“Yes. Though that was closer to a coincidence. There were fifteen ships that could have picked up Jarluk Dreur, but I secretly lobbied for the *Gosroth*. I thought it would be good for you to have at least one Nahen-born friend. I didn’t think you’d become so close, however.”

“When did you become a puppeteer, Father? Next you’ll be telling me you arranged the United Mankind invasion!”

“You overestimate your old man, Fal Fryum. Those guys wouldn’t listen to me. They won’t even listen to your grandmother, who’s going to tear them to pieces.” He sighed. “I got Plakia to birth you, and I raised you alone. That time, however, is ending, because you’re already Fryum Frybaral.”

“Really?”

“She was a great woman.” Dubeus reminisced. “When we first met, I was just a Lowas, and she was an up-and-coming Fektodai. I can think of hundreds of reasons why I was enchanted by her, but for the life of me, can’t think of a single one why she would love me.”

“Maybe the Traiga of Feia.” Lafiel couldn’t believe she just said that. It was as if the anger she built up throughout this conversation manifested itself in one terrible, poisonous comment.

Dubeus’ eyes narrowed — although he had one of the most mild dispositions in his family, he was still an Abriel. “You knew Plakia since you were just a little girl. And you rode on her ship. Do you honestly think she was the kind of woman who is dazzled by social status? Answer honestly.”

Lafiel hung her head. “No. She wasn’t like that at all.”

Dubeus watched her for any tell-tale signs of lying. Her shame and regret were legitimate. “Then don’t say that kind of thing.”

Still staring at the sand, Lafiel nodded. “Please tell me one more thing. Do you know what she thought of me?”

“Yes. In a private message, she said, ‘I’m proud of her/’

“Proud...”

Mentally replaying all the days she spent with Plakia, Lafiel reconstructed the time she spent with the woman who would have been called her ‘mother’ on a land world. Overall, the memories were quite happy.

Her vision blurred, and there was something warm on her cheeks.

“Are you crying, Lafiel?” Dubeus said.

“Not because you scolded me, Father,” she choked out.

“Grieving Plakia’s death?”

Desperately trying to regain control of her convulsive sobs, she nodded.

“I must have done something terribly wrong in raising you,” he said quite affectionately. “I haven’t seen you cry since I took your diapers away, Sok

Jenna.”

Dubeus squeezed Lafiel and pulled her to his chest.

“Now, now. Our family has a reputation to uphold, you know. Abliars are cruel. Abliars are callous. Abliars don’t even blink as they watch their friends and lovers succumb to the cruel hand of death. If anyone knew that Abliars shed tears, all our hard work establishing that ignominy could go to waste. I don’t care if you get angry, and I don’t mind if you laugh sometimes. But an Abliar must not cry.”

“Teach me how to grieve like that,” Lafiel lifted her tear-drenched face from her father’s chest, “with no tears.”

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A man in uniform stood waiting in the room with the Spunej and Jinto.

“Roibomowas Bilskuus from Ryuazornyu Spaude Rirrag,” announced the Spunej. “Roibomowas, please explain the current situation to Jarluk Dreur.”

He nodded. Almost immediately, there was a projection of a Ja Fad in the middle of the room. It was a large-scale map that covered the whole human-inhabited universe.

The vicinity of Sord Sufagnaum was red.

“A battle occurred here, and the Labule recovered Loebehyu Sufagnaum.”

Blip! A red dot appeared between Loebehynu Sufagnaum and Dreuhynu Vorlak.

“This is Sord Kikotosokunbina Keik. That’s where the enemy army came from. The Jadbyr Futune investigated.”

A dotted red line extended from Sord Kikotosokunbina Keik, dividing Fek Irik in half. All the gates along the line turned red as well.

“They found that the enemy army had turned the neighboring Sords into military bases, and is completely obstructing passage. If that were it, the Labule could break though with no problem. However, the problem is here ...”

Another red sphere appeared on the opposite side of Fek Ilik. It birthed a red

arrow that advanced ominously toward Sord Ilik, the entrance to Lakfakalle.

“The enemy movements in the direction of Loebhynu Sufagnaum were simply a diversion. The real target was the Arosh, which they attacked with a force equivalent to a hundred twenty Jadbyr. We saw that coming, but we didn’t suspect they would open an invasion point to Fek Ilik.”

A blue arrow raced from Sord Ilik and collided with the red arrow.

“We counterattacked with a hundred forty Jabyr, under the command of Feia Glaharerl Rue Byrer. We repelled them, incurring significant damages in the process. We lost many excellent men, women, and ships.”

The Ja Fad disappeared.

“At this point, we know a few things. Right now, Rue Byrer has switched to pursuit, and reports that they’re performing recon of the invasion point district. There’s no mistake that the enemy is building its defenses there. Our side doesn’t have nearly enough reserve strength to conduct a large-scale military operation — while rebuilding the Labule, we have to keep enough troops on hand to defend the frontiers and to investigate whether there are other invasion points. To strike the two walls that appeared in Fek Ilik, we would need three years to prepare. Currently, we have no more than one Jadbyr’s worth of troop strength beyond the walls. And that’s fairly generous — in reality, they are scattered and disorganized. If the enemy implements a full-scale invasion of that territory, we won’t be able to resist.”

Jinto understood what this meant for Dreuhynu Haidar, which lay beyond that wall.

“I’m very sorry, Jarluk Dreur,” said the Empress with earnest feeling. “In exchange for the good news you brought with you, we can offer you only this kind of bad news. Sadly, in order to save one part of the Empire, we have to expose other parts to danger. Communication with your Aith has been cut off, and there is no hope of recovering it for the time being.”

He couldn’t speak. Dreuhynu Haidar was his old home, and it was also his only remaining link to Dreuhynu Vorlak, which was where all his friends lived.

But, most shocking of all, in spite of everything, Jinto really didn’t feel the

least bit sad.

12 Daughter of the Empire (Fryum Frybaral)

On the very same day Jinto and Lafiel arrived in Lakfakalle, a Former Emperors' Congress (Luzei Fanigalak) congregated in the Ruebei.

The Luzei Fanigalak consisted of ex-emperors (Faniiga), each chosen from one of the eight royal houses (Ga Lartei). Its only responsibility was to promote, reward, or punish officers who were members of the Fasanzoerl.

It was the policy that the member of the Imperial family who demonstrated the most excellence of a particular generation would sit on the Skemsorl Roen. This was a tough distinction to make, and the Luzei Fanigalak considered the question from every angle.

The day of Lafiel's return, the topic of discussion was whether First Princess (Lartnei Kasna) of the Lartei Kryb was suitable as a Lodairl — or, more precisely, as a candidate for Spunej.

The Congress lasted five days, poring over Lafiel's Written report and the testimony of Lyuf Raika and the Gosuk salvaged from Lyumusko Febdak.

On the last day, they summoned Lafiel to the Hall of Former Emperors (Wabes Faningalak).

A circular room with a Gaftonosh drawn in the center of its floor, the Wabes Fanigalak had a platform near the front.

When Lafiel stated her name, holograms of the Faniiga appeared. *Old souls*, her father's words reverberated, *in young bodies*.

She bowed demurely.

"After assembling to determine whether Feia Lafiel of Lartei Kryb is suitable to be appointed as a Lodairl, we wanted to ask her a few questions directly," declared Spunej Raika, His Grace Dugath (Nisothe Dugath).

"Please, let us see your face, Feia Lafiel," requested the oldest of the

Fasanzoerl, His Grace Dusuum (Nisoth Dusuumar) of the Lartei Balgzeder.

She complied, and the eight Faniiga gazed upon her.

Although Duguth was the youngest of the Faniiga, he was already more than two hundred years old. He had a childish face with a mature expression.

Dusuum looked over two hundred. Bleached by time, his long hair had faded into a pale lavender and fell in ringlets on his shoulder. His eyes were perpetually shut — it was rumored that he *never* opened them and relied exclusively on his Frokaj.

Normally unflappable, Lafiel felt extremely nervous.

It was her first appearance in front of the Luzei Fanigalak, but she'd heard plenty of stories. From what everyone said, it seemed as if Faniiga had nothing better to do than sit around and find faults with everyone.

"Radeuraj Burkrag is very tedious," Dugath explained, seeming to read her mind. "It's hard for you to understand, but we take no pleasure in criticizing. Some of us have led Byr of a hundred thousand ships and destroyed entire interstellar nations. After that, how could we enjoy this kind of drudgery?"

Nisoth Durad, who led the Shashain Campaign more than a hundred years earlier, nodded at the reference to his accomplishments.

"However, on rare occasions, it is at least interesting, Feia." Lamronyu of the Lartei Weskor certainly had a way of making the Traiga of Feia sound insignificant.

"We found all kinds of carelessness in your actions. It's especially hard to forgive your oversight in letting the atmosphere out of Lyumex Febdak," said Dugath.

"Yes, we've received a petition from Lyuf Raika Febdak," said Lamyuunyu of the Lartei Skirh, "that we place no blame on you for what happened in the Lyumusko. He doesn't understand that it's not the Luzei Fanigalak job to charge you with crimes — we just gauge your suitability as a Lodairl."

Instinctually, Lafiel remained still.

"The atmosphere leak is serious. You never know what will happen during

battle. Even though we are Karsarl Gereulak, you must know that we can't live without atmosphere," Duguth said.

"Yes." Lafiel's nervousness increased.

"However, Feia, the Luzei Fanigalak unanimously agrees it would be an understandable blunder for a young Bene," said Dusuum, assuaging Lafiel. "All of the people in this room had less adventurous campaigns as Bene, and there are more than a handful in this very room who made magnificent errors as Lodairl. Nisothe Lamron, remember when you stood in that spot, accepting a demotion from Frode to Bomowas?"

"Nisothe," Lamronyu protested, face reddening, "perhaps we should stick to the matter at hand."

"Now, there are two points," Dusuum continued, "that even we can't overlook. I'd like to hear your take on these incidents."

"I'd like to give it." Lafiel looked resolutely at the oldest of the Abriels.

Would the old man, who had abandoned his vision, be able to detect the outward arrogance of the young Abriel? For an instant, a wry smile formed on his lips.

"Feia," he began, "in Lyumusko Febdak, did you make use of your Fasanzerl status to incite rebellion against the Lyuf?"

Duguth cut in, before she could answer. "Abliars have a reputation for Imperial wrath. I must admit, that even I have been known to lose my temper from time to time. However, the Bitsairl approve of our rule, even respect and love us. Know why? Because we make a clear distinction between personal anger and Frybar offense. If ever there were an Abliar on the Skemsorl Roen who used the Rue Greu as a club of emotion, our subjects would all lose their trust in us. Ever since our Skurleteria, the main purpose of the Luzei Fanigalak is to prevent such a person from advancing to the Skemsorl. Furthermore..."

"Excuse me, Nisothe," interrupted Lafiel.

"Please, speak, Feia," encouraged Dusuum.

"I don't use the social status to influence people, certainly not to spur

rebellion. As a Labule Bosnal, I requested Lef cooperation when the Lyuf interfered with my official duty.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Dugath *harrumphed*, folding his arms. “But, Feia, if you didn’t have the name of Abliar on your side, do you think it would have worked out the same way?”

“That kind of speculation does not concern me.”

Dugath’s eyebrows drew together. “What do you mean?”

“It was battle. Luck plays a role in every battle, whether you want to admit it or not. In this case, I was fortunate to be an Abliar.”

“What if you were just a Ryuuk?”

“My actions would have been the same,” she answered immediately. “To this day, I haven’t thought of an alternate way to accomplish that mission.”

Dusuum smiled. “For a young chickadee, I must admit, you struggled through quite well.”

Lafiel wondered whether he referred to the ordeal in Baron Febdash’s territory or her answer to the question.

“Very well. With the Faniiga’s approval, I’d like to close that inquiry. Objections?” Dugath waited.

There were no objections.

“Good. Next point, Feia,” he said. “This is more serious, because it relates to the very foundation of the F’ybar. You promised to give a Menyu to Sos in Loebehynu Sufagnaum.”

“Not true!” protested Lafiel. “I merely promised to ask Spunej Erumita to lend them a Menyu.”

“Which might not sound unreasonable to a young chickadee, but perhaps you don’t understand the gravity of Fasanzoerl words. If an Abliar hints at the mere possibility, people hold it as gospel. Then, if it doesn’t happen, they think you are a liar.”

“And, in this case,” added Lamyuunyu, “you were probably aware that you

lied to save your own skin. This is undeniably disgraceful!”

“Nisoeth, that is a very one-sided way of looking at it!” Lafiel raised her voice against her own better judgment.

“For starters, a request like that could never be granted,” Dugath stated calmly. “Under the Frybar’s Darfass, no one below the social station of Ryuuk can borrow a Menyu. Didn’t you know that?”

Lafiel bit her lip and shook her head.

It was hard enough to grasp the basic regulations of the Frybar, let alone the fringe clauses!

“Then, how should we settle it?” Dugath shook his head. “Although you didn’t know the usual customs, you probably would have understood it if you thought about it a little. The Frybar and Semei Sos protect the territorial citizens. Thus, the territorial citizens are not even directly connected to the Frybar. Knowing that, why would we ever loan them a Menyu?”

“It was thoughtless, Feia,” concluded Lamronyu.

Flustered, Lafiel didn’t know what to do. She certainly hadn’t made any promises, except to discuss it. It made her angry that the elders considered this unreasonable. She had given consideration to the weight of Fasanzoerl words — after all, when she was in Lyumusko Febdak, the Gosuk definitely misinterpreted her words.

Then, there was a loud, rolling laugh. It was Nisoeth Dusem of Lartei Barker, who until that moment had been completely silent.

“Nisoeth,” Dusem implored. “As Nisoeth Dugath said, it’s cruel to condemn someone whose wings haven’t yet sprouted feathers! And regardless, this Lartnei didn’t tell a cowardly lie — she just told the truth.”

Secretly, Lafiel thanked the helping hand from the unexpected source.

“I still say that’s insufficient, Nisoeth. Those Sos will doubtless claim great deception from an Abliar. And that’s a problem,” declared Dugoth.

“Then why don’t we lend them a Menyu?” suggested Dusem cheerfully.

“Really, Nisoeth. Must I repeat the words of Nisoeth Durad? No one — “

“Those Sos saved a Fryum Frybaral,” Dusem butted in. “That merits a promotions to Ryuuk status in my book. And if they’re conferred as Ryuuk, we can go ahead and loan them a Menyu.”

“Sos promoted to Ryuuk?” Dularz’ eyes bulged out of his head. “There’s no precedent!”

Dusem shrugged.

“Just a minute, Nisothe,” interjected Her Grace Lamorz (Nisothe Lamdorl) of Lartei Ilik. “According to the written report, these people advocate secession and independence from the Frybar. Do you honestly think they’ll happily become Imperial Ryuuk?”

“They’re free to refuse, but then we simply cannot loan them a Menyu.” He smiled mischievously. “There’s a Byr Wakeil in Loebhynu Sufagnaum right now, so we should be able to find them. We’ll announce that we’re conferring them as Ryuuk in front of ten thousand people. If they agree, we can loan them a ship. If not, we could give them a medal of courage or something.”

“The Labule isn’t really set up for that kind of operation,” pointed out Lamorz.

“If the Labule can’t handle it, we could use the Gal Skas.”

This is getting ridiculous. Lafiel paled.

In accordance with its name, the Imperial Crest Medal Institution (Gal Skas) was set up to award Sif and Ryuuk medals, and to be the government office that supervised genealogy. Currently, however, the Gal Skas primarily concerned itself with secret investigations of territories and Aith, acting as a kind of Abh secret police.

“I thought we were looking for a way to thank them,” Dularz said.

“Of course we are. I’ll never be called an ingrate!” Dusem waved his arms around wildly, causing the sleeves of his vestment (Feksei) to flap. “Let’s hold the investiture ceremony on Planet Clasbul, and invite the radicals to be our guests.”

Seven of the eight Faniiga turned inquisitive looks to Dusem.

“I’ve looked into it; those who advocate secession from the Frybar often feel

they aren't oppressed enough—

“Is Nisoeth suggesting we oppress them, in order to make them happy?”

“Certainly not. If we did something like that, it would cause too many problems for the Labule and Gal Skas, who already have their hands full. I don't know about you,” Dusem's smile became even more gruesome, “but I don't mind being hated as long as I'm not despised. I just want the Sos to realize that the Frybar is capable of oppressing them, but we *choose* not to. I want them to realize that, if we felt like it, we could track down everyone in opposition to the Frybar.”

Lamyuunyu smiled pleasantly. “Spoor, for some time now, I've known that the Fiith of Lartei Barker isn't Abliar. You have such tricky ideas.”

Unable to contain herself, Lafiel cracked. “I must say, Nisoeth. I am grateful to those people — I even liked them. Their circumstances are different from ours, but they are still people with their own kind of pride. Please, Nisoeth, do not take your anger out on them.”

Dusem spread out his arms. “It's not unreasonable to accept some misunderstandings, when we ourselves are misunderstood by our own kind. Seriously, Feia, I wish to thank them.”

Lamorz grumbled.

“But, Nisoeth, we don't have the power to decide that kind of thing,” noted Dularz.

“We can still recommend it to Ramaj Erumita. It won't take long. Hold on, please.”

Instantly, Dusem's hologram vanished.

The remaining holograms of the Faniiga froze, perhaps to discuss something out of reach of Lafiel's famous ears.

Eventually, Dusem returned, and the other holograms reanimated.

Ramaj's disembodied voice echoed through the Hall, “Nisoeth Dusem has filled me in on the situation. I have been racking my brains for an appropriate way to thank those Sos, and I appreciate Nisoeth's advice. I will arrange it at once, in the

name of the Spunej.”

“Then this is decided,” concluded Dusem.

Grumpily, Dugath nodded. “Then there is no fear of damage to the honor of the Abliars.”

It didn’t sit right with Dularz. “It is not the role of the Luzei Fanigalak to patch up the Bene Lodair’s failures.”

“Who else but old birds can teach the chicks to fly?” shot back Dusem.

“At any rate, we must come to a conclusion. We have no more questions for Feia Lafiel,” stated Dusuum. “Let’s hear Nisoth’s opinions.”

“I acknowledge Feia Lafiel has the aptitude for a Lodairl.” With that, Lamyuunyu put her hand to her shoulder, and her hologram disappeared.

“I have no objections.” Hand on his shoulder, Lamorz blipped away.

“This is an aberrant departure from custom.” Dularz shook his head and put a hand to his shoulder. “I suppose it couldn’t be avoided.”

“Yes, I enjoyed that it distracts them from my dishonorable past.” Lamronyu winked and vanished.

“For some reason, I feel as if I’m looking upon my own daughter when she was small,” said Nisoth Lameimar, Lafiel’s great-grandmother, who had not spoken throughout the whole proceeding. “Please, come to visit before you settle into your new post.”

“Yeah, you really do resemble Ramaj Erumita. Maybe someday, you can stab my son in the back!” Dusem joked before dematerializing.

“We will meet again, young chick. I certainly hope it’s a more straightforward review next time,” said Dusuum.

“Congratulations, Fektodai Abliar.” Dugath made a half salute and *poofed* away.

*

To the Abh, who were not at the mercy of the weather, seasons were not associated with increments of time— rather, they were linked to specific

locations. There were four gardens in the Lartbei Kryb, one each for summer, spring, autumn, and winter. The gardens' ecosystems were regulated to match the stereotypical conception of the corresponding season.

On a wooden bench in the autumn garden, Jinto sat, watching maple leaves dance in a gentle breeze.

"There you are."

He turned and saw Lafiel standing there. For once, she wasn't in uniform; she wore a flashy Lartnei's Alpha, and a golden Daush over a light green Sorf. In her arms, a kitten purred softly as she stroked it.

"It's very peaceful here."

"Were you thinking about your Aith?" asked Lafiel.

"No. And I wasn't thinking about my native world, either."

"Not at all?" she asked, taken aback.

"Really. Even when I heard that the ties with my native world were completely severed, for some reason, I wasn't sad at all. I actually felt kind of relieved, as if a heavy burden were lifted off my shoulders. I know that's terrible ..."

"Aren't you worried about your father?" Lafiel seemed baffled.

"I want to be, but I'm not. He'll probably be just fine. My father's a survivor. If we could make it out of Clasbul, then surely..."

Jinto knew it was balderdash. The ecosystem of Martine was hostile to humans, and they learned this at a very young age. There would be no place for his father to hide, but in the buildings of Martine, where he would certainly be discovered during even a rudimentary search. Most of the people of Martine hated Jinto's father.

Dreu Haidar is probably already no longer of this world.

"Who's your friend?" Jinto asked, indicating the cat.

"Diaho, the son of Zeneria, who is Horia's daughter." She set the kitten down on the bench. "Zeneria had a litter while I was on the training cruise."

The name Horia sounded familiar to Jinto. *Oh yeah, that's the name of the cat Lafiel used to think was her mother!*

"So ... I guess that makes you this cat's aunt."

"Onyu."

Jinto held out his hand, and the cat rubbed his face on it.

"Isn't he adorable?" Jinto scratched the kitten's throat.

"You enroll in Kenru Sazoir tomorrow."

"Yes. They're coming to get me as soon as breakfast is over. There's a war, you know, so many enrollments have to be processed in a hurry. It's kind of daunting — the start of three long years of school life." He turned to Lafiel.

"What about you?"

"I haven't decided which ship I'll board yet."

"You should take your time — once you commit, you'll be in a battle encampment for a long time."

"Yes." She nodded. "Three years? You'll be a Fektodai Sazoirl in three years?"

"Assuming everything goes according to plan."

"By that time, I'll probably be a Rowas. I should be able to get a small ship — a Leit or a Gel. Probably not an assault ship."

"That's right." Jinto continued to pet Diaho, unsure what he was supposed to say.

"A Gel needs a Fektodai Sazoirl as a Wiigt. And according to Labule tradition, to a certain degree, the captain gets a say in choosing the ship's personnel. Of course, it's not absolute — the officer's own wishes must be taken into account." She waited.

Jinto finally understood what he was supposed to say.

"Future Rowas Abliar," he said grandly, "when you get a ship, if there exists a person called Fektodai Sazoirl Linn, please summon him, as your faithful Wiigt, by all means."

Lafiel's face lit up. "If that's what you really want. But, I must warn you: I am

committed to becoming a Rowas in three years' time, so you'd better do your part to graduate on schedule."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll work hard, Lafiel."

"Then, I'll see you again at breakfast, Jinto." Excitedly, she stood to go. "I've got things to do."

"What about Diaho?" Jinto held up the kitten, which batted its paws at a floating leaf.

"He likes you, and he's not doing anything right now. Maybe you should talk to him for a while." She walked away.

Setting the kitten on his lap, Jinto said, "You sure don't have much to say, do you pal?"

Diaho chewed playfully on Jinto's clothes.

While the cat continued to gnaw little holes in Jinto's Sorf, he fell into deep thought.

I'm glad I'll be able to be with you again, Lafiel.

Although I'll live only half as long as you, I will stay by your side as long as I can. Whether you take your place on the Skemsorl Roen or are bested and scattered in Fath, I will always be there beside you.

Even if you hate it.

That is my intention, and the future I've chosen for myself.

The value of a human life is only as high as the worth of the freedoms with which we're born. Maybe if I were Ku Dorin, I would grimace and suggest that it is too early to sell my freedom. But I can't imagine an offer this good coming my way again.

For some reason, Jinto's thoughts turned to the exotic jungles of Planet Martine, the backdrop against which the Martinese were wed. He wasn't thinking about weddings, just a change of scenery from the Gereulash.

"What do you think, Diaho," he mused, "about this Jinto fellow?"

The kitten mewed.

13 Final Chapter

“They’re taking the Futune away from me?” demanded Spoor.

“Well, it would be highly irregular for someone with the Renyu of Frode to serve as Lesheik Jadbyral,” explained the hologram of Peace Protection Office Commander-in-Chief (Glaharerl Shutymmer) Star Force Fleet Admiral (Spen Labular) Unyuush. “As you know, we lost a considerable number of ships in the battle three years ago. We’ve put our battle array in order at last. You will lead a Byr, carrying one wing under Fofrode Trife.”

“Which Byr?” Spoor asked in disbelief.

“It hasn’t been assembled yet. For the time being, you will serve as Roiglaharerl Shutymmer. But that will only last until the time is right to remind the enemy of the existence of the Rue Labule.”

“Is it decided which ship I’ll board? I’m quite fond of the *Heirbyrsh*, you know.”

“It will definitely not be the *Heirbyrsh*, because that’s Futune’s Glaga. Please surrender to rear duty. For now, that is all.” Unyuush seemed rushed. “The personnel notice will come into effect in three days. Until then, you’ll make the arrangements. Please, be prepared to discuss personnel matters at the new Glagaf. Congratulations, Frode Spoor. Now, please excuse me.” The hologram disappeared.

Spoor stared at the traces of the vanishing image. “Congratulations? Do they honestly think I care about titles? I’m already a Niif!”

Eavesdropping, Cufadiss felt slightly relieved. Spoor was a tough boss. After three years, Cufadiss thought he would be used to her, but that was purely wishful thinking. She was selfish and capricious, and — worse than anything else — a terribly efficient commander!

“Why are you smiling so much, Aim Kasalia?” Spoor snapped Cufadiss out of

his pleasant daydreams of less demanding commanders.

“What? Nothing! I don’t know. What happened?”

“It’s okay that you’re happy. Please, be quick with your personal arrangements.”

“Say what?”

“You heard the news. We will depart to consult on personnel matters at the new Glagaf. After all, you’re the new Was Kasaler.”

“Hold on just a minute.” Cufadiss panicked. “I’m a Bomowas. The Renyu doesn’t match.”

“It’s high time you got a promotion! Three years? I’ll push it through myself. I can’t advance and not share some of the joy with the officers who helped this to happen. Congratulations, Shewas Cufadiss.”

“Can’t... bear ... the ... joy.”

“Is there a problem?” Spoor crossed her arms.

“No, no, I’m very honored, thank you very much.” He nodded maniacally.

“You’re welcome. And that goes for everyone — you’re all promoted. I’m taking everyone with me!”

As cheers broke out on the command seat bridge, Cufadiss let loose a sigh of enormous proportions.

*

“When I left my beloved husband and children to travel into deep space, this is not what I had in mind,” Marca grumbled.

“Eh, what can you do?” pondered Undertaker.

“We’re not even flying the ship!” Bill took a swig of some booze. “Load the cargo, unload the cargo, sit, drink, and repeat!”

“Eh, what can you do?”

“At least we’re making money,” Minh said between gulps of liquor. “I know I feel better, thinking about the funds we’re raising for the Clasbul Independence

war that will inevitably occur one day. And we're doing this with the Frybar's cooperation. Not so bad."

"Not so bad?" Bill probably drank more than anybody. " 'Please, Kyuuk Ryuukar, deliver this pork shoulder to the next town'? I can't take it!"

"Eh, what can you do?"

"Hey, we're getting to see all kinds of worlds, giving us more insight into the independence struggle. Once the war is over, we can choose the destination of this ship."

"Once the war is over?" Marca threw up her hands. "When will it ever end?"

"Exactly." Bill looked at Daswani. "If you can hack into this ship's Datykirl, I can overpower the crew."

Silently, the big man shook his head.

"Then what should we do?"

"What *can* we do?" corrected Undertaker, quite pleased with himself.

"Can't you say anything else? It's starting to get really old." Marca glared.

"Sure. Did I ever tell you the story about the man who jumped into the thorns?"

Everybody groaned.

*

Loenhynu Sufagnaum: Luna Vega City Police Department...

"The results are in!" proclaimed a young man as he burst into Entoryua's office.

The inspector looked up from the screen on his desk. He could tell from the man's expression, but had to ask anyway. "And?"

"At last, we're free from Superintendent Aizan's rule!"

Entoryua grinned. "He never should have cooperated with the occupation army."

"His supporters are throwing a hissy fit. They say it's a violation of election

laws for a working Inspector to publicly decry the Superintendent.”

“I just relayed the facts of the report. What’s wrong with telling the truth?”

“Exactly!” the young man laughed. “At any rate, Inspector, I’m going to go spread the good news.”

“They haven’t heard already?”

“They probably have. But I’ll tell them again. It’s good news, no matter how many times you hear it.”

The man disappeared in a whirlwind of enthusiasm. Entoryua returned his gaze to the screen, on which there was a letter from Military Police Captain Kite, sent from Suituur POW camp (Loneugvi Suitur), in the faraway Fek Weskor.

*

About three light seconds away from the Arosh, on the fixed star Abriel side, an antimatter fuel inspection vessel (Radeuia Vekekar) hurtled through space.

“That was really close,” Seelnay commented as she removed her Gono. “The magnetic flux density was very low, but the remote observation mechanism’s Datykirl was pretty much shot, so I swapped it out for...”

“Don’t lie to me,” interrupted Alusa.

Seelnay’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I just got a message from Greida — the authorities are suspicious that you’re repairing perfectly functioning Baikok.”

“What?” Seelnay’s face tightened.

“Yeah, they’re concerned about the number of unexpected abnormalities the Seelnay Company is finding with their Baikok. They want to know why, but I think they already have a pretty good guess.”

Seelnay gulped. “It’s okay,” she intoned boldly. “Lartei Kryb has our backs.”

“After they were generous enough to give us the funds to start this business, I think asking them to help us rip people off is going a bit too far, don’t you?”

Seelnay hung her head.

“The authorities are looking for an excuse to throw the book at you, so just charge them for the inspection this time.”

“But, that’s not fair — I repaired it. I replaced the flux density meter, and rewrote the Datykril!”

“Yes, we’ll just subtract those costs from your share.”

“You can’t do that!” she whined. “I’m the company president!” It was only an idle threat, however — she knew that without Greida and Alusa, the Seelnay Company would go downhill in a hurry. As Seelnay saw it, the biggest problem was that they both knew that, too.

*

At the Imperial Capital Lakfakalle, in the reception hall of Baron Febdash’s Imperial mansion (Garish Arok Lyum Febdak).

“Wow, time sure flies ... Has it really been three years already?” The old man held out his hand for Jinto. “You’re looking a lot more manly these days, Faneb!”

“Yes, and you haven’t changed a bit, Lonyu Lyum,” said Jinto, grasping the old man’s hand.

“Luckily, I’ve still got my health, too.” The Lyuf Raika sat and motioned for Jinto to do the same. “I hear you’ve succeeded to the Dreujhe.”

Nodding, Jinto took a seat.

Jinto heard of the execution of the former Dreu Haidar (his father) through a United Mankind broadcast. At that time, Jinto became a Count (Dreu), even though he hadn’t yet finished his military service. He was able to bypass a couple of the regulations because the Lartei Kryb took over as his legal guardian.

The news broadcast brought even more interesting information: the new Hyde Star System Prime Minister, a firm supporter of the United Mankind, vowed to resist the Frybar until his dying day. The man was none other than Teal Clint, once Jinto’s surrogate father.

“I’m not sure whether condolences or congratulations are in order, Lonyu

Dreur, so I'll offer the latter," said the former baron.

"Thank you," said Jinto appreciatively. Since he'd had so much time to prepare for the event of his father's death, he came to terms with it before it actually happened. Thus, the old man's mention of it did not really affect him. "But please, don't call me Lonyu Dreur. I don't even have a Ribeun."

"Okay, Faneb."

Jinto smiled wryly. "I'm not sure that's any better. I'm not a boy anymore, you know."

"Yes, you must be twenty years old now, right? A fully-fledged adult. This creates a dilemma. What to call you? Wansh? That doesn't seem right..."

"Jinto works. Or, if you're feeling fancy, I kind of like Fektodai Sazoirl Linn, because I worked pretty hard for it." "That's right! Even more congratulations are in order!"

Jinto thanked him again.

"Can I interest you in something to drink?" The old man started poking at his Kreuno. "I know it's a little bit early, but are you hungry?"

Jinto refused politely, saying that he didn't really have much time.

"It makes me feel even more honored that you'd come to visit me when you're so busy!"

Seeing a tinge of profound loneliness cross the Lyuf Raika's face, Jinto felt incredibly guilty for not coming sooner. "You know, I wanted to come after my training flight, when I had a holiday, but there was just so much to do ..."

The old man chuckled. "I know, I know, Faneb. I was young and in the military once myself. I'm grateful you remembered this old dotard at all."

"I thought I had to visit here. Isn't that what you said?"

"Ha! Yes. Lakfakalle is full of my old friends, but I can't relax around them, when I see how young they all are."

"I know what you mean."

An amused grin appeared on the man's wrinkled face. "Remember I said the

same thing three years ago?”

“Really?”

“It’s not a good sign, Faneb, for you to remember even less than an old man like me! Anyway, I won’t bore you with my ramblings for too much longer.”

“I’m not bored.”

“Well, at any rate, I won’t force you to stay; I know you don’t have any time.”

“I can stay a little while longer.”

Waving his hand, the Lyuf Raika dismissed him. “That’s great news, Faneb, because these old ears are really looking forward to hearing some of your exploits. At least tell me this — where’s your new post?”

*

“I’m stationed as the Wiigt on the Gel *Basroil*.”

“I’m not surprised to hear you’re stationed on a Gel, but I’ve never heard of that particular ship before.”

“You’ve never heard of it because it’s brand-new,” Jinto explained. “But it’ll be famous soon.”

“Because of its Wiigt?”

“Of course,” he joked, “but also because the Manowas is an Abliar.”

“Oh ho!” The old man was genuinely impressed. “Now, I understand why you’re so busy all the time! Be sure to say hi to your girlfriend, Feia Borl Paryun!”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Jinto mumbled as he rose. “Anyway, I’m sorry to be in such a hurry.”

“Don’t worry about it. But do come back whenever you can spare a few minutes to be bored to death by an old man.”

“I will visit again, Lonyu Lyum Raika. Take care.” Jinto saluted.

“Of course I will, Faneb,” cackled the old man mischievously.

The Arosh Lakfakalle: the Gahorl of the Gel *Basroil*.

Wow. Here it is, fresh from Lori Lespor. I can't believe how new everything is — it hasn't even finished its breakin cruise.

Lafiel ran her hands along the new machinery, and took in a lungful of metallic “new ship” smell.

Her first Menu! Her heart swelled to bursting with pride and joy when she looked upon the ship's Garl Guraw, a hornet (Roil).

In the last three years, there hadn't been time for the Labule to carry out any regular campaigns. The enemy had been in a similar stage of semi-active preparation and rebuilding, during which there had been a couple of minor skirmishes.

The log Lafiel delivered from the Resii *Gosroth* proved that the United Mankind initiated the attack. When the Frybar disclosed that information, it reiterated its neutrality, accusing the United Mankind of fabricating the whole pretext to the war. At that point, the Hania Federation was still pretty much uninvolved, since it had not participated in the assault on the Arosh, so the Frybar was content to ignore it.

The other three nations of the Four Nations Alliance (Bruvoth Gos Suyun) decried the Hania Federation for its perfidy. Many of the Abh, including Lafiel, were equally disappointed in the Hania Federation.

Now, the battle was deadlocked on the front lines, and the enemy controlled a full two-thirds of Fek Ilik.

It was time for the Empire to live up to its reputation of ruthlessness. It was amassing a fleet many times larger than the one it employed before the war began.

The Lespo Shipyard (Lori Lespor) cranked out Roil-class assault ships at the rate of one every ten minutes. Lori Beitur manufactured the very latest model Kau-class patrol ships. The Vorbinort Shipyard produced Sorf-class Alek, Lori Shuurar made Gamov-class assault vessels, and Gokulorsh Shipyard hammered out Heijh-class Leit. The list of shipyards that were mass producing brand-new ships went on and on.

Nearly all the reserve officers (Lodairl Kisaina) were reenlisted, and each

Kenru had repetitive drills cut to save time. New enlistees were at the highest number in Frybar history. On Nahen all throughout the Frybar, the rate of Sash enrolling to fill the new ships kept pace with the Menyu factories.

The major part of the war lay before them.

Lafiel took a deep breath, trying to calm herself.

There was nobody else on the bridge. The Sash were otherwise occupied with preparatory tasks, and the Lodairl were all supervising something.

Aside from Lafiel, there were four officers: two flight officers (Lodairl Gariar), one Military Engineering Officer (Lodairl Skoem) who was Supervisor (Bynkerl), and one Administrative Officer (Lodairl Sazoirl), who was the ship's clerk.

"Manowas," the clerk Jinto reported. "We're finished loading the food and supplies."

Laughing at his formal salute, Lafiel wondered whether Jinto was making fun of the fact that she'd called him "Fektodai Sazoirl Linn" the last time she spoke to him.

Reading the amused look on her face, Jinto smiled. "It's good to see you."

"I'll let you in on a little secret. I'm glad to see you, too."

"Secret's safe with me." He took a minute to look her over. "You haven't changed at all in the last three years."

"Why would I? You've aged a bit."

"I like to think I've *grown*."

Lafiel harrumphed.

"I'm sorry, Manowas, did you just snort at me?"

"It's okay; we're the only ones here, right now."

"I know, but I'm not sure it's a good idea to be so familiar around the others."

"Yes, I won't have you screwing up the morale on this ship."

"I'll do my best. I'd better get used to always calling you Manowas or Rowas Abliar."

“Is that what you want?” she seemed slightly perturbed.

“Do you think that’s what I want?” he dodged the question, eyes a-twinkle.

Lafiel puffed out her chest, causing her brilliant blue hair to ripple and the ends of her Kos Kisehal to shimmer like fantastic earrings. “You shall call me Lafiel!”

Appendix: Summary of Abh Language Formation

Ultimately, the ancestral language of the Abh was artificial — a derivation of a language that was itself merely a reconstruction.

Traced back far enough, Baronh was based on an ancient language that dogmatic nationalists resurrected. They discarded modern words of assimilated European multi-language origin, as well as the Chinese words that came into existence at the same time as their characters.

Naturally, this kind of severe linguistic reconstruction was not without difficulty. While the group had no intention of abandoning its technologies, the ancestral vocabulary came from the dawn of the metal ages, before the possibility of space flight was even fathomable.

There were many impossibilities, expanded meanings of forgotten words, lexemes coined from mimetic words. Basically, they brought a dead language back to life, altering it to suit their scientific society.

It was an unnatural experiment, however, so it had its faults. Originally, the language had many polysyllables. Borrowing a vocabulary from the Chinese, it drastically shortened the list of polysyllabic words. But since the Chinese language was also extinct, that tendency became more and more impractical. The sudden abbreviation of many Abh words was rational, especially considering the fact that the original Baronh didn't even have letters.

The people who created the Abh did not intend for them to become an independent culture. Instead, the Abh were designed to work as they were taught and to make simple decisions in times of intergalactic crisis.

Acting on the idea that giving the Abh the alphabet was not only unnecessary, but also potentially harmful, the Abh's creators trained them using only images and voices as a means of preserving information.

It is well known that languages without letters are prone to rapid change, and

the Abh language was no exception.

Another reason for the rapid changes was that the Abh existed in a closed environment — when one person committed a change to the language (whether it was intentional or not), it quickly spread to the whole group, and became established.

Thus, sudden alterations destroyed vocal sound rules and progressed in an extremely short time.

According to the few existing materials, popular opinion is that the loss of vowels occurred first. As a consequence of losing all those vowels, an inordinate number of homonyms popped up. Speculation is that they made a conscious effort to correct this problem by dragging out some of the vowels to sound like the ones that were dropped. So, although the number of vowels decreased, the variety of vowel sounds increased.

Concerning consonants, there were changes including: the transition of phonetic parts, “non-nasalization” of nasal sounds, and so forth. Through that process, it is speculated that the end sounds of stems and the fusion of character particles occurred.

Although these changes to the language were nothing short of severe, they were effected in a matter of two or three generations.

After that, the Abh declared independence, abandoned the restrictions imposed on them by the mother city, and developed their own culture, including a functional alphabet. With letters at their disposal, the rate of changes to the Abh language slowed to a crawl.

The Abh standard language was officially defined with the founding of the Empire. To facilitate communications with other Abh who lived in faraway interstellar ships and orbital cities, they made an incredible effort to preserve the “correct” Abh language. This meant that there were no accepted changes to the language from that point on.

The result was the preservation of the Abh’s complicated grammar. The most remarkable example of their complex grammar was the noun declension.

In this manuscript, I’ve attached a diagram of the Abh language noun

declensions.

Abh Language Noun Declensions

	1st decl.	2nd decl.	3rd decl.	4th decl.
Nominative case (~ is)	abh[a:v]	lamh[la:f]	duc[du:]	saidiac[sɛdja]
Accusative case (to ~)	abe[a:b]	lame[la:m]	dul[du:l]	saidél[sɛde:l]
Genative case (~'s)	bar[bar]	lamr[lam]	dur[dur]	saidér[sɛde:r]
Dative case (to/for ~)	bari[ba:ri]	lami[la:mi]	duri[du:ri]	saidéri[sɛderi]
Directional case (towards ~)	baré [ba:re]	lamé [la:me]	dugh[du:jh]	saidégh[sɛdejh]
Ablative case (from ~)	abhar[a:var]	lamhar[la:far]	dusar[du:sÐr]	saidisar[sɛdisÐr]
Possessive case (of/by ~)	bale[ba:l]	lamle[laml]	lamle[laml]	saidélé [sɛdele]

Note: In Abh language, they use specialized letters called Ath, but here the alphabet is substituted.

Postscript

This book marks the completion of Crest of the Stars, which lasted three volumes, despite being a newcomer's debut long work. Did you enjoy it?

When I was planning the plot of this book, I intended to write something that dealt with interstellar war. However, it's not that exciting to have cultures from Earth fighting each other in space.

First, I thought I'd like to place the main character on one side of an interstellar Empire that couldn't possibly exist unless humanity had spread to many planets. I wanted to make the Empire a hostile nation that develops land-based political principalities throughout the galaxy.

Then, I created the Humankind Empire of Abh as a type of empire that couldn't exist on a land world, and created the race called the Abh as an indispensable element to integrate the empire.

I flatter myself that I've created a pretty unique empire.

I placed the boy called Jinto in this story to act as your guide. Simultaneously informed and ignorant, he was an apt guide, and he is unmistakably the main character of Crest of the Stars.

You're probably wondering why I would deliberately declare something like that, in spite of the strong impression our guide's guide, a girl called Lafiel, makes, (laughs) If I didn't say it plainly, somehow I'd feel sorry for Jinto.

Oh well, it can't be helped. As for Lafiel, she doesn't feel too "made up." To varying degrees, though, the characters are all like that. There are those who dared to make an appearance, even though I had not planned on their participation, and some who I destroyed arbitrarily.

As a complete guide to the Empire, Crest of the Stars is still insufficient — the idea of being an Abh tradesperson, for example, was barely mentioned.

And now, there is still the issue of the impending war (to those who've already read volumes one and two — by now, you knew better than to expect

the war to conclude in this number of volumes, didn't you?). For now, my feelings are: "Perhaps I should end it here."

As I wrote that, I actually knew, "Nah, the story can't end with this."

Right now, not even the author knows the fate of the kin of the stars. What I do know, however, is if they're defeated in the war, the Abh must be destroyed. Abh bound to land worlds are already not Abh. More than anything, if genetic adjustments are prohibited, the genetically unstable would die out in just a few generations.

I want to see with my own eyes whether the Abh are destroyed, or if they bring peace, like a great sleep, to the galaxy. At the same time, I feel very strange talking about this kind of thing, but it's a fact that I want to leave them an open-ended future like this.

When I go writing such things, it seems like Crest of the Stars came about as the result of some grand plan, (laughs) Actually, as I stated in the postscript to volume one, I made up the plot only as fast as I could write it. I wrote this in a time widely known as "the age of SF winter" (even now, SF seems to be in winter). Regardless, I approached it fondly and enthusiastically.

I aimed for four hundred pages, to make it easier to get it published. But once I began to write it, that proved impossible. Boo hoo hoo.

"Then, somehow, in six hundred pages ..." I thought. Then later: "If it's eight hundred pages, will that fit into one massive volume?"

When I finally got through it, I had about five hundred and fifty pages. All things considered, I felt myself to be about right in the middle of the story. In actuality, I couldn't arrive at the end without seven hundred more pages.

The plot and terminology also changed considerably from the first draft.

For example, Lafiel wasn't a "Star Force Pilot Trainee," she was a "Cosmic Army Officer Cadet," and Captain Lexshu was originally "Colonel." Rereading it a while after I'd written it, those particular words stood out, and the peculiar terms such as "Star Force" and "Aviator" were born.

The ideas of Plane Space navigation and the Abh language were more rigid from first draft to completion.

As a minor scholar of SF writing, I had to stop implementing FTL with the word warp, and I racked my brains to produce “Plane Space navigation.”

There are many reasons why I made the Abh language rubi dance madly. One reason was that I wanted to engender an otherworldly atmosphere.

Jinto is set up as a human about three hundred years in the future from our timeline, so it's okay if we give him a normal future. Lafiel is a human from more than two thousand years ahead of us — if you don't understand why this kind of contradiction occurs, research the Lorentz transformation. Please don't ask the author, because he'll give himself away (laughs) — I didn't want to use borrowed terminology too heavily.

There wasn't anything I could do about plasma and energy. For plasma, I thought there were the translation words like “ionization substance,” but because it didn't appear in the Koujien [a famous Japanese dictionary], when I put the Abh language rubi on it, nobody would understand it at all. Although I thought that using atypical kanji for preexisting words just to put on fictitious language rubi was too unkind, I closed my eyes to my tastes.

The Abh language's origin was made clear in volume two (I did make it clear, didn't I?), but for people who say: “How did this become the Abh language? I can't accept it,” I've prepared this installment's appendix. To those who say, “I'll buy volume three and start there,” I suggest you reconsider, because it's a spoiler (I admit — from time to time, I can't ignore that warning).

Seeing as this is the final volume, I get to relate my thanks.

I got a recommendation letter I didn't deserve from Nota Masahiro. Thank you very much. When I first met him, I just wanted to pay my respects to him. His articles published in SF magazines, starting with SF Hero Group, taught me the joys of space opera.

Holed up in the shed on the galvanized iron roof while it was really super hot, what I gleaned from back issues of the SF magazine SF Hero Group were memories I have not been able to forget since elementary school.

I also thank Miss Akai Takami, who decorated the front covers with splendid illustrations, despite being busy with many different projects. I'm certain most of the people who picked up these books were captivated by the front covers

(you too, right?).

I mustn't forget the people who put in the hard work on the rubi relationships. At first, they put them on in accordance with their own basis, but after that, they ran wild. They put rubi even where they weren't necessary, and it got to be so that I couldn't make them stop.

The burden of sorting out the wild rubi fell largely on the editor, N. Of course, I am indebted to N, not just for the rubi relationships, but overall.

Still more, to the reviser and manufacturer, I guess that the work involved in these books was a nightmare. Thank you very much. Basically, because I think there ought to be fewer rubi, I hope to see you again.

And of course, to all you who've been with me to this point, I offer my sincerest thanks. I'll thank you again if you'll send me your impressions.

It was truly a joy to write Crest of the Stars. If the book conveys even one-tenth of that enjoyment, I think you will like it.

Well, I await the day when we can meet again somewhere.

Hiroyuki Morioka

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