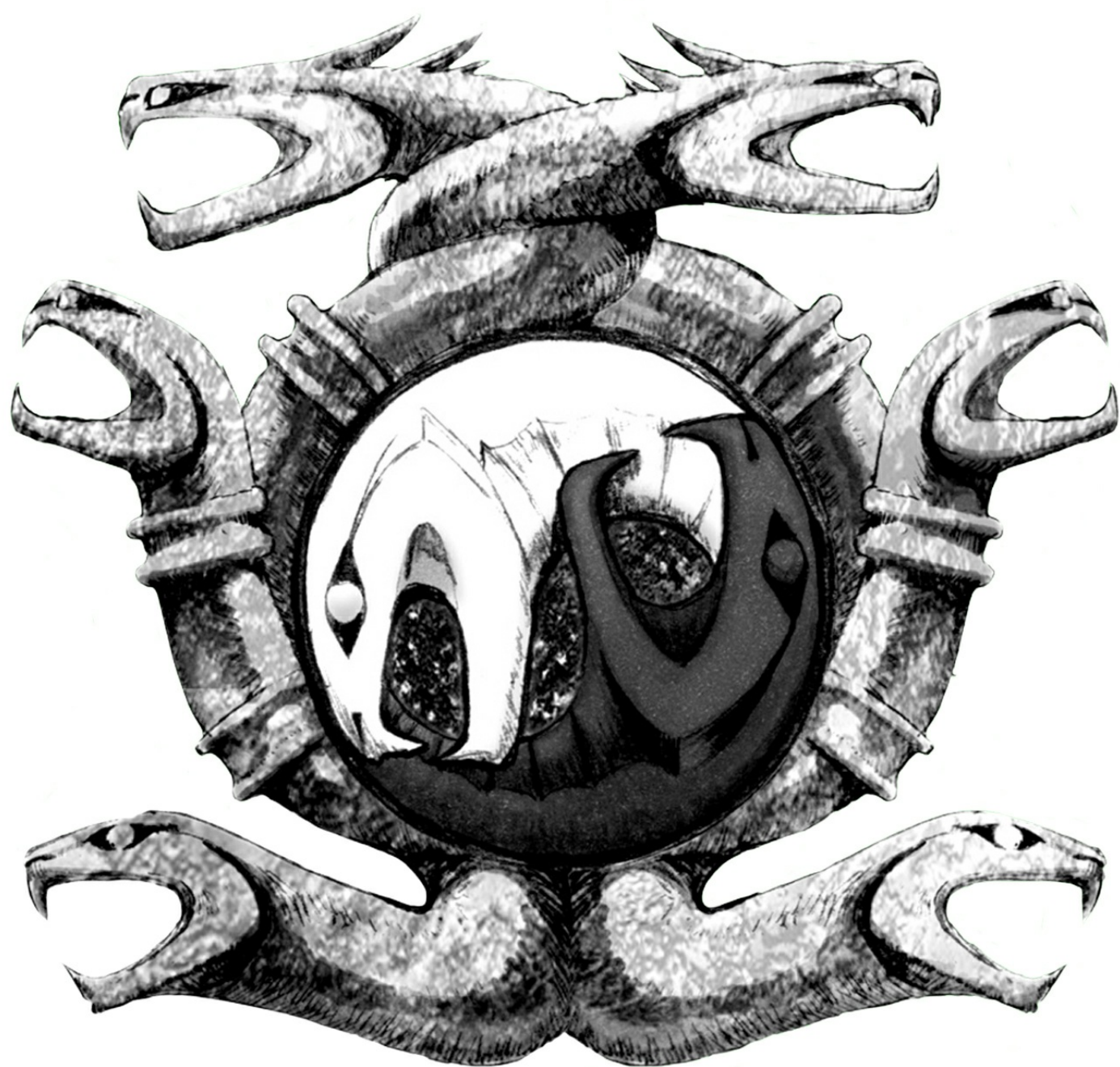




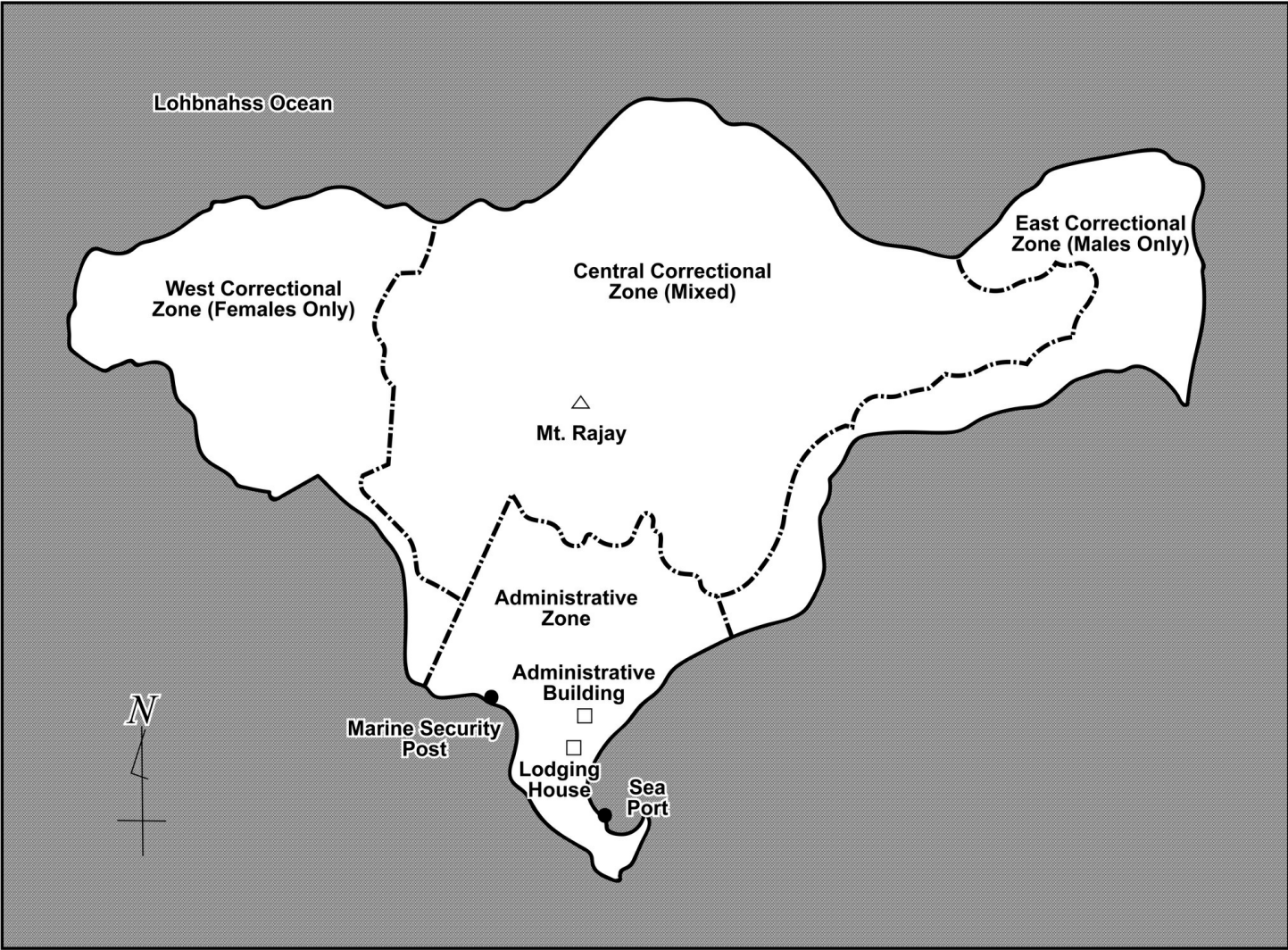
BANNER OF THE STARS

WHAT NEEDS DEFENDING

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Rajay Island (on the planet Lohbnahss II)



Welcome Back to the Abh Empire!

Welcome “back”?

Yes — to fully enjoy *Banner of the Stars*, you need to read the three-volume *Crest of the Stars* first. (It’s soon to be out in print omnibus form!) It explains the ins and outs of the fictional future MORIOKA has crafted, as well as our protagonists’ backgrounds and shared bond. More to the point, it’s a great story, and worth your time.

For those of you who have read *Crest*, but would like a refresher:

Whenever a vocab word of the Abh language, “Baronh,” appears, it will be in *italics* (with the English meaning in parentheses). Whenever that particular word appears again past the first time in the original text, it will be replaced with its English-meaning counterpart in **bold** (but won’t be bolded if the word didn’t have the Baronh for it next to it in the original text). This is to make sure the book is accessible without losing some of that lovely “conlang” (constructed language) flavor! That being said, if a Baronh word has already been introduced in the English version of *Crest*, it won’t be reintroduced in *Banner*. This translation assumes you have read *Crest*.

Baronh words are spelled weirdly. The character whose English-language spelling is “Lafier” is spelled *Lamhirh* in Baronh (“mh” makes an “f” sound, and the “rh” is actually a rolling “r”). *Ghintec*, meanwhile, is pronounced “Jint” (as the “c” and “ec” at the ends of many nouns are silent). This translation will largely be making use of accessibility-spellings for character names. Having to constantly remind oneself “*Lamhirh*” is pronounced LAFEERR would probably prove a tad immersion-breaking for some readers.

Banner of the Stars is ongoing (its sixth volume having been released in 2018), and according to MORIOKA, *Crest of the Stars* was something of an introductory primer to this, the “story proper.” Each volume of *Banner* is its own episode, a snapshot in the lives of our protagonists at a certain point in the grueling

decades of galactic warfare. As such, please know that unlike the individual volumes of Crest, Volume I of Banner is a *self-contained story* in addition to being a part of an overarching saga. Pick it up and read at your leisure!

We join our protagonists three years after the main events of Crest, in the year 955 I.H. (Imperial History)...

“Just this once, I shall grant the right to refuse, for though the structure you are to build would be necessary to defend the lives of our brethren, it is also an abomination.”

“No, I shall do it. It would be enough for me if you could, in your magnanimity, see to it that my name is not preserved for posterity.”

“...Very well. The name to be tarnished shall be my own.”

- Excerpt of a conversation between the 11th Emperor, *Dugnac*, and an anonymous figure

“If you don’t go to sleep, I’ll have the Abh take you away.”

- Traditional parental threat used on the planet of Lesh in the Archduchy of Rapohk

“I won’t say ‘go to hell’ is meaningless... After all, there’s no way you weren’t expelled from the pit yourself. Bastards like you oughta slide straight to the Abh Hell!”

- Excerpt from a play entitled “Kevin and Cshatoria”

BANNER OF THE STARS II: What Needs Defending

Synopsis of BANNER OF THE STARS I

In order to take back the star systems and planets annexed by the Three Nations Alliance (with the United Humankind at its head), the Humankind Empire of Abh launched a large-scale military strategy named Operation Phantom Flame. Amidst the large armada formed for that operation was a ship named the *Basrogrh*, which the royal princess of the Empire, Lafier, boarded alongside Jint.

Lafier and Jint's first official battle ended with them narrowly escaping with their lives when the first iteration of the *Basrogrh* exploded, but the overwhelming victor of the grand clash at the Aptic Portal-Sea was the Empire.

After being ordered to serve as temporary Lady Agent of the conquered Aptic System and fulfilling her role without incident, Lafier was assigned to the new *Basrogrh* that arrived from the imperial capital, again alongside Jint.

Characters

Lafier (*Lamhirh*) ... Captain of the assault ship *Basrogrh*, and the Empress's granddaughter.

Jint (*Ghintec*) ... Clerk on the *Basrogrh*, and the Count of Hyde.

Sobash (*Sobach*) ... Navigator on the *Basrogrh*.

Ecryua (*Aicryac*) ... Gunner and Communications Officer on the *Basrogrh*.

Samson (*Samsonn*) ... Inspector Supervisor on the *Basrogrh*.

Doosanyuh (*Dusanh*) ... Crown Prince of the Abh Empire, and the Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief.

Kenesh (*Cénéch*) ... Overall Chief of Staff of the imperial armada.

Neleth (*Nélaith*) ... Commander-in-Chief of Hunter Fleet 4.

Nefeh (*Néféc*) ... Chief of Staff of Hunter Fleet 4.

Sporr (*Sporh*) ... Commander-in-Chief of Hunter Fleet 1.

Cfadiss

... Chief of Staff of Hunter Fleet 1.

Georr Maydeen

... Chief Executive of the planet Lohbnahss II.

Yuri Dohkfoo

... Representative of the Lohbnahss II Central Correctional Center.

Lara Bay Shungarr

... Representative of the Lohbnahss II West Correctional Center.

Meekeh Anguson

... Representative of the Lohbnahss II East Correctional Center.

Prologue

At the moment, he wanted nothing more than to groom the short fur characteristic of so-called **Abh cats**.

The place? An area of the **Royal Palace of Clybh** named the *Camhac Deucer* — the Cats' Refectory, where they were always provided with the most sumptuous fish and meat, and where order was maintained to perfection by that venerable elder of a fellow cat, Horia.

His stomach was filled to bursting, and he was feeling moderately torpid. Life was great. And at times like these, his fur wouldn't stand on end even if humans or other cats drew close, which was why his temper remained as even as ever as the young human male approached. And though the human's embrace was sudden, it was not unpleasant.

"That must be you, Dyaho," he said, tranquilly stroking the cat's head.

Everyone who lived here in the **Royal Palace of Clybh** knew how to handle their feline compatriots, and the young male was no exception. Dyaho's general listlessness wavered just long enough for him to purr the purr of unadulterated satisfaction.

Pointed ears poked out from underneath the male's indigo blue hair. His jet-black eyes were trained someplace far away, while his striking facial features (which could always pass as those of a beautiful maiden) were tinged by the melancholy of the moment.

Dyaho remained in the male's arms for what seemed a long while, as the male never made to release him, so the cat began squirming.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were uncomfortable." Yet he still opted not to let him down. Instead, he started stroking him even more gingerly, on the throat. As a result, Dyaho's worldly cares abated, and he began to purr anew.

"Has any thought crossed your mind as to what **His Excellency the Count of Hyde** is up to right now?" he spoke.

The world of cats was too rooted in the pragmatic to comprehend a **title** like *Dreuc Haïder*, but perhaps due to his inborn intuition, Dyaho was dimly aware that the male might be referring to his one-time housemate. And yes, the housemate's whereabouts did weigh on his mind a tad bit. Was he getting his fill of prey? Was he successfully defending his territory? Unsurprisingly for a cat, however, Dyaho didn't make a habit of worrying about faraway humans.

"Are you bidding the cats farewell, Duhier?" spoke a second, different voice.

Before Dyaho knew it, another human male was here in the **Cats' Refectory**, standing nearby. And this male's gait smacked of the human whom this room was originally meant for.

The boy named "Duhier" turned around, and grinned. "Why ever did you think I was here?"

"I was right, was I not, my **son**?" the male adult smiled back. "You oughtn't take your father so lightly."

"I never have."

"Good, then." He proceeded with effortless poise to grab Dyaho by the scruff and snatch him out of Duhier's arms.

As far as Dyaho understood things, this man was of the highest esteem in the pecking order of the **Royal Palace**. Most of the humans here addressed him as *Fiac Lartr*: His Highness the King.

"This is the cat that Lafier gave the **Count of Hyde**, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yes. He is Dyaho."

Then, when Horia rubbed herself against his leg, the **King** let Dyaho free and caressed the aging cat's throat.

"I can't say I approve, *Lartsoc* (Prince). While he may have been born in our manor, Dyaho was only left here temporarily by the Count. We can't treat him like our own. I do not wish to be called a cat thief."

"I don't wish for that, either," he said, taken aback. "It's just, he was by Lafier's side, so..."

The **King** raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "So?"

“I mean, uhh...” Duhier became tongue-tied.

“I see you’re struggling to put it into words, *sareucenonn* (clever one).” The **King** rose to his feet and looked into Duhier’s eyes. “Am I wrong to assume something is troubling you? And I think that in your shyness, you sought to consult not with a human, but with a member of a species that’s not quite as talkative. An animal that’s accompanied Lafier.”

“That isn’t it,” said the boy, his lips pursed tightly.

“Hmm...” The **King** stared at Duhier’s lips, and suddenly laughed.

“You and Lafier share the same reaction whenever I hit the bull’s-eye, oh **steel heart**.”

“No, I swear! I was just wondering how Lafier is faring, so I thought I’d strike a conversation with Dyaho, who’s like a living memento.”

“If you have Lafier on the mind, she’s currently been foisted with serving as the **Lady Agent** of yet another **territory-nation**, and it seems she’s disgruntled to no end by it.”

“That, I know.”

“Right. Those tidings reached you as well.” The **King** chuckled. “But you share another trait with her — you’re a poor liar.”

“I am not lying, Father.”

“You’d best concede defeat and confess.”

The boy breathed a sigh. “I... I’m not like her.”

“I thought that might be the source of your distress. Now out with it: What difference between you two has you so concerned?”

“Father!” Clearly he wished to object, but then he thought better of it. “...When she was my age, she was already a **trainee starpilot**. Meanwhile, I’m only just about to enter an **academy**.”

“So you’re worried about lagging behind her?”

“Yes...” Duhier nodded. “On top of being born after her, I’m beginning academy life later than she did, too...”

“There’s no need to fret over it. She’s special, that’s all. I, too, was enrolled into **academy** life at your age.”

“But...”

“What? Are you dissatisfied with being on par with your father? Remember, even being about average among **Imperials** is elegant in itself. The **King** ruffled the boy’s indigo blue hair. “You and Lafier are different people. If you and your sister grew up exactly the same way, then what would be the fun of being a parent, *nadaugec* (dear child)?”

“But I’m not just ‘different.’ I can’t compete with her. She’s obviously just *better* than me.” His manner of speaking couldn’t conceal his stubborn streak.

“You are wrong, *Secasiac Abliarser* (Hope of the Abliars),” he said, shaking his head. “I may have indulged myself too much with her. It seems the amount of fun I had raising her equaled the amount that she resented me for it. That is the reason she strove to ‘come of age’ and gain her qualifications so quickly. I do reflect on my actions from time to time, and when it came time to raise you, I did so a little less flippantly.”

“I tried to come of age as early as she managed to, as well.”

“Which means you acknowledge you are not yet of age, *asaugec* (small one). Don’t preoccupy yourself with self-evaluations until *after* you have come of age. Whether or not you make me proud will be determined down the line.” He ruffled Duhier’s hair once more.

“But...”

“Yes? What?”

“No... it’s nothing,” he shook his head. “I’ll work hard to make you proud of me, Father.”

“As well you should. I’m glad I was able to chat with you like this. We might not have much opportunity to talk much from here on out.”

“We won’t be that far,” said the boy, another little smile playing across his mouth. “While it’s true that once I’ve entered the **academy**, I won’t be able to return here very frequently, we’ll still both be in *Lacmhacarh*.”

“Have you forgotten that I have returned to active duty? In fact, it appears I must make for the warfront sooner rather than later.”

“Will you be in the field of battle?”

“Why the look of surprise? Did you honestly think I’d be content to sit here with my thumb in my mouth while sending just my children to fight?”

“No, of course not...”

“So you understand. But do enjoy your feline farewell tonight. Tomorrow there won’t be any time to, with all the preparations and the **feast** and such.” And just as quietly as he’d entered the room, the **King** departed, with the boy staring at his back as he headed through the exit.

Duhier scooped Dyaho into his arms a second time. “Father... am I not just my sister’s shadow...?” His arms squeezed Dyaho tight. The cat, for his part, could sense the boy’s somber and serious mood, but he had no way of answering his query, so he played it off with a small meow.

Chapter 1: The *Ciïoth Lobnasr* (Lohbnahtss Star System)

The most powerful empire in human history was at present, expanding its sphere of influence even farther. In the year 955 I.H., the **Humankind Empire of Abh** tore a line through United Humankind territory via the **Operation Phantom Flame**. That same year, the **Imperial Star Forces**, having concluded that strategy with aplomb, moved to the next. They would now focus on squashing disturbances in isolated, helpless sectors. And the name of that mission was “*Blaigh* (Hunter).”

It was, in actuality, nothing more than the military attending to a backlog of sorts. The two rabbit holes (**Portal 193 of Caysh** and **Portal 882 of Seev**) that led to one of the Empire’s regions, the **Ileesh Monarchy**, had already been divided from the hub of the enemy by Operation Phantom Flame. It was only a matter of time before the United Humankind “Peacekeepers” that occupied that portion of the Empire would fall to pieces. In any case, in order to enact the new operation, the **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief** (aka **Imperial Admiral**) *cum* **Crown Prince** of the Empire *cum* **King of Barkeh**, *Abliarsec Néïc Lamsarr Larth Barcær Dusanh*, dissolved the **Phantom Flame Fleet** he’d commanded, only to reorganize it as the *Byrec Blaigr* (Hunter Fleet).

The **fleet flagship** *Sancaü* was currently moored at one of the new **territory-nations** of the Empire, the *Læbehynh Darmaper* (Darmap Marquessate). Up until that point, the main planet of the now-**marquessate** had been called Darmap IV, but the Abh took no account of the residents in naming the planet “*Saibac*” among themselves. Of course, the people living there hadn’t cottoned onto the fact that their planet had been rechristened; since land peoples and the **Empire** not calling the same celestial bodies by the same names was common enough, the Star Forces neglected to inform the residents.

The planet *Saibac* had such a large moon, that it was perhaps appropriate to call the two twin planets. That moon was also given a new name: *Mutilaubh*. In

orbit around *Mutillaubh* were thronged many a **Star Forces** ship and facility, including the **patrol ship** *Sancaü*. And recreation facilities were being constructed within the lava tunnels that ran the length and breadth of *Mutillaubh's* underground, leaving this space as the Abh campsite. Whether to make the place a permanent military base in the future was currently under discussion.

Dusanh sat upright in his **Commander-in-Chief's Seat** and gazed at the tide-of-battle diagram. At this state of the game, there wasn't much the **Crown Prince** could do, and he welcomed that fact. That he wasn't very busy meant the strategy was proceeding smoothly, and moreover, he did have his less sedulous side.

On the diagram, half of the sector, which had been named the *Blaighac* (Hunters' Battlefield), was colored in blue, representing the zone the **Star Forces** already controlled.

One of the thornier problems of interstellar war was how slowly information and messages reached their destinations. When information did arrive, it was processed and brought before *Dusanh* instantly, but it still took time for news from the front lines to roll in, since the fastest way to port information from star system to star system was via **conveyance ship**. Presently, there was a time gap of 317 hours between this point and the farthest front. It took around thirteen days for reports to make their way to the **command center**, and another thirteen days for orders to make it the opposite way. Command couldn't even be sure if it was still, in fact, a 317 hour gap.

Just then, a conveyance ship came through the sector, a development reflected by the diagram. The protruding arm of the blue zone stretched yet further into the red-colored enemy zone.

Twelve **fleets** had been sent to take over the Hunters' Battlefield. And the zone occupied by *Byrec Gona Blaigr* (Hunter Fleet 4) was jutting so far into enemy territory that it could spell trouble.

"**Fleet 4** is helmed by **Commodore Biboth**, of whom I know you're fond," *Dusanh* teased his **Chief of Staff, Star Forces Admiral Kenesh**.

"No, sir. The Commodore *Biboth* that I loved disappeared long ago. Though he

wasn't a commodore back then, so I'm not 'fond of a Commodore *Bibo*—'" That was when she realized she'd said too much.

Dusanh grinned. "Finally, the year-long mystery is solved."

For a brief moment, Kenesh squared her shoulders, but they drooped back to normal in no time. "How in the starry heavens does it benefit **Your Highness** to pry into my past?"

"Are you being serious, **Chief of Staff**?" The **Commander-in-Chief** raised an eyebrow. "If I really wanted to pry into your past, I could use any of a multitude of more surefire methods."

"Sir, I've always known that to you, the 'mysteries' of my past are just a way to kill time."

"You say that so bluntly," smiled *Dusanh*, though his eyes remained on the protruding arm that was Fleet 4. "In your opinion, is he not advancing too far into their lines for comfort?"

"You mean **Commodore Biboth**? The man I do NOT love?"

"The very same. He and his fleet."

"They are certainly protruding," she agreed. "But I don't think there's any real cause for alarm. Even if the enemy encircled them, we have enough reserve forces to come to their rescue. In fact, I hope the enemy *is* plotting to encircle them; it'd be the chance of a lifetime to pulverize them once and for all."

"How ghoulish. You'd use the commodore you loved as a decoy?"

"Please don't say things that will soil my reputation if overheard. You're making it sound as though I'm formulating my strategies with a *personal grudge* in mind."

"Perish the thought. Making Mr. Neleth jut out into enemy territory is no strategy of yours," he consoled her. "This is a road he chose himself. But I say, mightn't it be a good idea, after all, to stop our forward march?"

"If you want my opinion, I don't think we should. I fail to see any cause for concern."

Dusanh put a hand to his chin. "I suppose you're right."

Because communication with the **command center** took so much time, front line commanders were given ample discretion. They were assigned a path to advance down, but each individual commander had to determine for themselves the most prudent speed at which to advance based on the current conditions. Were they to order **Commodore Biboth** to desist, he might feel humiliated. Though naturally, Commodore *Biboth's* feelings weighed little compared to the lives of the **soldiers** under them.

“For the time being, allow me to ask as to the reasons regarding the pace of his forward march. What do you deduce might be his rationale?” *Dusanh* asked, steeping his fingers.

“That is extremely simple.” With a swipe of her hand, Kenesh changed the modality of the tide-of-battle diagram. The circles representing **portals** leading to inhabited star systems grew bigger, but not uniformly so. Portals of many different sizes dotted the map. “Here you see the star systems ranked by importance, as evaluated by our forces. As must be apparent, there are almost no important star systems in the direction that Fleet 4 is headed.”

“I don’t recall allocating them any such courses.” But as was common within the **Star Forces**, *Dusanh* trusted his **staff officers** with the little things. He issued broad commands, and listened whenever the smaller details were explained to him. As such, this was the first he was hearing of this particular tidbit surrounding Fleet 4’s course. Or at least, it was the first he was cognizant of it.

“Fleet 4 isn’t alone in that, either. *Byrec Gana* and *Byrec Locutena* (Fleets 8 and 11), among others, are also in charge of sectors where relatively little resistance is projected.”

“But *Ganonn* (No. 8) and *Locutenonn* (No. 11) aren’t jutting the same way,” muttered *Dusanh* to himself.

“This is just conjecture on my part, but...” Kenesh glanced meaningfully at the Crown Prince. “You have a good head on your shoulders, **Commander-in-Chief**. That’s why you have the ability to make sound judgements based on the circumstances.”

“You mean to say Mr. *Biboth* does NOT have a good head on his shoulders?”

“I would be pleased if you never forget I was opposed to your appointing

Commodore Biboth to a commander-in-chief position.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten. What I don’t understand is why, if that commander you consider silly-brained is jutting out like that, you would then say there is no cause for concern.”

“It’s a matter of perspective. At the end of the day, I am merely the overall **Chief of Staff** of the Hunter Fleet.

“I see. So you’ve already looked into it?”

“Correct,” she nodded, a faint smile on her lips. “We haven’t taken the very latest information into account yet, but according to the battle simulation carried out seventeen hours ago, if the remaining enemy forces were to launch a general offensive against the protruding portion of Fleet 4, then we could reduce the overall losses of the Hunter Fleet with a 0.89 probability.”

He understood what Kenesh was getting at. The way Fleet 4 was sticking out was actually something the Hunter Fleet could be thankful for. Nevertheless, if Fleet 4 were attacked, then Fleet 4 would exhibit no such gratitude. Which was why the **staff officers** didn’t run that otherwise shrewd strategy by them.

Dusanh rested his chin in his hands. “Very well then. Do not order him to stop. But we must enact this plan swiftly and efficiently. Organize as many reserve forces into formations as you can now, while there’s time.”

“Understood. Whom will we have take command?”

“Hmm...” For a moment, *Dusanh* considered taking command himself. If the clash surrounding the jutting arm did come to pass, then it would surely amount to the decisive battle of *Cfazaitec Blaigr* (Operation Hunter). A battle worthy of the **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief**. But in the end, he thought better of it. For though it lacked in elegance, maintaining a battlefront capable of brushing aside pressure from the central zone of the United Humankind remained of the essence. Indeed, **Operation Hunter** could proceed apace even if Fleet 4 were to fall, but if the line holding Bisketh and Wereh were overtaken, then the entirety of the Hunter Fleet would come under jeopardy.

“I shall have **Grand Commodore** Tlife take the reins,” *Dusanh* decided.

Kenesh concurred. “Excellent. With him at the helm, the fleet will plunge

headlong into danger for sure.”

“Promptly select the star systems that **Grand Commodore** Tlife ought to foray into, and calculate troop concentration. Subsequently, I order Ms. Penezh to pay extra careful heed to the vicinity of the protruding arm of Fleet 4.”

Sporh Aronn Saicsepatr Nimh Laitpanr Painaigh commanded *Byrec Casna Blaigr* (Hunter Fleet 1), which used to be **Phantom Flame Fleet 1**. However, since it was a precursory recon corps in nature, it was not particularly effective in the eyes of Operation Hunter. That being said, a combat phase requiring the services of a substantial gathering of recon corps was anticipated, so the formation was kept intact. And now was their time to shine.

“Roger.” Kenesh lightly saluted, and turned heel in order to implement her orders.

A single **assault ship** was attempting to leave Fleet 4. That ship’s name was the *Basrogrh*. In an exceedingly peculiar turn of events, it was being accompanied by three **supply ships**. Assault ships defending supply ships was hardly out of the ordinary, but flying side-by-side was certainly unusual. The *Basrogrh* did, however, have a good reason to be keeping those supply ships company.

The little fleet, commanded by an assault ship, exited **planar space** and entered **3-space** through the *Saudec Lobnasr* (Lohbnahss Portal). No matter how many times the **Captain** of the *Basrogrh*, *Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Bærh Parhynr Lamhirh*, experienced the transition between dimensions, she always felt somewhat nervous. She could perceive the giant nearby globe through her *frocragh*, and her shoulders relaxed, the tension dissipated.

Yet this was no time to be at ease. This just signaled the beginning of a new mission.

The name of the planet she was sensing, which had only been incorporated as an imperial territory very recently, was Lohbnahss II. And the **Lady Agent** of the newly-dubbed *Dreuhynh Lobnasr* (Countdom of Lohbnahss) was none other than Lafier. Yet again, her mission consisted of serving as the interim liege of a star system. And frankly, she was sick of it. The reason she was in the **Star**

Forces to begin with was as an obligation owed to the **Empire**. But what service was she rendering the Empire taking up these perfunctory, makeshift positions at all of these scattered new **territory-nations**? Sadly, though the **Star Forces** didn't exactly house an overabundance of assault ships, it certainly harbored more assault ships than it did personnel with societal status befitting a liege agent. On the other hand, she had no idea when any rule mandating a lord agent be a **noble** or **Imperial** had been put in place. Lafier brooded that **Commodore Biboth** could very well be laboring under a strange misconception.

Alas, orders were orders. Lafier kept her expression stiff, so as not to make how she felt about this mission of hers plain for all to see.

"You totally hate this, don't you," said the **Clerk**, *Linn Ssynec Raucr Dreuc Haider Ghintec*, below his breath. He himself had been appointed as the "Adjunct to the Lady Agent," an even more opaque job title.

"What makes you think that?" huffed Lafier.

"I can just tell, you know?" he deflected.

"I don't 'hate' it. I'm just..." She searched for the right word. "...unenthused."

"I see." Jint nodded solemnly, thereby demonstrating he was not one to focus on the dubious and debatable gap between "hate" and "unenthused."

Up until days prior, the Lohbnahss Star System formed part of the United Humankind. Of the system's twelve planets, only Lohbnahss II was inhabited. The planet had a rotation cycle of 11.8 cosmic-standard hours, and a solar revolution cycle of 417.8 cosmic-standard days. Its surface gravity stood at 1.87 times the standard Abh gravity level, and its population numbered 1,200,000. There was precious little other information to be had, and that was all she'd been notified of. Truth be told, the **Imperial Star Forces** bore no interest in the Lohbnahss Star System. After all, there were no signs of an important military institution anywhere in its borders, and its entire population was on par with the capital city of a podunk planet. And one good look at its commerce records revealed it contained no real industries to speak of, and was self-sufficient more or less only with regard to water and salt.

Yet the **Star Forces** just happened to win a battle in a neighboring sector of **planar space** (though the incident was so low-key and unlosable that it could

scarcely be called a “battle”), so the Lohbnahss Star System fell under the dominion of the Empire. And because of that, they had to monitor and manage it whether they liked it or not. So **Commodore Biboth**, who headed the Star Forces in the greater area, foisted the role of interim liege onto Lafier, all the while rushing off to the next conquest.

“What about you?” she asked.

“Me? I’ve never found being in a warzone very enjoyable, so...”

“Fair point.”

“**Captain**,” said **Deputy Starpilot, Rearguard** Ecryua, looking over her shoulder. “The ship is undergoing exposure to a directed beam of electromagnetic waves coming from the **landworld**.”

“Are they attacking us?” Lafier drew her **control gauntlet**.

“No, it’s too weak to be an attack. It appears to be a transmission. Detecting conversion format... data confirmed receivable.”

“Then put it through, right in front of me,” she ordered. How banal.

“Yes, ma’a—ah.” Ecryua’s hand froze in the midst of implementing her orders. “Another transmission, this one originating from a moon.”

“What is the meaning of this?” said Lafier, brow furrowed.

“Yet another transmission incoming. Ah, and another. There are currently four signals calling for our attention.”

“Prioritize the one from the **landworld administration**,” said Lafier.

“Problem is,” she muttered, “they *all* claim to be **landworld administration** representatives.”

Certain that this waffling was a pointless waste of time, Lafier exchanged glances with Jint.

“Why don’t you put ‘em all through?” Jint shrugged.

“I can’t hear out four people all at once,” pointed out Lafier.

“Then I’ll preside over the discussion,” he suggested.

“Please do.”

Jint threw out his chest. “**Rearguard** Ecryua, if you could open all lines.”

Ecryua stared at the **Clerk**. “You sound so... self-important.”

Instantly, Jint rolled out an excuse. “C’mon, I’m going to be speaking to them as **Adjunct to the Lady Agent** here...”

But Ecryua was barely paying attention as she briskly fulfilled her duty. Four window-screens appeared before Lafier and Jint’s eyes.

The one on the far left belonged to a completely bald, elderly man. One wondered whether he had it shaved off on purpose. Meanwhile, the man to his right had something of a cunning air to him, and the third screen featured the sole woman, who was nearing middle age. The last contained a man with a fierce and stern look about the eyes. Since his body below his chest wasn’t on screen, they couldn’t discern his height, but his neck was thick and brawny, and his pectoral muscles so pronounced his shirt could tear at any moment.

“This is the Adjunct to the Lady Agent, the **Count of Hyde** speaking,” said Jint, pointing at himself. “This is the Lady Agent, the **Viscountess of Parhynh**.”

“This is the Chief Executive of the planet...”

“Allow me to greet you on behalf of the planetary government...”

“Our demands are extremely straightforward...”

“I’m the only true representative...”

The people inside the four windows were all talking over each other.

“Please wait a moment,” said Jint, raising a hand. “While I’m sure you understand, we’re currently a little confused. We never expected a single **landworld** to have as many as *four landworld administrations*. As such...”

At that, each of the four launched into their personal statements again.

“Please, a moment,” Jint repeated. “As I believe you’ve already realized, given the other voices in the room, we have, at the moment, four separate lines of communication open simultaneously...”

“Why do something like that?” said the rightmost man.

“Because we figured this is the most effective means of sorting out the situation.”

“It had better be,” muttered Lafier.

Jint ignored that remark. “First of all, I’d like for all of you to make your positions clear to us. Let’s start with you.”

The leftmost man gave a bow. “As I stated earlier, I am the Chief Executive of Lohbnahss II, Georr Maydeen. In light of the regrettable turn of events that is our system’s conquering by the **Empire**, I have to bear the burden of representing the best interests of the people.”

“‘Chief Executive’? What has become of your Prime Minister, or Premier?”

“This star system doesn’t have a prime minister or premier. Due to certain circumstances, the Chief Executive, as selected by the system’s central government, serves as the highest authority. And at the moment, that would be me.”

“I see.” Jint saluted him with an inclination of the head. Then he shifted his gaze to the next in the line of window-screens. “Now your position, if you may be so kind.”

“I am Yuri Dohkfoo, and I am the legitimate Premier of the Lohbnahss Star System.”

“Say what?” Jint frowned. “That seems to fly in the face of what Mr., uhh, Maydeen just stated.”

“That’s just due to a difference in legal interpretation. I was voted into office as the result of a free and fair election. I’m not on the same level as some government official the central government dispatched all of a year ago.”

“Oh, that’s rich! You assumed the title of Star System Premier *THREE HOURS AGO!*” barked Maydeen. “And what ‘free and fair election’? More like a rally you and your backers put on.”

“I can show you the voter name registry, if you like.”

“No need. I *know* it’s just a list of your cronies,” said Maydeen, jumping to convenient conclusions.

“An absurd accusation. Your name is also on there, Chief Executive. Why did you abstain from voting?”

“Did you give it the proper public notice? Who’d recognize an election held by you people, anyway?”

This is going nowhere, thought Lafier, glancing at the side of Jint’s also confused-looking face.

Jint, for his part, decided to cross that bridge later. “If the, uhh, next individual could state their business?”

“I’m also the Star System Premier, elected fair and square,” chuckled the woman. “My name is Lara Bay Shungarr. But I prefer to be called ‘Your Excellency.’”

“All right, then.” With a look of resignation, he bade the last of them to speak.

“Are you the Star System Premier, too?”

“I don’t need a high-falutin’ title like that, and I wasn’t elected, either. Us taking over is just God’s will. We’re the strongest on this planet.”

“And, uhh, your name?”

“Meekeh Anguson.”

“So if you weren’t chosen by way of election, how *were* you chosen?”

“By our muscles, by our popularity with the people, and by the works of God,” declared Anguson expressionlessly.

“I see.” Jint smiled feebly, and looked at Lafier, who proved no help as she turned away.

“We take it this system’s predicament is rather complex,” said Jint, who was about ready to sigh. “If you don’t mind, we’d like to wait until conditions sort themselves out.”

Agreed, thought Lafier. It wouldn’t take long for a **magistrate** more fit for the job to come, along with experienced public officials and bureaucrats.

“What do you mean, ‘wait’?” asked Maydeen.

“Oh, uhh, you see, our policy is actually not to interfere with the internal

affairs of **landworlds**. Once you iron out among yourselves a rightful **landworld citizen representative...**"

"It's obvious I'M the rightful representative!" shouted Maydeen, which promptly sparked heated objections out of Shungarr and Dohkfoo. Anguson alone remained silent.

"I implore each of you to come to some sort of agreement with the other three. That is, if there aren't even more people claiming to be the **Citizen Representative.**"

"There's no time for that!" said Maydeen.

And this time, Shungarr and Dohkfoo agreed.

"What do you mean?" asked Jint.

"Never mind that, I beg you, just recognize me as being the system's representative, and give me your aid!"

"Our aid?"

"Unless you mean to say you can't provide any aid?"

"It depends on what exactly this 'aid' would entail. We do have enough goods and materials prepared for immediate dispatch to sustain all of the **landworld citizens'** lives."

And that was no empty blather on Jint's part, for though it was indeed customary for the **Empire** to destroy all enemy nations utterly, what that ultimately pointed to was wiping the interstellar power off the galactic map. It didn't involve destroying the individual star systems that formerly constituted that power. Those systems were to be cherished parts of the Empire's dominion, after all. They couldn't just sit back and let those subjected planets fall to ruin.

In fact, the **Empire** deployed the military to **landworlds** with some frequency. Usually, they sealed off their astrospace, and waited for the land peoples to raise a helpless peep. Then they'd simply incorporate those worlds into their economic web. Most planets could subsist for a while after connections with other systems were so severed. At the very least, it wouldn't ignite a grave

global-scale crisis of resources overnight. There were, however, times when a planet decided to keep struggling for a little too long, to the point of starvation. Moreover, some planets were already cursed with extremely low agricultural output. On planets like those, the Empire didn't have the time to wait for the planet's economy to get back on track. They needed to hand out emergency food supplies with pressing urgency. But those provisions didn't come for free; the Abh were more than content to play the long game. They would collect their debts, no matter how many centuries it would take.

In any case, while there was little information on the Lohbnahss Star System, they understood now that there was a need for emergency goods transport. The system was in want of all kinds of supplies, and could offer next to nothing in return. That was why the *Basrogrh* was accompanied by the three supply ships, which contained food and medicine enough to sustain a million people for two months' time.

"Now then, I'd like for your aid to be delivered to the proper administrative agencies," said Maydeen.

"So you're in need of food and other goods, right?"

Maydeen pulled a face like that was the most obvious thing in the universe. "Yes, that's correct. If you need me to fill out forms of surrender or what have you, I'll do it right now. There's no point in hiding it, so I'll just come out and make it plain as day: the food shortages are already at our doorstep. As for medicine, we have plenty in reserve, but we need food resupplies, and we need them now. And we of the administrative agencies are the only ones who can maintain a fair distribution system. If you give it to the self-proclaimed 'Premiers,' they'll just divvy it out among their own buddies."

"That is not true," butted in Dohkfoo. "My 'buddies' are the citizens of Lohbnahss. I will apportion the supplies to everyone, you have my word."

"Sure, but only to expand your own influence," spat Maydeen.

"Don't listen to them; you can't trust men. I have a duty to protect the women," said Shungarr haughtily.

"Feh," snorted Anguson scornfully. "Weaklings who can't defend their food by their own power haven't got any right to it. We're the only ones who can

protect the food. Not like you spineless cowards. A government suit, a castrate, and a woman. None of you have got what it takes.”

“You heard him. You see what’ll happen if you give it to *him*...” said Maydeen.

“Is there a civil war?” said Lafier, who finally felt like joining the conversation.

“Not yet. But we’re likely on the verge,” nodded Maydeen reluctantly.

“What exactly is going on here?”

“It’d appear you aren’t aware... most of the residents here are convicts serving sentences.”

No. No, they hadn’t been aware.

Lafier bit her lip. Either the Information Department was no longer up to snuff, or they’d foisted this wretched, star-crossed planet on her on purpose.

She didn’t want to believe it. She was a **soldier**; she was prepared to see through any mission she was entrusted, no matter how bitter. They should have just told her; the idea they might not trust her not to balk at a mission was shocking to her core.

On the other hand... The face of **Commodore Biboth**, her superior, floated to mind. *Maybe he merely forgot to tell me.*

She had never really spoken with the commodore in charge of Fleet 4. In terms of military rank, he was virtually above the clouds compared to a mere **Deca-Commander** like her. And in terms of the **imperial hierarchy**, it was the reverse: she was a **royal princess**, and not even a member of a branch of one of the Twenty-Eight Founding Clans like *Biboth* could compare, especially given he was one of those **nobles** without a **star-fief**. All in all, they had little opportunity to interact. Even so, she’d heard tell of his reputation. His personality was very, in a word, *Biboth*-ian. And among the pedigreed clans of the Abh, “very *Biboth*-ian” left no room for interpretation.

“So... you’re telling us that the entire planet of Lohbnahss II is a prison?” said Jint.

“Yes. Exactly,” said the Chief Executive, nodding vigorously. “Only, we don’t call this place a ‘prison.’ It is a correctional center. I am both the Chief Executive

and the Warden of the Correctional Center.”

“I see.” Jint looked at Lafier with a relieved look on his face, and Lafier shared his sentiment. One mystery, solved. It also explained why the planet had no exports. The service it provided its economic zone was as a penitentiary.

“Would that make the other three, uhh...” Jint faltered in his speech, “...inmates?”

“We can’t abide by that label,” cut in Dohkfoo. “We may have been sentenced under the penal code of the United Humankind, and transferred to this planet by force... but Lohbnahss is no longer under UH control, and as a result, our status as ‘inmates’ doesn’t hold.”

“Damn straight. There are no prisoners or guards anymore,” said Anguson.

Lafier managed to keep it from showing, but she was in a state of bewilderment. Not once had she ever entertained the notion she’d have anything to do with a prison, and the reality that this entire planet was one big prison had yet to sink in (if, indeed, it ever would).

Naturally, the **Empire** housed prisons of its own. Crimes committed on individual **landworlds** were to be dealt with on a local level, so she wasn’t too knowledgeable about planetary law and punishment, but she did know of criminal activity among Abhs and **imperial citizens**. The prisons they were sent to were comprised of isolated orbital facilities of moderate size, with every corner of their premises under watchful management. Or at least, that was what she’d heard. Granted, one could technically regard the planet of Lohbnahss II as a facility orbiting the star of Lohbnahss, but still. That was one gargantuan “facility.”

“I didn’t have this in mind when I called, but now that we’re all on the line like this, I have a suggestion,” said Dohkfoo. “What say we implement a general election and have the people select the one legitimate representative?”

“But how do we set up a board of elections?” replied Shungarr.

“How about we ask the fine folks of the imperial military to lend a hand?” said Dohkfoo with a composed expression.

“What’s a ‘board of elections’?” Lafier asked Jint under her breath.

She'd heard of elections, and she knew the administrative meaning of "board." What she didn't understand was how they went together. Weren't elections supposed to be free? Couldn't anyone vote for anyone? Why would an election need an administrative board?

"I don't mind explaining it to you later, but for now, suffice it to say I don't think it's a job you're suited for."

"Are you mocking me?" she said, a little miffed at his tone.

"Course not. It's just a question of familiarity," he consoled her. Then he shook his head: "Actually, a **royal princess** administering an election might be a sight to see."

Upon seeing the look on Jint's face, Lafier grew certain that she'd never, ever involve herself with something as incomprehensible as a "board of elections." Yet much to her consternation, she didn't know how to tactfully turn down the proposition.

Fortunately for Lafier, someone else objected.

"You must be joking!" shouted Maydeen, his face drawn tight with emotion. "Go on, try holding an election. The prisoners will just vote for another prisoner! They outnumber the guards by a huge margin. And no matter who becomes the Premier, their first priority will undoubtedly be to massacre us!"

"So you do know how much we hate your guts," said Anguson.

"We can't know that unless we try it," said Dohkfoo, his voice soft and wheedling. "We former prisoners have our separate factions, and if the former guards and their families were to vote for Mr. Maydeen as a block..."

"'Former' nothing! You're still prisoners! And my subordinates are guards on active duty!" Veins were popping on Maydeen's forehead.

"I'm thinking of dropping the calls for a bit; you with me?" whispered Jint.

"Yes," nodded Lafier.

Jint puffed out his chest. "Ahem, may I have your attention? We would like to take some time to confer amongst ourselves. Don't call us; we'll call you. We should be able to use the same frequency you're using now, right? So please,

give us a moment.”

Unanimously, the four of them cried foul.

“Do I cut the lines?” asked Ecryua, looking back at them.

“Yep,” said Jint.

And so they cut out.

“Yours is a more stressful job than I’d expected,” said Vanguard Starpilot Sobash in sympathetic tones. He was here on the bridge of the *Basrogrh* as Senior Starpilot, having nothing to do with the duties of a lady agent. None of this directly concerned him at all.

“If you feel that way, then we could really use your help,” said Jint.

“I just hope I can help,” he replied, getting to his feet before addressing Lafier. “I did some research while you were speaking with them. It seems the stance the United Humankind takes towards criminals is ‘correction and rehabilitation’ as opposed to ‘punishment.’ At least, that’s what their official documents claim. But there’s also a certain percentage of criminals that the people don’t want back into society. And the argument goes that they have no choice but to erase those people from the public. That said, the UH has no capital punishment. So they send their undesirables to a handful of predetermined planets.”

“And this happens to be one of them?” asked Lafier, who was already feeling burnt out by all of this.

“Do you have any other idea as to what it might be?”

“No,” Lafier sighed. “What, then, do you think we should do?”

“In business, there is an ironclad rule: you must cut a deal with the right person. You can secure a successful deal to buy for cheap, but if the other party doesn’t have the goods, then all that effort will go to waste.”

“Then who do you think ‘has the goods’?”

“Well, it’s a bit complicated, because there’s no guarantee he does have the goods,” said Sobash, clasping his hands behind his back. “If there is, in fact, a ‘right person’ at all, it would have to be Mr. Maydeen. He has a grasp of the population and the distribution system, as well as an organized bureaucratic

apparatus. None of the others can make that claim.”

“Guess we’re going with the safe bet, huh,” said Inspector Supervisor and Mechanics Linewing Starpilot Samson, who was being too loud to be muttering to himself. “Boring.”

“I agree with you there,” nodded Sobash, who flashed the Captain a look ripe with expectation. Ecryua and Samson were quick to follow suit and stare her way.

“I have no intention of bucking the wisest course of action just to make things entertaining,” declared Lafier flatly. “Rearguard Ecryua, resume transmission with the Chief Executive.”

“Him? Really?” asked Ecryua, clearly disappointed.

“Yes, really.”

The screen-window opened anew. A flustered Maydeen soon reappeared within it. “That was quick.”

“I hereby recognize you as Landworld Citizen Representative,” said Lafier.

“As was obvious from the outset.” Indeed, the Chief Executive didn’t look all that overjoyed.

“There is no time, so I will postpone the ceremony of appointment. You need only recognize me as the Lady of this world, and that will complete the necessary procedures.”

“I recognize you, of course.”

“Then as you have requested, I will send you the provisions. Now designate a suitable port.”

“There’s something I need to tell you before getting into anything else.”

“What?”

“We’ve made it this far managing the prisoners with the military forces of the Central Government backing us. But now the fleet has been exterminated. We’d been trying to keep that a secret, but it seems it’s slipped away from us. To be honest with you, I’m not confident we can hold them back with just the

officers present on the planet.”

“If it’s our forces you want, I’m afraid they’re rather occupied,” said Lafier. It was the Imperial Star Forces that felled that fleet, after all.

“But surely it would coincide with the goal of granting provisions? To put it to you straight, the second those provisions drop down to the surface, the prisoners will riot. The Anguson Faction in particular is a gang of violent criminals.”

“Hold on,” said Jint. “There’s no way you guys allowed the inmates to bear arms.”

“Yes, of course. The prisoners are prohibited from possessing weapons. But unfortunately, the rules and regulations aren’t always upheld with the strictest... no, it’s time to put aside such circumlocution. We know they’ve got weapons. Those weapons are, at best, primitive gunpowder-based guns, but they’re more than a threat when their potential is used to the fullest.”

“You don’t mean...”

“We take a very lax approach to their supervision. There are a few restrictions placed on them, but for the most part, they lead lives no different from normal law-abiding citizens.”

“Then isn’t this whole penitentiary kind of pointless?”

“The Empire and UH philosophies on the matter must be different. This isn’t a penitentiary, and they aren’t being punished. They’re just separated from the rest of society.”

“I see. But what about fights breaking out between prisoners...?”

“The ‘Count of Hyde,’ I believe you called yourself?” said Maydeen, irritated. “I apologize, but there’s no time.”

“Sorry. I just wanted more information.”

“And I’d just like to ask how the imperial military would respond to a planetary riot.”

“If the legitimate landworld administration files a request, then the Empire will intervene on its behalf.”

“Forgive my impertinence, but do you have robust enough land forces for the job?”

“Yes, the Star Forces have land units,” she said candidly. “But we cannot afford to station any in this system. We are at war. The airship fleets have enough to do as it is.”

“Then it’s to no avail,” said Maydeen, dour-faced.

“However, should an uprising occur, we’ll stop supplying food. If it suits you, we can even blow away some of the planet’s atmosphere. Would that not tamp down any potential mutinying?”

The Chief Executive’s eyes reeled open with terror.

Jint cleared his throat. “Ahem... you need to know that the Abh — er, I mean, *we* — tend to *overdo it* when dealing with **landworlds**. We don’t mean anything by it, honest. I think the root of the problem lies in taking the, uhh, *stirring* way of doing things in the vacuum of space and applying it to delicate atmospheres.”

An awkward pause.

“We really don’t mean anything by it, I swear.”

“And I suppose that lack of malicious intent is supposed to impress the planet whose atmosphere disappeared?”

“We don’t want to see that happen, either. I mean, apart from ceasing food aid, we won’t fire an actual attack on the surface from up here. Unless, that is, you all request it.”

“That’d be suicide. Who’d request such a thing?”

“Yes, but if you were to circulate the fact that we could attack if we wanted to, it’d serve as a decent deterrent, wouldn’t it?”

“It wouldn’t be enough...” muttered Maydeen, contemplating.

“We cannot promise you any more than that,” asserted Lafier. “Having **airships** sent here is simply out of the question.”

“What if we were to hire a *daigreeuth* (mercenary corps)?” asked Sobash from the side.

The **Empire** was extremely sensitive about monopolizing space warfare capabilities, but didn't care one jot about **landworld citizens'** warfare capabilities, no matter how fearsome, so long as they never crossed into the theater of the stars. Consequently, several military groups distinct from the **Star Forces** also existed within the **Empire**. For instance, there were groups commissioned to deal with situations a **landworld administration's** police couldn't handle, and those set up to guard the assets a **grandee** kept on a **landworld**. The for-profit militaries among these groups were called mercenary corps. And since mercenary corps weren't a formal part of the **Empire's** system, no one knew their overall numbers, though counting only groups granted the *rüé gursiac* (imperial permit) for interstellar travel, there were more than a thousand, providing more than five million **landworld citizens** with a livelihood. There were even some **landworlds** that had made dispatching mercenary corps their main industry. Their employers were chiefly **grandees** and **landworld administrations**, but the **Star Forces** were known to make use of them from time to time as well. And they were especially indispensable in times of war.

"We don't have the budget for it," said Jint.

It was Lohbnahss that had to shoulder the costs of the process of becoming a splendid **territory-nation**, including the emergency relief. But their debts couldn't be collected immediately. Their initial expenses would be covered by a loan from the *Flisorh* (Institute of Imperial Assets). And obviously, that loan had an upper limit. Beginning with the galactic war, the scope and size of the mercenary corps expanded, which kept supply balanced with the increased demand. As such, their rates didn't skyrocket. Yet they remained the money sinks they always had been, and well beyond what a loan could pay for.

"What's all this now?" asked Maydeen, intrigued.

After giving him a rough explanation, Jint added: "Of course, there'd be no problem if the **landworld administration** can cover those expenses now. Do you have any assets that can be immediately converted into money?"

"Nothing apart from the antimatter fuel factories, I believe."

"Please give us the relevant documents."

The documents pertaining to the **antimatter fuel factories** revolving around

the system's sun were sent forthwith.

Jint glanced through them. "It pains me to inform you, but even if they were topped up with **fuel**, it wouldn't even finance one-way transportation costs."

"Then you can use the fuel they'll be producing in the future as collateral."

Jint hated to say it, but... "Ahh, actually, that's already being kept as collateral."

"I never agreed to such a thing," said Maydeen angrily. "How could you do that behind our backs?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that if we ask for prior consent for every little thing, then it'll take time to get you the relief."

A sigh of resignation. "Well, I suppose this is what losing a battle entails."

"Do you, uhh, have anything else?"

"No," Maydeen admitted. "I can't think of anything else."

"In that case, I'm afraid there is nothing to be done about your planet's force of arms," said Lafier.

"We're stuck in this corner," Maydeen concurred. "Allow me to clarify that I'm not questioning your efforts, Your Highness. I'm aware that to the **Empire**, anything involving this planet must seem trivial, so I thank you. Now then, I'd like to receive that food aid as soon as possible. I'll send you the necessary information."

"Understood." Lafier nodded. And with that, Maydeen's video vanished in a blink.

Chapter 2: *Nahainec Rémdagsso*tr (Penal Planet)

To most sensible Abhs, the words “standing on a planet’s surface” sent a shudder through their souls. Regarding the **orbital towers** that stood on the majority of inhabited planets in the **Empire’s** control, Jint had always suspected that while their economic impact was indisputable, the real reason they existed was so that Abhs could carry out their business as far from the surface as possible whenever their work had them unable to avoid being on a planet. This psychological phenomenon could also be seen in how the ships the Abh built were premised on only ever entering an atmosphere once (it was hard to argue it made the ship’s specs appreciably superior in other ways).

Abh **interstellar ships** only breached a planet’s atmosphere if the people aboard would die otherwise. The ship would shed almost all of its hull, the passengers alone making it to the ground intact. Naturally, said ship had little prospect of ever weaving through the stars again. For all intents and purposes, grounding was one of the ways an Abh ship could meet its end.

Which led Jint to surmise that perhaps, to the Abh, descending to the surface was a small step above being dead. So he pondered while gazing down from the window upon the sprawling white clouds.

Though they were truly unorthodox, the **Imperial Star Forces** did have ships capable of diving to the surface and coming right back. There were the *frach* traffic ships, which could pass between space and an atmosphere without incident. All **sub-fleet flagships** contained **traffic ships** within them. In addition, *lussomiac* amphibious assault ships also fell under this category.

Jint was currently aboard the amphibious assault ship *Dacsait*h, which was descending toward Lohbnahss II. Despite the “assault” in their name, amphibious assault ships were actually a kind of supply ship; the other two **supply ships** that had come to the Lohbnahss Star System were orbiting in standby. It couldn’t be helped, since the *Dacsait*h was the only ship that could make the trip unscathed. Not that there was any need to have three supply

ships go down there anyway. These were emergency provisions; they were just sending what food they had and Jint himself down to the surface.

Under normal circumstances, an **adjunct to a lady agent** wouldn't set foot on a **landworld**, but Lohbnahss II's circumstances were far from normal.

Viewing the planet through live video of the outside, he could still see its curvature. White clouds covered around half of the globe, and his eyes were greeted by the beryl-green of the ocean waters visible in the unclouded half. Lohbnahss II was an ocean world, with small specks of islands. The largest of those specks was the only inhabited landmass.

"Lady Agent Adjunct, we'll touch down in twelve minutes," said the *Sarérh Symr Salygr* (Transport Unit Commander), *Gabautec*.

Jint nodded. "Understood."

The relationship between him and Jint was a fuzzy one. *Gabautec* was a **Hecto-Commander**, whereas Jint had only just been promoted to a mere *rinhairh sazoïr* (quartermaster rearguard starpilot). Yet at the moment, he was temporarily acting outside of strictly military matters, so for the time being he was of a higher position than *Gabautec*. Jint wasn't yet accustomed to the complex hierarchical system of Abh society. He wondered whether the day would ever come where he'd be able to comport himself like a real **noble**.

The farther they descended, the quicker the clouds appeared to drift.

"We almost there?" asked **Mechanics Linewing Starpilot** Samson, who had shown up on the **bridge**.

"Yeah. We'll be there in less than ten minutes now," replied Jint. "Are you sure everything's going to be okay up there?"

"Oh c'mon, my able-bodied crew's more than enough to keep watch over a moored **assault ship**. I think you're the one who needs a bit more protection. It's a den of violent criminals down there," said Samson, pulling the **lightgun** out from its holster with a satisfied smirk. "Besides, it's been a while since I've set foot on a surface. Can't pass up this opportunity, can I?"

"But there's nothing to see."

“The air’s different,” he winked.

Normally, Samson was in charge of maintaining the machinery on the *Basrogrh*. However, there were times when the ship was parked in orbit. So he’d come along as Jint’s bodyguard, along with the six subordinates he’d picked out for the job.

The ship plunged through the cloud cover, and the outside video became shrouded in white. But mere moments later, they found themselves under a sudden shower of rain, land visible ahead.

Above, a rift in the clouds let through a majestic shaft of light. Jint was reminded of the religious painting he was forcibly bidden to appreciate when he was a kid in Martin.

“Splashing down,” said *Gabautec*.

The *Dacsaith* hit the waves gently, but even so, the spray was enormous. Then, the ship glided across the sea, clearing the rainy area soon enough to witness the blue sky and white clouds. The rays of the planet’s sun, also named Lohbnahss, beat harshly down on them.

“Oh yeah, this is what I’m talking about, right here. Blue ocean, blue sky. Real beaut of a **landworld!**” cheered Samson.

“Is your homeworld like this?” asked Jint.

“No, there aren’t any oceans. Just a bunch of big lakes. And they’re still green from the terraforming.”

“Green is pretty too, though, isn’t it?”

“There’s pretty green, and then there’s not-so-pretty green. I still can’t get over how my homeworld’s saddled with the not-so-pretty shade of green. Midgrat is a glorious and beautiful place, but that is one of its few shortcomings. The seas here are perfect.”

“Is that so?” On Jint’s homeworld, the seas were tinged reddish-brown. He was taught that that was due to Martin’s ecosystem. Jint then realized this was the first time he’d ever been this close to the sea. Though he’d had the opportunity to look down on oceans countless times... from orbit.

The amphibious ship drew closer to the landmass at a slow pace. Then it came to a halt. The jetty extended out toward them, and the ship attached to it.

Jint gave the **Captain** parting words, and headed toward the **air lock room** in order to disembark. Samson and the six members of the “bodyguard unit” accompanied him.

Back when Jint had set foot on the surface of Delktu on the heels of his first trip through space, it struck him how the planet smelled different from his homeworld. Claspure had been the same in that regard, too, with its own unique aroma suffusing the air. And the smell of this planet’s atmosphere was altogether different from all three of those landworlds.

“Ohh, take in that sea air. It’s the only thing that’s pretty much the same across all planets,” said Samson, the opposite of Jint’s deep revelation.

“Sea air?”

“Yeah. Smells salty, like the briny deep. Saltwater bodies always smell like this. You didn’t know that?”

“This is my first time at sea.”

“I see. Well, this is pretty much your standard ocean. The lakes on my homeworld reek something fierce...”

While the two were chatting in front of the jetty, one of the **NCCs** cleared his throat. That “ahem” was like a push on the back, causing Jint to step onto the jetty. Once the whole group was on the jetty, it began to quietly move, ferrying them to the shorefront.

Looking both ways, huge jetties seemingly designed to accept cargo were stretching toward supply ships.

They’ve got their arrangements in order, that’s for sure, thought Jint, impressed.

On the other side of the jetty stood some figures wearing white, with Maydeen at the front. He assumed they must all be high-level Lohbnahss System bureaucrats.

“Welcome to Lohbnahss II,” Maydeen greeted them, though his expression

was dark.

“Pleasure to meet you, Chief Executive, Your Excellency,” said Jint.

“Come to think of it, this is the first time I’ve seen you directly, Your Excellency Count Hyde. Now then, please, follow us.”

They were guided to a room in a building tall enough to be visible from the port — the Administrative Building. The Bodyguard Unit was made to wait in a separate room, but Samson was there with Jint.

“Let me explain the current situation,” said Maydeen as he entered the room.

It appeared the Chief Executive was so out of time that he didn’t even offer them seats. He thought about just sitting of his own accord, but decided instead to just remain standing for the time being. For a body accustomed to the standard Abh gravity level, Lohbnahss’s gravity level was a bit tough to endure, but he wasn’t exhausted enough to crumple.

A map floated up on one of the walls. A map of the largest landmass on Lohbnahss II, and the only inhabited landmass, the island of Rajay. The seas on the map were almost the same shade of blue as the actual oceans. Around a tenth of the island was colored white, with the remaining sections colored red. There were white points scattered across the red section as well.

“The Correctional Zones are in red, and the Administrative Zone in white,” said Maydeen. “The Administrative Zone is comprised of various facilities, including this building, the residences of the guards and their families, and some shops. Needless to say, the Correctional Zones are where the inmates live.”

The red zones were divided into three by a set of solid black lines.

“What are these lines?” asked Jint, tracing the black lines with his fingers.

“Walls. The East Zone is for males, the West for females, and Central is mixed. They’re the East Correctional Zone, the West Correctional Zone, and the Central Correctional Zone. Good and easy to remember.”

“That they are,” nodded Jint. “Do all of the inmates want to live in the Central Correctional Zone?”

“Living in the mixed zone has strings attached.”

“Like being a model inmate?”

“No. They need to be sterilized first.”

“Sterilized...”

“That is correct. The inmates can enjoy themselves however they want; we don’t care. But we can’t let them give birth. What would we do with their children? Ripping them from their parents would be cruel, but on the other hand, we couldn’t just leave an innocent, blameless child in a correctional center. The place isn’t exactly geared toward giving children healthy upbringings.”

Then, a muse spoke into Jint’s ear, and he cottoned onto something: “Those three self-styled premiers must be the representatives of each zone.”

“Indeed,” said Maydeen. “Only, we don’t acknowledge any such claptrap titles. The whole idea of zone representatives is a joke.”

Jint pointed at the West Zone. “This must be her, that Shungarr lady. The Central Zone must be Mr. Dohkfoo, and the East is Anguson. Am I off?”

“Impressive, Your Excellency. Right on all counts.” But he didn’t look as impressed as he let on.

“I have my moments, but they’re few and far between,” said Jint modestly.

“Why don’t you just sterilize all of them?” butted in Samson.

“Forcibly?” Maydeen looked disgusted. “We can’t perpetrate such barbarism. Though if the Empire were to sterilize them all, I wouldn’t object.”

“The Empire would never do such a thing,” said Jint, dangerously close to adding “*it’d be too big a hassle.*”

“Oh, I see. Well, whatever.”

“So, how are you managing the inmates’ dormitories?” While Jint took note of the Warden’s casually negligent attitude, he continued asking questions. Since the vast majority of the island’s inhabitants lived in the red zone, he had to carry out his role as a **liege**, however temporary. He couldn’t be indifferent as

to the lives of the people living in the star system he and Lafier technically presided over.

“They have housing. More than needed given the population, in fact. In any case, we’ve entrusted the management of the housing to the inmates themselves.”

“So your policy is noninterference,” said Samson.

“Freedom is the core tenet of our system here. Though of course, I don’t know what the Empire plans to do with this planet.”

“As a general rule, the Empire doesn’t intervene in the internal affairs of its **landworlds**.”

“That’s all well and good, but at the moment I’d rather like for the Empire to intervene.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never understood what goes through their heads. It’s not as though we’re robbing them of the ability to have intercourse, so why do they hate the idea of us taking their reproductive capabilities? Well, this place may just be paradise for same-sex lovers.”

“What if they want to marry after returning to society?” asked Samson.

“None of the inmates here will ever go back into society.”

“Hold on, isn’t this a *correctional* center? How is it correctional if they’re here forever...?” said Samson, cocking his head.

“Is it impossible, in the Empire, for traditional monikers to be out of step with reality?”

“Guess it happens all the time!” Samson smiled wryly.

“Anyway, they’re once again doing something beyond my understanding. They’re taking up arms and gathering together.”

“Are you saying they’re trying to attack this area?” asked Jint.

“I think the chances of that are high,” said Maydeen, shaking his head, “but they could also be trying to break into the Central Zone, surprisingly enough.

With the West Zone being their end goal, obviously.”

“Sounds like a pickle,” said Jint perfunctorily.

“You don’t understand how grave the situation is!” shouted Maydeen. Then he looked surprised at his own outburst. “My apologies, Your Excellency. Ever since I’ve come to this planet, I’ve had only my subordinates and the inmates to talk to. And you look so young...”

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t bother me a bit,” said Jint. “And I really am young.”

“Are you? I thought Abhs are unaging?”

“Genetic Abhs are. But I’ll age, same as you, Your Excellency.”

“Huh.” Maydeen seemed taken aback by this.

He didn’t honestly take me for a genetic Abh, did he? What about my brown hair? And do I look that handsome to him? Maybe the title of “count” is so imposing it makes people not notice the outwardly trivial little things.

“I’m sorry about that,” said Maydeen, before looking at the map on the wall again. “That aside, things are looking serious.”

“Serious how, exactly?”

“Earlier, I said I don’t understand the feelings of the folks in the male housing area who reject the idea of sterilization, but it’s a different story for the inmates in the female area,” he explained. “In other words, they don’t want to come face to face with the men.”

“Uh... huh...” Jint recalled what Shungarr had said: that she had a duty to protect the women.

“The people on this island are criminals. But there are also those who, in straying from the right path, have been victimized as well. I think the majority of the women here ran toward crime due to such bitter experiences. Most of their crimes have to do with gender. In other words, the women *want* a world without men.”

“I see,” Jint nodded.

“I want you to protect them.”

“Oh.” Jint blinked. “Actually, there’s something that’s been on the back of my mind, Chief Executive. You’re speaking as though you’re not going to bear any responsibility toward the state of affairs on this **landworld**, Your Excellency.”

“That’s right. I suppose I should have told you from the beginning,” said Maydeen, as though he’d just remembered. “We wish to seek asylum.”

“Who do you mean by ‘we’?”

“Everyone apart from the inmates. The employees and their families. There’s also a small number of shopkeepers and other civilians.”

“But why!?”

“I think you know why.”

“Because the prisoners might revolt?”

“Correct.”

“But you guys are armed, aren’t you?” said Samson. “Can’t you put down any revolt?”

“I believe we could. But our ammunition isn’t limitless, so we couldn’t keep the peace indefinitely.”

“You should just import more,” he replied matter-of-factly. “The Empire’s not particularly fussy about arms deals where the weapons are for surface conflicts. You can import as many as you like.”

“And build a mountain of corpses out of the inmates?” scowled Maydeen.

“The revolt would peter out before getting to that,” said Samson, not backing down. “It might not even build enough steam to begin with. You’ve managed the prisoner population all this time, haven’t you? So long as you keep getting more weapons and ammo provided to you, all you need to do is proceed as usual.”

“It’s not that simple. Spare some thought toward the guards who’d have to live the rest of their lives here with no change of post on the horizon. Many among the leadership are here with their families, but the lower-level guards are mostly living by themselves, having been deployed here for two-year terms. To them, this dismal prison planet — yes, I say prison, not correctional center,

otherwise I'd be a hypocrite — to them, this place is just a temporary stopover. The pay and benefits are ample, and if they serve without committing any gross errors, their resumés gain prestige, and their pensions slightly increase. I guess you could call it a stepping stone to a brighter future. If that stepping stone were to become the end point, I don't think morale could be maintained for very long."

"Yeah, well, maintaining morale's the job of the guy in charge," whispered Samson, so only Jint could hear.

Jint agreed, but he did acknowledge it was a tough job, and he didn't feel right putting all the blame on Maydeen, either. That said, he wasn't about to shower the man with praise, either.

"This **landworld** is already Empire territory. I don't think you can receive 'asylum,' technically," said Jint.

"If asylum is the wrong term, then I don't care what you call it. You can call it emigration, evacuation, anything you want. Given I'm now calling this place a prison, there couldn't be a more trifling concern."

"Emigrate, you say? Where to?"

"I haven't the foggiest. Anywhere but here."

"Ah..." Jint's mood turned despondent indeed. "How many people?"

"I'll hand you a detailed register of names later, but if I recall correctly, around twenty thousand."

"Twenty thousand..." *Maybe I ought to sleep on the Basrogrh until the official **magistrate** and their staff members make it here on assignment.*

He'd have to settle on emigration destinations for twenty thousand people, scrounge up some way to get them there, all before sending them out from this **landworld**. And as if that wasn't enough on his plate, doing all that wasn't likely to tackle every hurdle, either. Moreover, he didn't have any staff capable of handling all of the intricate and confusing work necessary to pull it off. The crews of the *Basrogrh* and each of the supply ships would try to help, but a **lady agent's** duties weren't in their job descriptions. They could regard the *Basrogrh* as a temporary *garich Cfarér* (Lady Agent's manor), but the only two people

who'd officially belong to that manor were him and Lafier.

"Your request is noted and appreciated." Jint had been feeling tired since before undertaking this task, so that came out stiffer than he'd intended. "I'm going to consult with the **Lady Agent, Her Highness the Viscountess of Parhynh**, and we'll then decide whether to take it up."

"Are you sure we can afford to take such a leisurely pace?" Maydeen protested. "They could spark the riot at any moment. Is that what the Empire wants?"

"But from what you've told me, the chances of civil strife wouldn't go down, whether or not you all venture away."

"In fact, since all of the people who've been overseeing them would be out of the picture, the chances would only increase," said Samson.

"You could look at it that way. Actually, that's fairly perspicacious of you," nodded Maydeen. He seemed surprised that the young **Abh noble** before his eyes had the insight to piece together the very real possibility that the prisoners might vie for power among themselves.

"My gratitude." But he wasn't too pleased he was being flattered over such an obvious conclusion. "We don't plan to keep you waiting for long. But we do need to gain a better grasp of the situation before making our decision."

"I'm more than willing to cooperate in any way."

Goodness, I forgot; we're having them cooperate?

Chapter 3: The *Soprhoth* (Rationing)

“That’s a whole lot of food,” said Jint, scanning the surroundings inside the vessel.

“But I fear it’s still not enough,” replied a woman named Lana Fazzin, the “Rationing Corps Chief Officer.”

With the provisions brought aboard the **amphibious ship** *Dacsait* inspected and sorted, it was time to apportion them to the prisoner population. Jint requested to come along, seeing this as an opportunity to see the conditions on this **landworld** up close and personal.

The Rationing Corps was made up of six airships, five of which were cargo freighters filled to the brim with food provisions. The sixth was the commanding vessel, aboard which rode Jint and the Chief Officer. Also aboard ship were more than thirty of Lohbnahss’s armed guards, as well as Samson and his makeshift Bodyguard Unit. Jint didn’t know what kind of gun the prison guards were wielding (probably some type of stungun), but he did know he didn’t want to see any of them fired... especially not at him and his people. Including Jint, the Empire contingent numbered no more than eight. There was no way they could win a scuffle.

Ugh, I’m such a worrier, thought Jint, shaking his head. Lohbnahss needed the Empire for the food, and its government employees were seeking asylum to boot. They had no latitude to be butting heads against the Empire.

“What’s the matter?” asked Fazzin, with inquiring eyes.

She had a machine translator on, perhaps so as to pay Jint’s group some mind. Yet the presence of such a device was not always welcome. Neither Baronh nor the official language of the UH, Ricparl, were Jint’s mother tongue. From what he’d been taught at the **Quartermaster Academy**, Ricparl was much, much easier to learn than Baronh, and its grammar was fairly similar to Martinese, too. For Jint, who still thought in the language of his homeworld, Ricparl was the tongue with which he had a greater facility. But now that the

other party was using a translation device, he was forced to speak Baronh despite that fact.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

“I see. Well then, let’s take the air.”

The airship hovered upward, and slowly swiveled. Looking down below, he could see the zone with the Administrative Building was built like a fortress citadel. At the center lay a park, with the office building towering beside it. Tall walls encircled the perimeter of the residential dwellings that surrounded the tower. The walls were double-layered, with some kind of mechanism installed within. Their fear of the prisoners, that had them so outnumbered, rang loud and clear.

With security that strict, what need is there to emigrate? thought Jint.

The vast stretch of ocean was visible, too, and though he hadn’t noticed them when he was looking down from the amphibious ship, there were spire-like structures standing in a ring around the island.

“What’re those?” asked Jint.

“They’re observation posts. Not even a single scrap of wood floating on the water can escape our sight,” answered Fazzin.

“Seems to me like it’d be pretty tough to escape even if they do manage to make it across the ocean!” laughed Samson.

“They could make it to other zones,” said Fazzin, eyes locked straight ahead, “which would invalidate the whole point of them.”

“It’d put those big ol’ walls to waste, that’s for sure,” said Samson, pointing at the ramparts that divided the Correctional Zones into three distinct areas. They looked just as formidable as the walls that closed off the Administrative Zone.

“If you ask me, you ought to have just divided them across different planets,” Samson murmured.

Fazzin heard that. “Inhabitable planets are a precious resource.”

“Then do it like the Empire and make orbital prisons.”

“And have them spend their whole lives off-planet?” she said, looking Samson’s way for the first time. “That would be inhumane.”

Samson laughed again, telling Jint: “Guess a war was bound to happen. Look how differently they think from the Abh!”

“But you don’t want to live your whole life out in space, either, Mr. Samson,” said Jint.

“Of course not. If anybody ever told me I’m not allowed back on a **landworld**, I’d stoke a rebellion myself.”

Fazzin looked surprised, but she didn’t get into it, instead changing the subject. “Look, that’s the East Correctional Zone.”

They cast their eyes down toward where the Rationing Corps Chief Officer’s finger pointed. The wall wound tortuously across the low verdant hills, which were smattered with bushes and shrubberies. The vista was so idyllic that the lack of cattle lying peacefully on the green was difficult to swallow.

“Going by His Excellency the Warden’s words, a rebellion could ignite at any moment,” said Jint. “But it sure doesn’t look like it.”

“The rebellion is already underway,” said Fazzin.

“Huh?”

“The Distribution Center was completely destroyed due to organized looting.”

“Are there people in the Distribution Center?” asked Samson.

“No. Not since it was automized. You see, this isn’t the first time rioting has broken out. And thankfully, because of that automation, no one was hurt.”

“You said the looting was ‘organized,’” said Jint. “Was it that Anguson guy leading them?”

“I don’t know,” she answered bluntly.

“Wait, if there’s no distribution center, then what’re you going to do?”

“We’re going to airdrop.”

“But then how are you going to make sure everyone gets their fair—”

“It can’t be helped,” interrupted Fazzin testily. “This is what their actions have gotten them. We can’t be responsible for how they behave.”

“Ah, if I’ve touched a nerve, I apologize. It’s just that I’ve always been the curious type.”

“It will take more than that to offend me.”

From around halfway up the hills to the seashore, structures that looked like boxes from above were closely packed together. They could only be the prisoners’ housing.

“Those domiciles were originally pure white. Now look at them,” frowned Fazzin.

Taken together, they appeared to be black. But the closer the airship drew, the easier it was to tell that that black was in fact a mix of various different colors. There were still some white buildings visible here and there, but the majority of them were painted over. Drawing closer still, one could see how most of the dwellings were decorated with bright hues. Some even boasted palettes that one might think more fitting for a little girl’s bedroom than a male prisoners’ detention zone. However, thanks to how crowded in the boxes were, and how there was no overall pattern or order to the colors, they seemed black-ish from afar. And while Fazzin clearly disapproved, Jint thought the place was beautiful in its own way. He suddenly recalled that time his foster parents yelled at him for tossing his toys all over his room.

“Whoa there, why the long face?” asked Samson.

“It’s nothing.” As of late, thoughts of his days on his homeworld rarely ever bubbled to the fore, but when the memories did surface, he still felt that twinge of pain. “Seems like they’ve got more than enough paint lying around.”

“You said it. Wonder if we’ll have to supply them with more paint if it runs out, too.”

“They made the paint themselves,” said Fazzin. “They’ll smash rocks or what have you and mix the stuff with glue.”

“Wow, you’ve got to admire their effort,” said Samson. “I just hope it stops at things like paint.”

“Do they make weapons, too?”

“They do. Though all they can make is the type that needs gunpowder.”

“Then there must be murders happening every day, right?”

“Not exactly. They have something akin to a self-governing body, and a level of public security is maintained as a result. That being said, there are deaths under mysterious circumstances every once in a while. We suspect they’re victims of execution by the self-governing body, but there’s no proof.”

“So the prisoner representatives didn’t just pop out of nowhere,” said Jint.

“Right. Those representatives have been around for a while, and they each seized on this chance to declare themselves the Premier of the star system.”

“I see.” *Finally, some heartening news*, thought Jint. After all, if the prisoners had such high self-governing capabilities, then a functioning star system government might come together more smoothly than he’d feared. He’d been worried what would happen once the jailers all fled the coop, but now he was thinking it just might be easier to govern with them gone anyway. Though he didn’t much care to contemplate how a **landworld** comprised solely of the criminal element would evolve over time.

“There’s a bigger fish to fry than the weapons: the drug manufacturing,” said Fazzin, dashing the ray of hope Jint had worked so hard to find. “And by ‘drugs,’ I don’t mean cold remedies.”

“I figured,” he said. *I’m not stupid, lady*. “You mean narcotics.”

“Narcotics manufacture is the biggest industry on this planet. Not that it contributes to the planet’s economy at all.”

“And you’re not clamping down?”

“Our policy is not to. Nothing would come of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“The UH doesn’t believe in capital punishment. Getting sent to this place is the most severe punishment there is. So no matter how much more crime they commit, it’s all a wash in the end.”

“But aren’t there in-prison punishments?” said Samson. “Like solitary confinement? They have that on my homeworld.”

“There’s another reason we don’t clamp down: we’re short-staffed,” she stated succinctly.

The airship had descended so low that they could now make out the prisoners that were milling about with their naked eyes. Once the airdrops commenced, the inmates went on the move, with more pouring out of the dwellings. Jint’s eyes tracked the falling boxes. He assumed some mechanism would activate on the way down to slow them down, but no — there was some air resistance, but still they plummeted as gravity dictated. And then they crashed... smashing a domicile or two in the process.

Sure hope nobody was in there, thought Jint.

“That’s... that’s some merciless rationing,” decried Samson.

“What other choice do we have?” snapped Fazzin. “Nobody ever expected we’d *have* to airdrop their provisions.”

“You could’ve at least hitched them to parachutes...”

“There are no parachutes in the inventory list. On this planet, we’ve no access to even the most unsophisticated gear. But worry not. We’ve already calculated the impact on the food. Ninety percent ought to still be good to eat. And the other ten percent can be made edible with a little elbow grease. All they need to do is pick out the wedged shrapnel.”

Jint considered telling her that he hadn’t granted the cargo aboard the *Dacsaith*, and that he was planning to have the bill reimbursed later, but he ultimately decided not to say anything. The jailers would all be leaving Lohbnahss soon, and the obligation to repay would be taken up by a **landworld administration** made up of the prisoner population.

And now the headache’s back. Paying for one’s purchases was the most sacred custom among all of humanity, let alone the Abh. But would a planet full of criminals respect that?

“Ms. Fazzin,” said the airship’s pilot, turning around, “we’re under attack.”

“What did you say!?”

“Looks like you’ve miscalculated,” said Samson, arms folded.

Fazzin ignored him. “Damage report?”

“No damage as of yet. All they’ve done is peel off some of the paint job.”

Jint did hear pinging sounds strike the hull. He looked down at the surface and strained his eyes, but he couldn’t tell who was firing. When Jint drew even closer to the window, something slammed against the pane separating him from the outside world. He ducked involuntarily. That he didn’t yelp with fear was a feat to be proud of. When he looked behind him, Samson was there, smirking at him. Jint smiled sheepishly back, then resumed looking through the window. He touched the glass; there were no cracks. It looked as though being “under attack” wasn’t a life-threatening predicament. Nevertheless, as long as he didn’t know what kinds of weaponry the prisoners had in store for them, it was best to remain on the alert.

“Is the airdrop almost over?” asked Jint.

“It’ll be over shortly. This airship doesn’t have an airdropping apparatus, so we’re employing the most primitive means,” said Fazzin.

“Why don’t we stop for now, and turn back?” suggested Jint.

“Everything’s okay. You saw how their weapons have no effect on the airship, didn’t you, Your Excellency? Though I also shudder thinking how we’d end up taking their fury *outside* the airship.” She stopped at that at first, but then couldn’t resist adding: “Or are you afraid?”

“I’m totally afraid,” Jint declared flatly. They were right in the middle of an all-out war, and he was technically a **soldier**, so he’d given more than a passing thought to his death. But he wanted his death to be as far down the line as possible, and he didn’t plan on having his life taken from him by old-fashioned gunpowder firearms on a **landworld**.

“I understand. We have no desire to expose imperial soldiers to danger, and they’re just reaping what they’ve sown.”

Fazzin picked up a transceiver and ordered the operation to be suspended. A

faint but contemptuous smile was on her lips.

Oh, please. Like you didn't bat an eye yourself back there. But Jint kept that observation to himself.

"I understand what you're contending," said Lafier, fed up.

"You do, do you?" said Dohkfoo. "Well then, if you understand what I'm saying, then why won't you recognize me as **Landworld Citizen Representative**?"

"Because I don't want to."

"I can't possibly accept that as an explanation! Listen here; I represent an absolute majority of the population of Lohbnahss II. In other words, more than half of the people back me. As such, if you refuse to appoint me as **Citizen Representative**—"

"If?' Did it really escape you?" said Lafier, legitimately surprised. "This is not hypothetical. There is no 'if.' I am refusing to appoint you."

"Yes, yes, I understand that. It's just a figure of speech..."

"Oh."

"In any case, I would like a clear and proper *reason* as to why you're rejecting me."

"No."

Dohkfoo looked positively deflated. "You can't just leave it at that..."

If only Jint were here, thought Lafier. She felt as though she'd only been able to avoid talking in circles like she was at the moment every other time she'd had to talk to land peoples thanks to his being at her side. Even if, at times, she picked up on a certain teasing tone toward herself and the Abh in every word that came out of his mouth that left her irritated.

"I will not be speaking to you any longer. Goodbye."

"That's a shame. But I'm not giving up here."

And with that, the call was severed.

Lafier rose to her feet and addressed Ecryua: “Do not pick up any other calls unless it’s **my adjunct**.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ecryua nodded.

Ever since they’d selected the Warden as the **Citizen Representative**, the other two self-proclaimed Premiers had kept pestering them with call requests. At first, she’d replied with all seriousness, but they simply refused to back down, calling over and over again. As soon as a call from Dohkfoo would end, a call from Shungarr would come. And as soon as she’d, in her exhaustion, cut the line with Shungarr, Dohkfoo would be waiting on the other line to talk to her once more. After the second round of calls, they had no new arguments to make, so instead they changed up how they said them (Dohkfoo was fairly talented at it, while Shungarr’s vocabulary was a bit limited).

It had even made Lafier question whether the two were conspiring behind her back to arrange their calls just so.

The fact that the other candidate for **Citizen Representative**, Anguson, hadn’t reached out to her could be counted as a blessing. Unlike the other two, he hadn’t even seen the need to declare himself Star System Premier, so it was little wonder he wouldn’t bother contacting her, their liege the **Lady**.

“A call from the **Adjunct**,” reported Ecryua.

“Put it through.”

“Humblest greetings from a chaotic **landworld**,” said Jint affectedly.

“I may be up in orbit, but I know full well. How’s the situation?”

“The rationing’s over for the time being. We got fired at, but we haven’t encountered any real issues.”

“Fired at? By who?” Despite the **landworld administration** facing a civil war, the young **count** seemed unfazed.

“Beats me,” Jint shrugged. “All we know is they’re men.”

“They didn’t look into it?”

“They haven’t got the manpower. It’s just like they told us before; the place is in turmoil.”

“So you’ve come to the conclusion that it’s not significant enough to react to?” She trusted Jint. If he judged the goings-on to be no big deal, then it must really be a trivial matter.

“Yeah. Just a bump on the road, that’s all. I’ll hand in the detailed report later. In the meantime, there’s something more important to bring up.”

“What is it?”

“Lonh-*Saimr Sosr* (His Excellency the Landworld Citizen Representative) wants to emigrate.”

“Is that all?”

“The jailers and all of their families want out, too. I’m told there are more than twenty thousand people total.”

“I see.”

Jint looked dumbfounded. “That’s all you’ve got to say? We’re talking twenty thousand people here. Don’t tell me you’re planning to push all the messy stuff on me.”

“That shouldn’t be a concern, either. There’s nothing to be carried out of this **territory-nation**. We should be able to stow them aboard one or more of the supply ships making their way back.”

“But where would their ultimate destinations be? We’d have to decide after stowing them.”

“Is there some problem taking them to a *loneucebhic* (prison camp)?” she asked breezily.

“A **prison camp**!?” Jint was taken aback, but thinking about it... “Hmm. They might misunderstand, though.”

“Their misunderstanding would eventually resolve itself.”

“Well, I guess it wouldn’t take much doing.”

When her call with Jint ended, she lifted her head, to find Ecryua staring her way.

“What?”

“A prisoner as **Citizen Representative**?”

“I suppose that’s how this plays out,” answered Lafier.

“Huh.” And then Ecryua faced forward again.

Though it was paranoid of her, Lafier suspected Ecryua was smiling inwardly — things were getting entertaining.

“A PRISON CAMP!?”

Maydeen reacted as expected.

“We are NOT prisoners of war! Were you lying when you told us we’d be treated as subjects of the Empire?”

“Please calm down, Your Excellency,” said Jint. “Think of it as more of a temporary pitstop than anything. A ‘waiting place,’ if you will.”

“What is a ‘waiting place’?”

“Well, truth be told, there is no such thing as a ‘waiting place,’ technically speaking...”

The conception of prisoners of war in the **Humankind Empire of Abh** differed greatly from other societies’. In the **Empire**, there were only two ways a war could end. Either the Empire collapsed, or the enemy lost its status as a sovereign interstellar power. So far, each war the Abh were a party to ended one way and not the other. Naturally, once a war ended, the government holding prisoners of war would be dissolved (with the rare exception of those administrations that survived as single star system administrations). The **Star Forces** didn’t view nations without space combat capabilities as threats. Enemy soldiers, who lost any warship upon which they could board, were made imperial subjects (whether they liked it or not), with total freedom to go wherever they so desired... so long as that wherever was within the Empire.

Most prisoners of war wished to return to their homeworlds. Unfortunately, it was not unheard of for a homeworld to not be annexed by the Empire. Needless to say, the Empire was not so soft-hearted as to return combat experts with years of experience to the enemy. That was where **prisoner camps**

entered the picture. They were to wait there until the place they wanted to go back to was dragged into the Abhs' mild autocracy.

"...So if there's any **territory-nation** within the Empire you'd like to emigrate to, you can depart for it as soon as you like. There are no restrictions," said Jint.

Maydeen seemed skeptical. "What kind of place is this 'prison camp'? Is it an orbital city?"

"No. It'll be a **landworld**. And probably one with more space than this place."

"So there are several such camps, then."

"Yes. Fourteen **landworlds** have been made prison camps, at present."

"Have you ever been to one of them?"

"No," said Jint, shaking his head. "But I have done my research."

"I see." Maydeen rose to his feet. "Tell me, what will life be like there?"

"The first year, your living expenses will be paid for. After that, it'll be the same as any other **landworld**. You'll earn income by working, or think about making a living some other, better way. Plus, it seems like it's fairly cozy. Stuff like maintaining order and constructing large-scale facilities is all financed by the Empire's coffers, so there are no taxes. There are even hospitals run using Empire funding, which is rare across **landworlds**. The biggest problem for residents of the camps is the waiting to find out in what way they'll be moved to another **territory-nation**."

But Maydeen's misgivings weren't dispelled quite yet. "What about the labor? What kind of labor will it be?"

"The main industry is development. Unlike here, there is no stipulation against reproducing, so there are people who establish roots across multiple generations. And as I said earlier, it's comfortable living. If a given world is judged to be self-sufficient without outside help, the Empire will even draw back, with a **landworld administration** taking the reins. That **administration's** make-up would of course be chosen by the planet's residents."

"In other words, we would be taking on the task of expanding part of the Empire's dominion."

“Well, there’s nothing stopping you from looking at it that way. And, though I hate to repeat myself, if there’s anything that rubs you the wrong way, you’re always free to emigrate anywhere you like. That is, if the **landworld administration** of the planet you want to go to accepts you in.”

“I see.” Maydeen folded his arms. “Can I ask you for background information about those fourteen planets?”

“Of course.” Jint retrieved a **memchip** from the **pocket** of his **long robe**. The chip was shaped like the UH standard. Both the data format and the language provided were set with the receiving party in mind.

“You didn’t need to do that for us. Our computers can read imperial-format memchips, too,” said Maydeen, taking it in hand.

“It’s a courtesy.”

“Now then, I’ll be examining the contents carefully. I’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

“There’s no need to hurry,” blurted Jint, his true intentions leaking out his mouth. In point of fact, Jint didn’t want Maydeen to give him an answer before the **magistrate** (whose job this actually was) arrived to replace him and Lafier. “There’s something I’d like you to do for us first. I’d like you to choose the next **Landworld Citizen Representative**.”

Maydeen took that like a sucker punch. “The next citizen representative? So, the next *warden*, you must mean. But the employees and their families will all be leaving this planet.”

“Whether they’re named Warden or Premier doesn’t matter to us. I want you to select the person best suited to take responsibility for this planet of yours — that is to say, this **landworld**, once you’re all gone.”

This was what Jint refused to back down on. He was certainly aware what an oddball he was among the **nobility**. Nevertheless, he had taken on his **noble rank** of his own volition, choosing to live as a member of the **Kin of the Stars** to see where it’d take him. To get involved with the selection of a **landworld’s Citizen Representative** felt like crossing a line as an Abh. Being an **Abh noble** despite hailing from a **landworld** himself was a complicated enough position to

start with. He couldn't imagine how things would branch out for him now that he'd hit this particular milestone.

As for who would head the Board of Elections, he had, as a joke, suggested to Lafier that she should do it, but he didn't honestly think she'd be fit for the role, and it was a hard pass for Jint himself as well. And, most importantly, if Maydeen didn't leave behind a responsible **landworld administration** in his wake, then this planet would succumb to out-of-control pandemonium. That much was crystal clear.

The **Empire** had a peculiar penchant for boasting of its less savory attributes and pretending to be worse than it really was. It seemed to want to be viewed by land peoples as ruthless, but in point of fact, the Empire did not cast a blind eye on civil strife. Moreover, this world was teeming with professional murderers, and they were taking a sabbatical from killing only on a superficial level. As such, a civil war here would be especially grisly. Even just as a human being vested with empathy, Jint didn't want to see that kind of gut-churning spectacle.

"You say that, but... I'm not the one who bears responsibility towards this planet's future. The term 'landworld citizen representative' sounds a tad belittling, but I'll use it just to make discussion simpler. What I wish to say is, the Citizen Representative is for the people who will be residing on this planet to choose."

"Yes, and I'd like you to work out a plan to make that happen."

"Are you asking me to hold an election?"

"I leave the method entirely in your hands. But if you'll allow me to state my opinion, I believe an election to be the most reasonable approach."

"I see." Maydeen folded his arms.

Clearly, Maydeen was less than enthused by this turn, but so too was Jint by his reaction. He couldn't afford to feel for the Warden here. "I can't authorize Your Excellency's emigration until the next **Citizen Representative** is chosen."

"I suppose you're doing as you must," said Maydeen, grim-faced. "We do have extenuating circumstances, however. We'd like you to keep our

emigration a secret to the inmates if possible. We have no idea what fresh hell would arise. But if we were to hold an election...”

“So you were planning to leave in secrecy?” said Jint, blinking. The thought hadn’t occurred to him, but he did understand where the Warden was coming from. Once the prisoners caught wind that the guards would be vacating the penitentiary, chances were high they’d act out.

“Yes, that’s correct. Granted, we can’t exactly sneak out without a sound. But we were planning to operate in secrecy until the time was nigh. That’s why even only a select few of my subordinates know we’re emigrating.”

“You haven’t even told the people who’ll be leaving!?” shouted Jint, despite himself.

“Of course. Some of my employees are friendly with some prisoners. Who knows who would leak what?”

“Then you don’t even know if they *want* to leave.”

“No, not with one hundred percent certainty,” replied Maydeen, his expression humorless, “but they’ll all want to relocate. Trust me.”

I don’t know about that, thought Jint. He’d met many people with personalities similar to Maydeen’s. He was likely just another person who didn’t doubt they knew the optimal path in their head was the best for everyone. But Jint knew that was usually an illusion. With the exception of children in need of guardians, the **Empire** never forcibly put people aboard ships, but for the time being, he kept that fact to himself so as not to complicate matters.

In any case, it seemed that there would be some quarreling by the time they were to relocate, and that at the moment, they ought to build up the strength they needed in anticipation of that eventuality.

“Well, if that’s the case, then given that there are three candidates for **Landworld Citizen Representative**, then shouldn’t you gather them together to hash it all out?”

“That an order?”

“Heavens no. Not to repeat myself, but I leave the selection method to you.”

He had a feeling that he had been, and still was, running his mouth a little too much.

“Very well. We’ll discuss amongst ourselves from here,” he said, waving his hand as though he was done with Jint.

Jint had seen United Humankind propaganda broadcasts before. They claimed that the **landworlds** ruled by the Abh were occupied with an iron fist. Had Maydeen never caught a glimpse of that propaganda?

Chapter 4: The *Cfazaitec Flurhotr* (Relocation Plan)

The Abh lived out their lives in artificial environments. To them, the concepts of “morning” and “night” were not dictated by the relative positions of a planet and its sun, as for landworlders. The Abh did, however, recognize the merits of every member of a community going about their work at the same time, so the words *arh* (“morning”) and *gorh* (“night”) remained in parlance for convenience’s sake. *Arh* was the period of time before the day’s onboard labors began, and *gorh*, the period after.

It was a different story, on the other hand, for the *gahoriac* (bridge personnel). Aboard a warship, at least one person had to be on duty at all times. The lifestyles of bridge personnel (which only **Flight Branch starpilots** could be) were segmented into three distinct categories. On vessels like the **assault ship** *Basrogrh*, where there were only three Flight Branch starpilots, if any one of them were absent, then having someone on duty at all times became considerably rougher. That was one reason it was the two non-Flight Branch starpilots, Jint of the **Budget Branch** and Samson of the **Mechanics Branch**, who had touched down on Lohbnahss II. Due to that, it was only really when they entered or left a port, or during battle, that every **starpilot** was together. It wasn’t uncommon for a given starpilot to never come across another given starpilot thanks to their differing work hours.

Being aboard a ship was an Abh’s everyday. Their time outside of work hours was precious indeed. Yet Lafier was making sure to be on the **bridge** as much as possible, even while off-duty. And that was because the bridge of the assault ship *Basrogrh* was also her **manor** as the interim liege.

“Are you not tired?” asked **Senior Starpilot** Sobash, whose shift it actually was.

“Not particularly,” answered Lafier, intending for that response to come across as natural as can be. But Sobash wasn’t convinced.

“I can call you as soon as anything pops up. Might I suggest you go rest?”

“The only difference is whether I’m sitting in my room, or in the captain’s room. Either way, I tire out at the same rate.”

“Well, that may be true, but...”

“Am I getting in the way here?” she asked, not sarcastically, but honestly.

“No, of course not. I just remember what happened all that time ago...”

“All that time ago?”

“Yes. When I went out to engage in trade for the first time, I mean. I could have gotten into it after serving as a *Roirilbigac* (Vice Navigator) or some such on a large vessel somewhere, but I borrowed money from my father and rented a ship, just like that. It was a small ship, of course. And back then, I couldn’t leave the bridge, no matter what.”

“Did you sleep there, too?”

“Yes,” said Sobash, nodding bashfully. “I napped in the Captain’s Seat. The crew warned me, but I wouldn’t listen, and when the all-important bargaining got underway, I was tottering on my feet. I took so much in losses.”

“I get plenty of sleep in my room.”

“You’re certainly better than I used to be,” he smiled.

“It’s been five years since I was appointed, and more than a year since I first saw formal battle.”

“All the more reason I feel you should give yourself a little more room to breathe.”

“I see you, too, would treat me like a child,” pouted Lafier.

“Far from it. I just can’t stand by and say nothing to the next generation, understand?”

“Just can’t stand by?” The **royal princess** frowned. If her subordinates harbored misgivings about her, then she had a big problem on her hands.

“And to be honest, the young woman I’m watching is, in her eagerness, stretching herself thin.”

“Am I? Am I being too zealous?”

“That’s what it looks like to me.”

She had no intention of acting with single-minded zeal. After all, she wasn’t thrilled to be saddled with the role of **Lady Agent** to begin with. She just wanted to properly carry out the mission she was assigned, and that was what she thought she’d been doing. She didn’t view herself as particularly ardent about it.

“What do you do when you’re alone?” asked Lafier. Truth be told, she wasn’t quite sure what she was supposed to be doing when resting. Ecryua was most likely asleep, and even if she wasn’t, she wasn’t exactly a scintillating conversationalist. There were starpilots who could carry lively conversations with **NCCs**. On the *Basrogrh*, there were two: Samson and Jint. But Lafier could never hope to emulate them. She was always aware how on guard her potential chatting partners got around her. And if she wasn’t wrong, it’d be difficult for Sobash and Ecryua, too. Speaking with Landers had to be a tricky art to master for everyone who just so happened to have blue hair and **spatiosensory perception**.

Be that as it may, she also didn’t care to spend all of her time by her lonesome, diligently crafting something or other. That was why she was interested in what Sobash did when alone.

“That is a very personal question,” smiled Sobash.

“Was it untoward of me to ask? Forgive me.”

“No, I have nothing to hide.” The **Senior Starpilot**’s grin grew wider. “For your information, I dictate letters.”

“Every day?”

“Yes, every day. One after the other, to the people I know. Also, though I’m currently on the battle front, I also have some business to attend to. There are administrative things to take note of.”

“Do you not get tired of it?”

“Writing the letters isn’t as fun as getting the replies back. Whenever I send a letter, it’s because I want to hear back from the recipient. It’s a good way to keep my relationships with people from crumbling away, too.”

“What do you mean, ‘crumbling away’?”

“You can be quite close to someone, but if you don’t interact for long stretches of time, that familiarity can only dissipate over time. But with the magic of correspondence, you don’t need to meet face-to-face to interact. So now I know that my funeral will be a boisterous affair!” he laughed. “I don’t think I can expect you or the others to attend, though we seem to be seeing each other every single day as of late, **Captain.**”

“You’re right,” said Lafier, smiling as well.

The crew was staking their lives on the ship, and that was doubly the case for a small vessel like an assault ship. Were Sobash to die in battle, then it would be because the *Basrogrh* had been shot to ruins. And in that case, none of the other members would survive, either.

“By the way, are you really sure you don’t want to go rest?”

“I would much rather keep chatting with you,” said Lafier, resting her chin in her hands. “To take my mind off the boredom.”

“I’m technically supposed to be on duty,” said Sobash, though he didn’t seem bothered by the prospect at all.

“Only technically, surely?”

“Yes. Only technically,” he answered.

But that was when they heard the incoming-call ringtone.

“A call from the surface. It’s **Rearguard** Lynn.”

“Put it through,” said Lafier, getting to her feet.

The video came up, and in it, Jint looked haggard. “**Lady Agent**, this is your **Lady Agent Adjunct**, calling from the **landworld.**”

That was blindingly obvious, but Lafier nodded. “What’s the matter?”

“Remember the relocation thing? They’ve reached a conclusion. They really will be emigrating. The itinerary’s set, so I’ll be sending it over.”

“Understood. At any rate, you look a little exhausted.”

“I’m more than a little exhausted.”

“Should I go down there, too?”

Jint seemed taken aback, but soon he was shaking his head. “No, it’s fine. Better if you stay up there.”

“Okay.” She did have tasks to see to aboard the *Basrogrh*. If she left, then the burden on Sobash and Ecryua’s shoulders would balloon.

“The first batch is projected to be twelve thousand people. We’ll be ferrying people from the surface into orbit using the *Dacsaith* a bunch of times. Hope the preparations for the **supply ships** that’ll be taking them past that point will go all right.”

“I tried asking, and they said that since they’re for transporting goods, they’re not made to receive passengers,” said Lafier, relaying the words of the **Transport Unit Commander** with her arms folded. “And twelve thousand is too many. Eight thousand is the occupancy limit.”

Judging by Jint’s face, this was an unpleasant surprise. “Then are you going to arrange for a new ship?”

“I suppose I have no other choice. I’ll send out a **conveyance ship** without delay. I will have the first eight thousand board ship, though.”

“But didn’t you say they’re not built to receive passengers...?”

“Meaning it won’t be a pleasant journey for them. They’ll need to bear with it for around ten days.”

Jint groaned in response. “I’ll try persuading him. Though if he doesn’t give the nod, it’ll just delay their flight out of here. Could I get the files on the ship’s occupant habitability?”

“Sure. I’ll have the *Symh Salygr* (Transport Unit) send them to you directly.”

“Thanks. One more thing: I just got the ‘**Landworld Citizen Representative Succession Ranking List**,’ which I’ll send you as well. They’d like us to keep the existence of the succession rankings from the inmates, let alone what they are.”

“Is that a record of who will be **Citizen Representative** after the current **landworld administration** leaves?”

“Nope. Mr. Maydeen’s a prudent man. The list details who will have to head

up their emigration should something ever happen to him. If the guards make their way out, then the list becomes irrelevant.”

“Understood.” *Prudent is good*, she thought.

“Right, well, I’ll probably have to call you again in a bit, but I’m going to drop the line for now.”

Lafier nodded, and when she sat herself back down, the video disappeared.

Jint breathed a sigh of relief. Thank the stars Lafier agreed to stay in orbit. The situation on this world was complicated enough as it stood.

He then exited the “communications room,” which was what he called this little room. While all he needed to communicate was his **wristgear**, in order to transmit messages he didn’t want the **landworld citizens** to overhear, he needed a room he knew was not wiretapped. And the other great thing about the room? How very close it was to the conference room.

The second he stepped foot into the conference room, the eyes of all assembled inside fell on him at once. Maydeen and the two self-professed Star System Premiers had been waiting for him. Anguson had declined to attend, or perhaps more accurately, was ignoring it, since he hadn’t responded to Maydeen’s attendance request at all.

Along the right wall stood the **NCCs** under **Mechanics Linewing** Samson.

I hope, for my sake and theirs, they’re enjoying this “bodyguard” mission, thought Jint. *I hope it doesn’t become an actual bodyguard mission.*

Samson certainly seemed to be enjoying it. In fact, bearing a holster heavy with a **lightgun** appeared to stir wistful memories of his homeworld. As to why his homeworld and **lightguns** were so connected, Jint had neglected to ask.

Along the left wall stood Maydeen’s armed prison guards, all wearing cantankerous expressions. And at the back stood the prisoners, who were evidently there to guard Dohkfoo and Shungarr’s respective persons. Their presence was demanded by the self-proclaimed Premiers as a condition for their attendance (and was a factor in the delaying of this conference, too). Being prisoners, they were unarmed; the fact that they *couldn’t* possibly be

armed was a formal stance both the prison administration and the prisoner population agreed on. Despite that, Dohkfoo hinted at a request to be lent arms, but Maydeen staunchly refused.

“How did it go, **Lady Agent Adjunct**, Your Excellency?” asked Maydeen.

“Twelve thousand is too many for the ship currently in orbit. We can take up to eight thousand for the first batch.” Jint didn’t give them a moment to interject; he knew it was best to bear all of the bad news up front. “Also, the ship’s habitability is awful. I think it’d be a better idea to wait for a ship that’s made to carry people, like a **passenger ship**. Though it’ll most likely end up being a military-use **personnel supply ship**.”

“If you can only accommodate eight thousand, then how about telling us that from the jump?” said Maydeen.

The twelve thousand slated to be the first batch comprised the entirety of the private citizenry, including the shopkeepers and the administrative staff members’ families. This meant that as Chief Executive, Maydeen had to revise the selection standard so as to leave four thousand people behind. Jint supposed it was only natural he’d be upset.

“If you’re not in too much of a hurry, might I suggest waiting for a more suitable ship?” suggested Jint. “As I’ve said over and over, the two ships in orbit are supply ships handling goods. And while it would certainly be less expensive for the **Star Forces** if you actually decide to use them...”

“I see Your Excellency is a straight talker,” said Shungarr. “After all, you could have just kept that to yourself and thrown us in a ship’s storage sector to do the job on the cheap. But instead, you’re sending for a ship for us.”

“You’re all already cherished **landworld** citizens of the **Empire**,” said Jint.

“So, if the administration people are passing on the first batch, could you take us instead?” said Shungarr.

“Who said we’re passing on it!?” erupted Maydeen. “And this is the first I’ve heard of *you lot* leaving the planet!”

“It would be. I never had a chance to tell you before now. Allow me to say it loud and clear: We, the residents of the West Correctional Zone, will evacuate

Lohbnahss II and leave this star system.”

Jint wished he could hold his head in his hands; now he had another misery-inducing obstacle to deal with.

“That cannot be allowed,” said Maydeen, red in the face. “You are criminals. And criminals must atone for their sins. And now you... you’d have your freedom, just like that? Do you think nothing of your victims’ desire for justice!?”

“The folks locked up in this joint aren’t the type to be looking deep inside themselves,” Shungarr quipped sarcastically. “Not on this far-flung rock.”

“And would you be fine with that, Count?” said Maydeen, facing Jint’s way. “Letting criminals loose?”

“I’d have to ask a specialist in the law before getting back to you with anything definitive, but I think that’s probably out of our hands. The ladies and gentlemen here weren’t convicted under imperial law. And they would be transferred to a prison camp, anyway. The only real problem lies in the right of the **landworld administrations** to vet who gets to relocate. I hate to break it to you, but...” Jint looked at Shungarr and Dohkfoo.

“Please, go on. You don’t have to worry about us,” said Dohkfoo, smiling broadly. Jint could tell he was grinning to hide his naturally frenzied-looking face.

“Well, I just don’t think there are worlds out there that welcome folks with criminal records.”

“The prison camp is fine,” asserted Shungarr. “Anywhere’s paradise compared to this hopeless, miserable planet.”

“You said society on a ‘prison camp’ planet is the same as any other planet’s, didn’t you?” Maydeen persisted. “They’ll commit more crimes there, too, given the chance. Does that really sit well with you? Is the Empire powerless to stop that? Or does the Empire just not concern itself with crime on landworlds?”

The Empire probably doesn’t care much, no. But Jint took another tack: “As far as I’ve been told, depending on the character of the camp, problems can arise with some regularity, so penal law tends to be on the stricter end of the

spectrum.”

“Exactly how strict are we talking?” said Maydeen, dubious.

Jint spoke the question into his **wristgear**, and read the search result. “Let’s see... Seems like in a typical prison camp, the maximum sentence for all crimes is death.”

“Even just for a recreational spot of fraud!?” shouted Dohkfoo, shocked.

“Even just for low-key offing some clingy wanker!?” shouted Shungarr, shocked.

“So it seems. The minimum sentence for fraud is ten years hard labor, and the minimum for murder is twenty-five years hard labor. No probation or suspended sentences, either.”

“Going to back out on relocating now?” Maydeen smirked.

“No way,” said Shungarr, glaring at the Chief Executive. “It’s still better than here. We’ll be fine as long as we don’t do anything wrong. Meanwhile, this planet’s turning into hell in no time.”

“I can’t let that remark pass, Ms. Shungarr,” said Dohkfoo. “You may be intent on leaving, but we’re not. We’re going to build an ideal society here.”

“Right alongside Anguson?” she sniped coldly. “Best of luck there.”

“We’d like your zone to stay, too, Ms. Shungarr.”

“But why? If we leave, then you’re a shoo-in for System Premier. Well, I don’t think Anguson will take that lying down, but at least one competitor will be out of your hair.”

“If your zone were to vacate, this planet’s future would be forfeit. You’re the only ones who can give birth.”

“Don’t be stupid!” said Shungarr, half-rising out of her seat to slam the table. “So let me get this straight: You only need us around to bear your seed, is that it? We are NOT your broodmares! And you’d have *Anguson* and his boys impregnate us? Well think again, because we refuse, you hear me? We REFUSE!”

“I didn’t mean to say it’d *only* be to give birth...” said Dohkfoo, visibly perplexed. “We know you’ll pitch in in other ways, too, of course. And you’d be free to love, marry, and reproduce as you see fit. Plus, if you don’t like the fuss of marriage, there’s always artificial insemination.”

“Forget it!” she replied firmly, before turning to the Chief Executive. “Now you see why we can’t stay here!”

“I’m willing to admit that was worded tactlessly,” said Dohkfoo. “But without fertile females, where does that leave this planet? It’s not as though we can hold out for settlers from other systems for the foreseeable future.”

“What do I care? If you ask me, this planet never had a future to begin with.”

“Uhh, if I may,” said Jint, “we can easily provide the planet with artificial childbirth tech. Rest assured the method is very safe. And there are plenty of **territory-nations** that’ll gladly provide you with egg cells and sperm.”

Jint was aware that in bringing that up, egg cells and sperm could very well be the first trade agreement he’d preside over as **Count of Hyde**. But the three of them just stood there, stiff as trees, looking at him. Judging by their faces, his suggestion wasn’t even worth considering.

“We’ll, uhh, think of that as a last resort,” said Dohkfoo, breaking the silence with a dark look.

“Putting that aside,” said Shungarr, “we’re leaving. I trust that’s okay with you, Chief Executive.”

“It can’t be helped,” said Maydeen. “That being said, you are lower priority evacuees. First we evacuate the non-personnel, then the personnel, and then you.”

“You should view us as non-personnel, too.”

“Surely you’re joking.”

“Look, we’re not here because we ever wanted to be. We were tossed into this slammer by force. Just think about that.”

“You’re not getting to me with that poor excuse for an argument. You are criminals, yet here you are, making yourselves out to be *victims*.”

“We’re victims of society.”

“You can say that at this late date if you like, but it’s not going to get you anywhere.”

“If you let us on first, then we won’t have to sit here arguing back and forth like this.”

“It’s out of the question!”

The way Jint saw it, this fledgling **landworld administration** lacked any really qualified parties, and it was killing him inside that that still didn’t mean he could just choose for them. Frankly, he had no idea what to do from here. He could sense his thought patterns turning gradually more negative. All he wanted was for an experienced **magistrate**, whose line of work this actually was, to come take over the job that had been foisted upon them for no other reason than that she was an **Imperial** and he was a **noble**. Not that they’d ever told them that was the reason, but what else could it reasonably be?

If he were to lose just a tad more hope, he’d have half a mind to keep this fruitless conference spinning its wheels so as to buy time. At present, he was teetering on the verge. But at this juncture, it didn’t matter whether or not they were averse to the idea. This was his and Lafier’s assigned task.

“You can’t be serious,” balked Shungarr, who then looked in Jint’s direction. “Could we meet in private over the first batch?”

“If you insist it’s necessary.” *But why can’t we talk about it right here?* “I’d just like to make something clear beforehand: there are two preconditions for boarding.”

“What preconditions?”

“The consent of those boarding, and the permission of the **landworld administration**.

“That’s right,” said Maydeen. “In case you aren’t aware, I’m representing the ‘**landworld administration**.’ At least for the time being, that is. You can try *working* him, but it would be a waste of time.”

“That is a petty-minded accusation!” said Shungarr, pounding on the table.

“Who... just who are you calling loose, here!? Why would I do such a thing?”

“I’m not saying you would be the one doing the seducing. You do, however, have a number of women as underlings, many of whom were prostitutes. You’d use them, of course...”

“How vulgar! You should be ashamed of your mind being so in the gutter. You don’t even know for sure if His Excellency the Count swings that way!” Shungarr pointed at Jint; then, suddenly, she faced where her finger was pointing with a worried look. “Are you straight?”

Do I have to answer that? thought Jint, lost and bewildered.

“You don’t need to answer that!” shouted Maydeen in Jint’s stead. “It has nothing to do with this meeting.”

“I was just trying to ease the tension by bringing up a lighter topic!” said Shungarr, pounding the table yet again.

“A lighter topic? That’s rich!” Not to be outdone, Maydeen also pounded the table. “You were trying to suss out whether you can strike a backroom deal!”

“Ugh, you insist on painting me as trying to seduce His Excellency. Well, let me use this opportunity to say it point-blank: no one likes you!”

“Of course they don’t. It’s not my job to be popular with the inmates.”

“Is *abusing your authority* your job, then!?”

“When have I ever abused my authority!? I will not stand by this slander!”

“Oh, let me count the ways!”

As their bickering — for it was far from a constructive debate from any point of view — continued to eat time, the desk continued to receive their punishment. After a while, Jint noticed Dohkfoo’s entourage of prisoners gleefully counting on their hands. It seemed they were betting which side would end up slamming the table the most times.

“Please, that’s enough!” Jint shouted.

Surprised, Maydeen and Shungarr regarded him.

Awkwardly, Jint cleared his throat. “I’m asking you, please, calm down. I, uhh,

I don't know whether His Excellency the Chief Executive has abused his power, but..."

"I don't believe it..." Maydeen looked away, never imagining he'd be so called into question.

Jint ignored this. "If you'd like to file complaints about each other, I ask that you do so elsewhere. And don't take this as a warning or anything like that, but just to allay any potential distrust, let me inform you that nothing good will come of trying to strike a backroom deal with me. We're just working by the request of a **landworld administration**, and have no intention of changing that framework. Besides, I'm a mere **adjunct to the Lady Agent**."

"Oh, now we know you ought to have asked **Her Highness** up in orbit whether she's straight," Maydeen mocked Shungarr.

"I think you're taking it too far," Jint's inner Delktunian chimed in.

Jint wasn't ultimately sure whether taking Maydeen up on his suggestion and asking Lafier would be considered an affront. In fact, he couldn't be sure whether it was even a meaningful question to ask. Unlike the **landworld citizens** of Delktu, the Abh possessed an extremely unfettered philosophy on love, tending not to give much mind to trifling concerns like gender when love struck. Regardless, the values of Delktunian society were deeply ingrained in him, and so hearing Lafier's innermost personal details be fuel for their glib rejoinders rubbed him the wrong way.

A friend of his most likely still living on Delktu, one Que Durin, suddenly came to mind. When Jint told Durin what he'd learned of Abh love lives at the school he'd been attending, the boy had yelled: "But then there are no taboos to break! Where's the fun in that?" Then Durin smiled, adding: "I win."

"Forgive me. I admit my tongue slipped," said Maydeen, but soon he hid his nervous agitation under an expressionless mask.

"You're guilty of disrespecting the crown!" Shungarr pointed an accusatory finger at Maydeen. "I was told the Lady Agent is a **member of the Imperial Family**. The gall of it, to talk of her sexual preferences! You should be executed for offending the dignity of the sovereign!" But once again, she faced Jint with a worried look: "That is a crime, right?"

“I guess?” said Jint evasively.

Imperial law did severely punish offending the throne. On paper. He couldn't remember which **Emperor or Empress** had enacted the law, but he knew it was on the books. Only, the realization that if it were actually enforced, then two thirds of the **gentry** and every single **noble** (in other words, the majority of the entire race) would have to be executed, settled swiftly. As such, it was ignored in practice. This was hardly the only instance of pretending a problematic law didn't exist, either. The phenomenon riddled imperial history. Jint knew that much, but being on the less august end of the **Abh nobility** importance spectrum, he couldn't help but hesitate to get into all of that.

“See!?” gloated Shungarr. “You're done for, Maydeen!”

The Chief Executive's face turned white as a sheet.

“But that doesn't apply to **landworld citizens**,” said Jint, still electing not to divulge the whole truth about the law.

“There you have it,” Maydeen smiled with evident relief. Then he blew up again. “Besides, you're the one who started it by asking people whether they're straight. His Excellency is a count! If I'm guilty of offending the crown, so are you!”

“A count is nobility, not royalty! And not an Imperial, either!” She gave Jint a worried look. “Right?”

“Of course, they're all different.” But Jint was fed up with this whole topic. “Now, let's get back to the main point of discussion, shall we?”

“Ah, right, of course,” said Maydeen. “What were we talking about? Boarding priority, if I recall.”

“Which is for the **landworld administration** to decide,” stated Jint. “My sitting here won't help in that regard.”

“Yes, yes. So, it's a question of onboard habitability, correct?”

“That, and occupancy limit,” Jint added.

“Right. The limit being eight thousand, yes? What exactly will the journey be like?”

Luckily, the relevant files had been sent to Jint's **wristgear** from the command center of the **transport unit** by then. This unproductive back-and-forth had its upside — namely, buying him the time he'd needed.

"The eight thousand figure is predicated on dividing the main hold into three." Jint projected the ship's layout map from his **wristgear**. "We can do it given a little construction work, but you would have to bring any sort of bedding with you from the **landworld** surface, since the only onboard bedding is for the crew. Also, there will be twenty thousand square *dagh* of space per person, not taking into account common areas like hallways and the like."

"Any space for luggage?"

"One million square *dagh* per person."

"That's not much..."

"If that's the case," said Shungarr, "let us have it. More of us can board at a time, since none of us has much of anything to bring aboard."

"I said non-personnel civilians are highest priority, and that's final." Maydeen began working the **terminal** by him. A moment later, he was done. "Narrowing down the criteria to children, the elderly, and their guardians and care practitioners, that makes 1,867 people. We'll have them board first."

"And the other 6,143 people?" asked Shungarr immediately.

"The other 6,133 people, you mean," Maydeen corrected her. "We'll send our household goods instead. That way we'll be able to enjoy a comfortable journey later, taking only a minimal amount of personal effects."

"Youuu..." Shungarr began pounding the table anew.

"Please calm down. You must recognize his right to determine the priori—"

"How can I be calm?" Shungarr interrupted. "Once the Chief Executive leaves this planet, we might be forced to ask Dohkfoo or even *Anguson* for permission to emigrate! Do you think they'll just let us go?"

She's got a point, thought Jint, taken aback. She was right; once Maydeen was out of the picture, evacuating the women seemed a difficult proposition.

"I'm appalled by your words," said Dohkfoo, clasping his hands. "I can't speak

for Mr. Anguson, but should I become System Premier, know that I will not suppress your freedom. If you want to relocate, I will support your wishes.”

“I haven’t lost my touch just yet; I’m not going to buy into the promises of a con man like you,” she potshot.

“That scenario hadn’t occurred to me,” said Maydeen, who also seemed not to take Dohkfoo’s word for it. “Okay. I’ll fly out last. I’ll have you all board before me.”

“Spoken like a true Chief Executive,” said Shungarr.

“At least I know I’m more trusted than Dohkfoo or Anguson, which isn’t a bad feeling.” Then Maydeen frowned. “Wait, is this even something to be pleased about?”

“I’d be pleased if I were you,” said Shungarr.

The air in the room had suddenly taken a turn for the cheerful, with Dohkfoo alone staring on grimly. Actually, Jint wasn’t feeling too sunny, either.

“Your Excellency, it appears I need to revise the schedule,” said Maydeen.

“Right. We need to accommodate more people now,” Jint sighed.

“It’ll be fine,” consoled Shungarr. “The West Zone has the smallest population.”

“Around how many people?” asked Jint, not hoping for much.

“Hmm, around a hundred thousand.”

Chapter 5: The *Blaiglach* (Hunters)

Aboard the *Scacaü*, the flagship of **Hunter Fleet 4**, which was currently in the *Ciioth Egmunter* (*Egmuntec* Star System), Noble Prince *Biboth Aronn Nérémr İarlucec Nélaith* sat himself in a wide chair and closed his eyes. He sensed with his *frocragh* a giant sphere ahead. The sphere slowly began warping. It was a flat disc; then, suddenly, it stretched vertically, into a cone. The cone then stretched at high speed while simultaneously narrowing, until it was naught but a simple line. The object would continue transforming into a disc and into a cone numerous times, in line with some outside rhythm, until suddenly, it stayed a sphere. The sphere's surface was not as stable, however; it was astir, as though writhing in protest. From within that commotion arose a smaller sphere, which predictably changed shapes between disc and cone as it revolved around Neleth. The small spheres came into being one after the other, and each time a new one was born, the big sphere changed shape, waving about its tentacle-like appendages. The tips of the tentacles sometimes turned hard and round, before coming off. The number of objects spinning around Neleth's vicinity kept growing apace. They morphed and deformed, slanted and inclined, jumped and danced. Until finally, the original sphere became around the same size as its offspring, and joined them in orbit. From there, the objects only moved more complexly, more esoterically, as though trying to impart the will of some inscrutable force.

And just as its intentions were beginning to come into relief...

"Neleth, are you napping?"

Neleth opened his eyes languidly. While his *frocragh* was still occupied by the wild dance of physical bodies, his eyes were greeted by the sight of his brother and **Chief of Staff**, Nefeh.

"As though I'd be sleeping," replied Neleth. "I'm spending my time appreciating some art."

He didn't imagine Nefeh was going to leave him alone any time soon, so he

unhooked his **circlet's access cables** from the playback device. It always felt extremely weird and unpleasant for one's *frocragh* and one's field of vision to be at odds.

"A surprisingly respectable pastime, for you." Nefeh hooked up his own **access cables** into the device's ports and closed his eyes. "Oh, I've sensed this one before. Only, I remember it being accompanied by music."

"Have you no appreciation for art in its purest form? *Froclaïc* (spatiosensory art) doesn't need music or video or what have you."

"What a humdrum opinion, coming from you, Neleth. I'm sorry to talk back, but I happen to like *rybelaïc* (composite art)."

"You have a disorderly, jumbled mess of a soul, so miscellaneous mishmashes suit you perfectly, Nefeh. You could enjoy each on their own, at their most splendid, but you have to go and mix them all together so thoughtlessly."

"Don't be silly, Neleth. The essence of composite art is in choosing the individual components, and in how they're combined."

"Whatever. Did you come here to interrupt my leisure time to argue aesthetics, Nefeh?"

"I'm afraid not. I come with news."

"Good news?"

"You might be one to regard it as such, but I and the rest of the **staff officers** think it rather bad news."

"Feh. You're a bad influence; you're rubbing off on them. I mean, to come to the same opinion, how else can that be?"

"I'm protecting my top-caliber staff from *your* bad influence. Now then, do you want the news or not?"

"If I said no, would you keep mum?"

"Gladly. After all, it's not as though your being in on it would lead to anything sound coming out of that head of yours. So will you do us all a favor and leave this matter to us?"

“No can do. Lay it on me.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say,” said Nefeh, grimacing. “An enemy fleet has passed through *Saudec Baurceutebina Rylaimer* (Portal 13 of *Rylaimec*).”

A **planar space map** appeared. The basal section of the territory in the charge of **Fleet 4**, which was jutting quite a ways away from the front lines made up by the other **fleets**, was glowing an ominous red.

“Huh. Well, where are they headed?”

“The Central Sector of the **Milky Way Portal-Belts**, obviously. Looks like they’re planning to escape.”

“So, what, they’re not going to try to surround and rout us?”

“The enemy commander must have all the common sense you lack. They know that would be a fool’s errand.”

“That’s a shame. I’ve become fond of defensive war ever since Aptic, but there just hasn’t been the opportunity.”

“Is that why you’ve seen fit to ignore our advice and plunge this deep into enemy territory?” chided Nefeh. “What of your obligation to your subordinates?”

“I don’t plan to sacrifice my subordinates needlessly, of course. If they focus too much on our fleet, then in the end, we’ll get off with only a little in losses. I already explained that to you.”

“The losses of the **Hunter Fleet** in its entirety would be small. But you’re the **Commander-in-Chief** of Fleet 4.”

“How saddening, Nefeh. I see how it is. You’re just dandy as long as you and yours are safe.”

“If you’re so into this newfound altruism, why don’t you spare some thought for the enemy while you’re at it?” cracked Nefeh.

“I *am* sparing them some thought. Think about it: They can’t win in the end, but if they encircle us, at least I’m giving them a chance to shine. I was even thinking of writing the sentence ‘In that moment, I steeled myself for the possibility we might get utterly wiped out’ in my memoirs.”

“But why?”

“Why, he asks!” Neleth was flabbergasted. “I know you have a bad attitude and no common sense, but I never dreamed you’d be this thick in the head to boot. Let me spell it out for—”

“I’m guessing it’s so that when the survivors among the enemy read it, they’ll be moved to sobbing, and realize that their struggle wasn’t in vain.”

“So you DO get it. I was seriously worried you didn’t.”

“I didn’t want to think you’re really that twisted,” jabbed Nefeh.

“What do you mean, ‘twisted’?” Neleth honestly didn’t know.

“I get it, though,” said Nefeh. “You’re just being considerate, in your own weird way.”

“Exactly. Though I do have to wonder what you mean by ‘my own weird way.’”

“Don’t dwell on it. It wouldn’t be like you to dwell on it, anyway. But please, don’t be *considerate* to me again.”

“Have I ever in the past?”

“No. At least, not that I’ve noticed.”

“Right. And I won’t pay you any mind from here on out, either.”

“That’s a relief. By the way, what do we do?”

“Ah, yes. I’d hate to give the impression that we let them escape without resistance, so I suppose I’ll refrain from writing about this particular incident.”

“Who cares about your memoirs no one’s going to read anyway?! I want to know what we do about the enemy fleet!”

“What is there to do about it?” Neleth smiled. “Are there any of our ships on that fleet’s path?”

“No. Our supply lines and action zone are stretched as far as we can. The gaps between ships being this large, they’re apparently planning to weave through. But is it really okay not to give chase?”

“Can we catch up?”

“I’m having the **Strategy Staff Officer** look into it. By the looks of it, it’ll take a while before a conclusion is reached.”

“Forget about it. The main forces will just intercept them at any rate. The enemy fleet is aware they’re pulling a do-or-die escape; if we gave chase now, we’d just be bullies.”

“The enemy isn’t helpless enough for us to be called bullies,” the **Chief of Staff** pointed out.

“Well, that only proves my point — that pursuing them would be pointless,” said Neleth. “What would happen if, in a fight like that, I ended up with some casualties? It’d come across to the reader like I was desperately trying to smooth over my own blunders.”

“For goodness’ sake, forget the memoir,” said Nefeh, but it seemed he didn’t wish to retort beyond that. “Then we’re not responding?”

“We might as well inform the **command center** over at Darmap. They’ll probably see it for themselves faster than the message will reach them, but I don’t want to hear them complaining to us later. Then I want you to instruct the units at the rear to take refuge, not to fire, if they encounter the enemy fleet. We’re speeding on ahead. All the more so, without any notable forces in front to block us. The other fleets will know soon enough, and it’ll make the race that much more exciting.”

“I assume you’re aiming to ‘finish first’ in the ‘race’?”

“Of course! And what a tremendous honor it’ll be,” Neleth said, with a profound sense of satisfaction. “See, Nefeh? I am thinking about Fleet 4, too.”

Aboard the *Lachcaü*, the flagship of **Hunter Fleet 1**, which was currently in the *Ciioth Atoriar* (*Atoriac* Star System), the **Chief of Staff, Kilo-Commander** Cfadiss, had finished up meetings on various small odds and ends, and returned to the **Commander’s Bridge**. There, the **Commander-in-Chief** had her chin on the back of her right hand while she gazed at the **planar space map** listlessly.

Cfadiss’s eyes were drawn to the **map**, too. On it, the enemy fleet’s path was

marked by a broken line. Fleet 1 had consolidated the reports of the **patrol ships** now on all sides. They could hardly be called completely accurate, given how long communications took in a sector this vast, but this was the most accurate information on hand.

The **Star Forces** were concentrated across two separate battle fronts. One was heading toward the **Milky Way Portal-Belts'** center to square off against the Three Nations Alliance's principal forces, while the other was headed toward the outer belt in order to expand the **Empire's** territory. As for the space between those two fronts, it was mostly deserted, with just a handful of defense corps guarding the **portals** which constituted the strategic points of the supply lines. The fleeing enemy fleet was aiming to slip away from the outer-ring battlefront and make it to the central sector, popping out into **3-space** at points to resupply. They were going at speeds slow enough to bely the word "escape," probably because the supply corps they were taking was slowing them down. At present, they made no sign of attacking the **antimatter fuel factories** that the **Star Forces** had deemed important enough to guard. They did, however, opt to snatch civilian-use **antimatter fuel** on their way. Granted, those factories were originally set up by the UH. From their point of view, they were taking back fuel that was rightfully theirs.

"The enemy fleet is trying to join up with their main forces, I take it," muttered Sporr.

"A valid move," offered Cfadiss.

"Is it?" She shifted in her chaise. "I thought for sure they'd abandon their military altogether."

"Abandon their military? And do what?"

"They could just touch down on any **landworld** and do as they please. Unlike us, they have no reason to cling to space."

"They certainly think they do."

If they were to place surviving above all other ideals, then the enemy soldiers' best option would indeed be to abandon the fleet and turn a new leaf on some hospitable **landworld**. The **Empire** hadn't made a custom of pursuing defeated soldiers over that far a distance. In fact, that would be the best outcome for the

Star Forces as well. The Abh seldom ever minded if a **landworld** became oddly anti-imperial due to receiving large amounts of former soldiers. They rarely even noticed to begin with.

Yet the enemy military was fighting to protect what they believed needed defending. And as long as hope was alive, it was only natural they would keep fighting. Cfadiss understood full well; he was also a soldier.

“Could our work here be over?” she pondered aloud.

“Our orders are to simultaneously observe retreating fleets while conducting recon on the entire battlefield.”

“I *know* that.” Sporr waved her hand with some irritation. “But there probably isn’t anything left to actually *do*. The fighting over the **Hunters’ Battlefield** is over.”

That may be true, thought Cfadiss. The enemy forces attempting to flee were estimated to contain around forty **sub-fleets** at their core. Based on various bits of circumstantial evidence, they equated to the entirety of the enemy fleets stranded by **Operation Hunter**. They had taken control over all of the Hunters’ Battlefield, and there most likely wouldn’t be much of a fight before they finally recovered the parts of the **Ileesh Monarchy** that were under enemy occupation.

In any case, Cfadiss was relieved. The **Commander-in-Chief** was more than prone to fly into combat by all means, but at the moment, she seemed content to stay behind the scenes.

“You look happy, **Chief of Staff**.” Her sharp-sighted red eyes scrutinized Cfadiss’s expression.

“Because of the lull in the mission,” he lied.

“‘Lull’ is right. At least, to me it is. I’ll be bored to tears soon enough. I’m jealous of you lot.” She let out an elegant yawn. “I’m making the observance of the fleeing enemy fleets your highest imperative. When can you hand me an operation plan?”

It certainly was the case that the **staff officers** would have their hands full. The patrol ships under Fleet 1 would take turns to come close to enemy fleets

and accumulate data. They would have to notify each sub-fleet of the plan beforehand. Put like that, it sounded easy enough, but it was in fact a terribly complicated mission. **Conveyance ships** were the fastest way to transmit information across **planar space**, and that fact made everything harder. The situation was in constant flux, but the information they had on hand was far from fresh. The patrol ships that were so widely dispersed were to wait near the enemy's projected path, with designated sectors set, and supply and communications routes established. Or rather, the enemy's projected paths, in the plural. They had to predict every action the enemy could reasonably take. They also had to plan for the possibility of losing the patrol ships that were doing the observing. Actually, for all they knew, the information that they'd already fallen was making its way to the **flagship** now. And they needed to come up with a plan for that possibility, too. With how intricate it all was, they were constructing an endless labyrinth of contingencies.

It was impossible to pound out an operation plan by human faculties alone, and most of the heavy lifting was done by **compucrystals**. Despite that, it was impossible to implement the perfect plan — after all, the theoretically perfect plan had need of limitless troops for every possible contingency. They were always forced to go forward with a plan that had holes somewhere or other. And it was humans who decided where the holes would be, not **compucrystals**. The staff officers' job was to agonize in the interstice between theoretical perfection and limited troops.

"Ma'am, permission to move the flagship toward the enemy fleet's direction of travel?" asked Cfadiss.

It was standard practice to position the information center — in this case, the *Lachcaü*, the flagship of Fleet 1 — in front of the enemy, so as to at least somewhat mitigate the harsh restrictions imposed by **planar space**. That way, even if the enemy thrust a spear into the hole in their plan, they'd be able to respond swiftly. Needless to say, the information center had to maintain its distance to avoid direct contact.

"Of course, **Chief of Staff**," Sporr nodded.

"I will have the first draft for you in six hours' time," said Cfadiss.

“Also, make sure as many ships as possible take action alongside the flagship,” she added.

So she DOES want to enter combat, thought Cfadiss, dejected.

As long as they flew in advance of the enemy fleet, then this observation operation’s final stage was set to have them encounter **Grand Commodore** Tlife’s corps. Of course, as a recon corps, they could just pass them by and continue toward the rear, but concentrating their forces into the main body of troops meant they could take part in eliminating the enemy. Cfadiss was a fellow soldier of the **Star Forces**; he did not shrink before combat. But allocating patrol ships for surveillance, while concentrating their force of arms at the same time, was bound to be a headache and a half.

“Is that clear?” said Sporr.

“Roger that,” answered Cfadiss, for lack of options.

Aboard the **flagship** of *Byrec Blair Matloceutena* (Hunter Fleet 21), the *Sulbiruch*, currently in the *Üéch Sauder Lylymata Melmir* (Portal-Sea 552 of *Melmic*)—

“What do you mean, we just *let* them pass through!?” barked Tlife.

The report, detailing how **Commodore Biboth** had allowed the remaining enemy fleets to pass without any obstruction whatsoever, had just reached Tlife’s ears.

“I’m sure they just couldn’t respond in time,” said his **Chief of Staff, Associate Commodore** Cahyoor.

“Oh. Then it couldn’t be helped.” But soon enough, his irritation returned. “Wait, they didn’t even try to pursue, from what I could see. What’s that **Commodore Biboth** even thinking!?”

“He probably came to the conclusion that if he gave chase, they’d sustain great losses for little gain. I think it was the right call.”

“It may have been the right call, but even so, I can’t condone it.”

Tlife’s mission was to wrap **Operation Hunter** in a neat little bow. If they’d

annihilated all the remaining fleets, then Operation Hunter would draw to a definitive close. All they'd need to do in the aftermath would be a final sweep to mop up.

And yet, all he'd been handed to wage this battle — this battle that should, by all rights, be a glorious one — was troops equivalent to a mere forty-three sub-fleets.

He'd been briefed on the whys. The worst case scenario would be the Three Nations Alliance's main forces going on the offensive in response to the remaining fleets' retreat. Even if the troops the enemy deployed were scant, it would still have the Abh ships in the area trapped in a pincer attack. As such, they couldn't afford to let the core of the enemy forces catch wind of the fact that the remaining fleets were presently escaping. Moreover, extracting a large number of troops from the battle zone facing off against the central area of the Milky Way Portal-Belts would be akin to flat out advertising how the remaining fleets were taking grand-scale action.

He understood the rationale. It was perfectly logical. But it didn't go down well with him.

"The enemy's at forty sub-fleets, huh. Can't exactly call our position overwhelmingly advantageous," grumbled Tlife.

"But the enemy must be bringing many supply corps with them," said Cahyoor. "There might be civilians aboard, so there's a high probability that their strength is lower than it looks."

"We've also got supply corps flying with us."

"They're different animals, though. Our supply corps are engaged in short-distance transport. But theirs have access to much more. Probably even **mobile antimatter fuel factories**."

"I know that! I know that, but still, it's all just probabilities."

"That is correct. We await **Commodore** Sporr's follow-up report."

"I wonder which'll come first, her follow-up, or our collision with the enemy."

"Quantifying the enemy's force of arms is our highest priority reconnaissance

target. We can never be too informed, and we won't have to worry about entering combat without enough intelligence."

"Never mind that; it's too unreliable. It's a tradition among **Star Forces** commanders to be uncooperative."

"I don't think it's a 'tradition,' sir."

"Ugh. Who cares if the enemy's at-home troops glean some info, dammit! I ought to just crush the opposing ships through overwhelming numbers! If only I had at least twice as many fleets..."

"Now I see."

"Hm?" Tlife turned to look at his **Chief of Staff**. "You see? See what?"

"Now I see, sir, that it really is a tradition among the commanders of our proud military to be uncooperative."

"Ah, good. So you understand." Tlife felt as though his Chief of Staff had been about to voice another calm rebuttal, but he decided not to dwell on it.

"Yes, sir. Unmistakably clearly."

"Excellent." What occupied Tlife's mind now was the problem of how to intercept the enemy with such insufficient numbers. "That aside, let's craft a strategy on the assumption that the enemy has nothing but elite troops. Rushing in recklessly would be inadvisable."

The always expressionless Chief of Staff knitted his brows high imperceptibly. "Might you be feeling ill, sir?"

"No, I've never felt healthier. Why do you ask?"

"I never thought I'd hear such passive measures come from out of **Your Excellency's** mouth..."

"Then how about we ditch the passivity and attack allied fleets to take their ships for our own?"

The one thing that never ceased to puzzle Tlife was how, whenever he cracked a joke, it was almost always taken seriously. And this time was no exception.

“I believe it would be best not to go through with that, sir. It would be with a heavy heart that I’d indict my superior officer with the crime of treason,” said Cahyoor.

“You wouldn’t even wait for somebody else to accuse me for you?”

“What for, sir?”

“Never mind,” said Tlife, waving a hand. “Let’s just focus on mobile defense. We move out of the way while dealing damage at the same time. Now make me a battle plan to underpin that strategy.”

“Roger.” Cahyoor saluted.

In the conference room of the administrative building of Lohbnahss II of the **Countdom of Lohbnahss**, Maydeen raised an eyebrow. “So you’ll be temporarily withdrawing?”

Shungarr glared at Jint while Dohkfoo smiled from ear to ear. Anguson hadn’t shown up today, either.

“Yes,” nodded Jint. “There is a chance that fleeing enemy forces will pass through the sector. We can’t be sure they’ll come to this **territory-nation**, but we figure there’s no need to risk facing such danger.”

“Will the asylum seekers be able to board a ship before you withdraw?”

Jint blinked. “No, we think we’ll have to cancel the relocation plan for the time being...”

“You feckless...!” Maydeen slammed the table. “You conquer the planet, and then you abandon it just as quickly. You could hardly be more irresponsible.”

“He’s right!” said Shungarr. “And here I thought we could actually make it out of here.”

“Hold on...”

“Listen here. The workers’ families have already left. By telling us to stay, you’re telling us to cast aside our families. The Abh may not bear families in mind, but we do. And to normal people, being pulled away from one’s family is a fate worse than death.”

“It’s *temporary!*” said Jint. “We’ll be back in no time. We’re scheduled to withdraw in seventeen standard days, and return in sixty. Unfortunately, due to a confluence of factors, we can’t say for sure when we’ll be able to forge ahead.”

“So you say. But any information on goings-on in space is being fed to us by you and you alone. You could be hiding inconvenient truths. And given this situation, you could be taking the easy route, telling us you’ll be gone temporarily, then leaving us in the lurch forever. I can only assume this place will be recovered by the United Humankind. After which my employees and their respective families will be stranded in mutually hostile interstellar nations. Do you understand how tragic that would be, boy?”

“I do, I think,” replied Jint, recalling his days on Martin and Delktu.

“If that does come to pass, then perhaps we should have you relocate *us*, too,” said Dohkfoo, his grin faint. “After all, if the UH returns, we’ll be treated like criminals again.”

“*Like* criminals? Watch your mouth. Your crimes have been proven without room for doubt,” said Maydeen.

“That’s what the court records would have you believe,” said Dohkfoo detachedly.

“Oh, I’ve read them. You committed murder in broad daylight, with plenty of witnesses. How could you be innocent?”

“Must have been a shared hallucination. I’m a proud swindler. I’d never stoop so low as to stain my hands committing such a shallow, simplistic crime as *murder*.”

“A proud swindler, but a bad one,” said Shungarr. “I heard that you tried to pull a fast one on somebody, but then, when you realized they’d outwitted you, you flew into a rage and ended up a murderer.”

“Such distasteful hearsay.”

“That’s what it said in the court records I read,” said Maydeen.

Jint cleared his throat. “Ahem.”

“But never mind that,” said Maydeen, who had evidently recalled the reason they were gathered here. “If you must retreat, then you must. But I demand the relocation plan be accelerated. I want you to get us out of here before you retreat.”

“And don’t forget us, either,” said Shungarr.

“Look, long story short, you want us to pledge that we’ll come back for the planet, right?”

“As if we could take your ‘pledge’ as proof!”

An idea ran through Jint’s mind: *What if I stay here while the **Star Forces** withdraw? Would they believe us then?* But the very next moment, he concluded that was a stupid idea. He didn’t want to be a pompous ass, but at the same time, he saw no need to be obsequious, either.

“Okay,” said Jint, “we’ll try our best.”

“You’ll *try*? Is that all?”

“That is all,” said Jint. “I don’t know how the situation with the **supply ships** is going, so I don’t know whether we’ll be able to relocate everyone who wants to go by the time we retreat.”

“Please, let us on and relocate us!” insisted Maydeen.

Jint sighed. “I honestly don’t know what you’re so afraid of, Lonh-*Saimr Sosr* (Your Excellency the Landworld Citizen Representative). Only part of the personnel has relocated, but that’s because you prioritized the people that needed it less than others. I think you’re more than capable of maintaining order on this **landworld** for a period of around two months with the people who are still here. And we’ve carried in plenty of consumer goods, too. So what exactly isn’t good enough for you?”

“There’s no guarantee we’ll last two months.”

“It should be enough to last the planet a year.”

“So you’d have us separated from our families for a whole year? This is no normal period of absence; I placed my family on the migration ship, too, and now I’ll have to sit here worrying my head off whether the prison camp is really

as habitable as Your Excellency claims. To endure that for a year...”

“It’s *not* going to take us a whole year to come back.”

“But we don’t *know* that. You say two months, but it could be a year or more.”

“You can’t take me at my word?” said Jint, knowing full well what the answer would be.

“No,” he said, as bluntly as Jint expected. “Your Excellency, you yourself said moments ago that you can’t say for sure when you’ll return.”

“Well, sort of.” *There’s such a thing as too honest, man.* “But I really don’t think it’ll take a year.”

Why did he have to hold the demands of the residents of this **landworld** in such esteem, anyway? Would it really be so wrong to just coldly lay down the facts? Sure, it may be, as Maydeen asserted, a feckless approach. But the **Empire** only felt so much responsibility toward its **landworlds** to start with.

“Shall I tell him what the Chief Executive is so afraid of?” said Dohkfoo.

“What’s this now?” asked Jint.

“Be quiet!” said Maydeen sharply. “I’m planning to designate you as the Citizen Representative after me. Think of this planet’s honor.”

“This planet’s honor!” Shungarr laughed shrilly.

“Oh, I know what to ask,” said Dohkfoo, eyes calculating. “Your Excellency the Lady Agent Adjunct, what will you give me in exchange for that information?”

“Well, I mean, I don’t care *that* much to know...”

“Shame,” said Dohkfoo. He didn’t seem to be in a hurry to let it slip, either. He averted his gaze from Jint as though he’d lost interest. Then he changed the subject. “By the way, Chief Executive, I can’t help but notice you seem averse to being called the Citizen Representative?”

“If I’m to be handing over the office of Chief Executive and all its authority to *you*, then I’m ready to see myself as the ‘Citizen Representative.’ Not that I will be for very long.”

“Then you do believe me.” Jint was relieved — this had to mean Maydeen trusted that the **Star Forces** would, in fact, come back soon.

“That’s not what I mean. I mean that even if the Abh don’t come back, I will be freed from the title of ‘Citizen Representative.’ Though in exchange, I’ll have to be away from my family for the rest of my life.”

“I see.” Jint shrugged. “In any case, we’ll do our best. That’s all I can tell you for now.”

“I suppose there’s nothing for it. You lot are our rulers.”

Are we now? He’d almost forgotten.

Chapter 6: The *Lomtuchoth* (Setback)

Look at that. It's a web out there, thought Lafier, as she floated through space. Her gaze was directed at the big orb of blue and white — at Lohbnahss II.

The **assault ship** was cramped, even to a member of the race that lived on spaceships. Of course, assault ships weren't built under the assumption that their passengers would be aboard for long stretches of time. Whenever circumstances confined crew to an assault ship, *tobiac* (orbital quarters) would be attached. These orbital quarters were the “web.”

Orbital quarters were ships without propulsion methods, and they could self-compress, allowing them to be stored in the hold of a small ship. The orbital quarters connected to the *Basrogrh* were of the lowest feature build, and as such lacked a **gravity control system**. All of the rooms were under microgravity, so the **NCCs**, who hailed from **landworlds**, didn't seem to like staying in them. On the other hand, they were taking turns to descend down to the **landworld** (as was technically their mission), so they weren't too dissatisfied. When the fleet command center gave her not a **magistrate** but orbital quarters instead, Lafier steeled herself to the fact that she would have to stay here for quite some time.

Two months had passed, two months in orbit over Lohbnahss II. Their orders were to temporarily withdraw from there. Lafier had had every mind to discontinue the annoying relocation operation. She wanted somebody, anybody else to take her post. But the **landworld administration** had made a fuss over getting the asylum seekers out by the time they withdrew. Or so she'd been told; it had been **her adjunct**, Jint, who'd heard out their demands.

It's been so long since I've seen him, she thought as she continued staring at Lohbnahss II. She spoke to him almost every day over the communication line, but it wasn't the same as seeing him face-to-face, and over the comms, he never called her “Lafier.”

The fleet command center, it had to be said, was doing well by them.

Personnel supply ships were being dispatched more frequently than she'd expected, and so the relocation was proceeding apace. Only the armed guards, and the prisoners that sought to escape, were left to take.

She gently spun in place, and the **Lohbnaahss Portal** placed in orbit over Lohbnaahss II came into view. At present, multiple ships were breaching through it. Five were *Cetairh*-class ships, around as big as **battle-line ships**. Three were **amphibious ships** (capable of entering the atmosphere), carrying even more migrants from the surface. The scale of the operation had never been bigger, and with this, they'd have them all shipped out in three days' time.

"Captain." Ecryua's hologram came up. "A message from the transport unit command center."

"I'll receive it on the **bridge**," said Lafier, who then faced the exit and drifted off toward it.

Jint was, as ever, on the surface.

The island of Rajay had beautiful beaches, too beautiful for a **landworld** with an attitude like Lohbnaahss II's. Jint liked taking strolls on the sands, especially at night, when he'd listen vacantly to the melancholy sound of the waves and come close to forgetting what had happened during the day. Which mainly entailed listening to Maydeen's angry tones and Dohkfoo's pleading. Jint had grown accustomed to Maydeen's harsh words, but he still felt a visceral revulsion to Dohkfoo's clinging stare.

The wavelets sparkled under the phosphorescent glow of the **Lohbnaahss Portal** above. Samson and the **NCCs** spent a lot of time swimming in this sea, though of course, not at this hour. They'd invited him to join a handful of times, but Jint had always turned the offer down. He'd never swum in the ocean before, so his mind couldn't help but dwell on what might be lurking beneath the waves. He was, frankly, phobic. Regardless, he liked looking out on the sea: the smell of salt, the sound of the waves... how the impression it gave shifted with the time of day.

I'd love to show this to Lafier, he thought. The most puzzling thing about the Abh was how they'd voluntarily discarded gazing across broad panoramas like

this.

He casually looked up at the phosphorescent **portal**, and witnessed points of light drawing away from it. Naturally, he knew what they were. He'd been informed of the arrival of the **transport unit**.

His joy surpassed Lafier's. Though this wouldn't free him from his position as **Lady Agent Adjunct**, he'd at least get to leave the surface. The inauguration of the new **Citizen Representative** was set to take place after the last of the asylum seekers arrived in orbit. And if everything went according to plan, that would be four days from now.

They had to hold that ceremony no matter what. If they failed to, the enemy would darken their doorstep. The enemy might just pass through, but he wanted to avoid any unnecessary stress.

Needless to say, Jint would be there for the ceremony. But after that, he'd never take another step on this land, even if he were to be appointed Lady Agent Adjunct once again.

Dohkfoo would take over for Maydeen, as anticipated. In the end, there was no election; instead, the current **Citizen Representative** simply designated his replacement. Jint had no say in how the **landworld** chose its representative, nor did he really care.

He checked his **wristgear** for the time. He should probably go to bed. The next day doubtlessly had many an opportunity for boredom in store for him, too. He about-faced and strode for his lodging — he'd been allocated the swankiest room on the entire planet. The room was built for when big shots came to inspect the place, and it was much more spacious than his *Basrogrh* living quarters. Yet he pined for the *Garich Dreur* (Count's Manor) that was only two beds' breadth wide.

It wasn't that Lohbnahss II had no **ground vehicles**. Jint simply chose to walk.

Once he'd neared the halfway mark of his way back, his **wristgear** beeped. A new call. And he didn't think it could be good news, a premonition that quickly turned to certainty once Maydeen's hologram popped out.

"Your Excellency?" Maydeen looked on tensely. "They're revolting. Come at

once.”

Jint replied that he copied, muttering to himself: “And there it is.”

The Office of the Chief Executive was virtually buried in window-screens. Buildings spewing black smoke. Walls lying in ruins. Gun turrets squashed and dented. Men firing their primitive firearms at random. Explosions one after the other. Each screen was a window into another scene of tribulation.

“The East Zone is attacking the Central Zone,” said Maydeen without preamble, pointing at the largest of the window-screens. It was a map. The line dividing the two zones was playing host to a whole herd of red blips.

“What are the armed guards doing?”

“They’re fighting back, of course.” Maydeen moved his pointer finger to another of the screens. Around ten guards were firing something with weapons that looked to be **lightguns**.

“Then there’s nothing to be worried about, surely. They may be packing some serious heat, but their weapons are still bootlegs in the end. They can’t be a match for regulation—”

“They’re also in possession of regulation weaponry.” Maydeen pointed at yet another screen. Somebody was holding a **lightgun** while surrounded by inmates wildly firing their handmade powder guns.

“How’d that happen?”

“There was a traitor!” Maydeen spat. “Someone among the personnel who wished to stay funneled arms to Anguson’s faction. More unbelievably still, there are some who’re even trading fire with their former coworkers.”

“How many are we talking?”

“I don’t know. As far as I can see, at least five hundred.”

“That’s... that’s not good.”

“Aren’t you being a little overly calm?” said Maydeen, irritated. “This is a grave matter.”

"I understand that. How did we get so many insurgents on our hands?" Jint knew that hearing the answer to that wouldn't serve them in any way, but he couldn't help but ask.

"Well..." Maydeen faltered. "Maybe it's out of loyalty to the UH."

"But how can that be?" Jint cocked his head in puzzlement. "I don't fault them for any loyalty they might have, but if that were the reason, why would they join the inmates and fire at their colleagues?"

"How am I supposed to know!?" Maydeen turned away with a huff.

"What is going on!?" The door opened, and Shungarr stormed in.

"I'm just as in the dark as you are," said Maydeen. "What *is* going on..."

"You're still in charge of the place. Irresponsible much?"

"Call me irresponsible or whatever you want, it won't change the fact that I don't know," he said, glaring at her. "Why on earth is Anguson acting this way? I just can't fathom what's running through you inmates' heads."

"Don't lump me in with Anguson and his boys."

Jint cleared his throat. "What we know is that you have an extremely serious emergency to resolve. And if there's a way I can assist you, I will."

"We have an emergency? Why are you putting it like it's not your problem?" Then, with a start, she realized: "*Is* it not your problem?"

"I'm not under obligation," said Jint. "At base, this is a problem for the **landworld administration**. But as I stated earlier, if you request assistance, I will look into it."

"Then assist us!" said Maydeen.

"All right then, what sort of assistance would you like?" Jint replied with a businessman's detachment.

"Quell the uprising, and quickly."

"That isn't happening. As I've already told you many times over, the **manor** of our Lady doesn't have ground war capabilities."

"Then you're all useless," said Maydeen.

Jint pretended not to hear that. “Have you already contacted orbit?”

“No, not yet.”

“Okay, I’ll tell them myself.” Jint dialed the *Basrogrh*’s call-code into his **wristgear**.

“This is the *Basrogrh*,” came Ecryua’s voice.

“This is the **Lady Agent Adjunct**. Please pass me to the **Lady Agent**.” Jint faced Maydeen: “May I send the feed of the footage being sent to this room to orbit?”

“Just do whatever you need to,” he answered exasperatedly.

“**Information link**, please,” Jint spoke gently into his **wristgear**. “The code is...”

“Chief Executive, this is the Foreman of Gatehouse 28, Kenny.” A man’s hologram appeared from within the crowd of window-screens. “Mr. Dohkfoo is asking to be allowed entry to the Administrative Zone.”

“Allowed entry? But he’s always allowed to enter the Administrative Zone.”

“It’s not just him, sir. He’s asking for every inmate in the Central Zone to be allowed entry...”

“You must be joking!” shouted Shungarr. “If that happens, then there’ll be nothing left between the West and East Zones. Anguson’s crew will just march on us unimpeded!”

“And my people are working to make sure that doesn’t happen,” he told the representative of the West. “Besides, the Administrative Zone isn’t large enough to accommodate them all. Tell them that the walls are there to protect them. Actually, never mind, I’ll tell them myself.”

But before Kenny could respond, the hologram of Maydeen’s successor as **Citizen Representative** emerged.

“I’m aware the Administrative Zone is small, but this is a state of emergency. I ask that you provide us immediate shelter.”

“That’s not necessary. We’re fighting the East Zone in a manner advantageous

to us.”

“But stray bullets are peppering our residences as we speak,” said Dohkfoo. “Multiple people have died.”

“So clear out of the range of stray fire.”

“Around how far is the bullets’ reach?”

Maydeen didn’t have a response to that.

Dohfkoo continued: “I’m not asking you to let us live there. I’m asking for temporary shelter.”

“It’s just not feasible. The Central Zone is plenty big enough. You can find places to hide from oncoming bullets.”

“Then you’re not budging.” Dohkfoo bowed, and disappeared.

If only they were as on the ball as him, thought Jint as he stared at Maydeen and Shungarr.

“This is Gatehouse 28!” A different officer came on the line.

“Now what? What happened to Kenny?”

“Mr. Dohkfoo and his people are trying to force their way through the gate!”

Maydeen’s expression turned grim. “Can you keep them at bay?”

“No, sir.”

“Why not? Give me video.”

Several new window-screens opened up. There lay Kenny, bloody and still. The solid metal doors were open wide, with the inmates passing through.

“Mr. Dohkfoo’s bodyguards suddenly attacked him and opened the gate. All we’ve managed to keep is this control room, and then there’s no telling how long we can hold on...” Those last words were spoken through tears.

“Chief Executive, this is Tomasov.” Video of yet another guard had appeared. If Jint had it straight, Tomasov was the head of the guards.

“What is it? More bad news, I imagine,” said Maydeen.

“Bingo. My subordinates are under threat of attack by the Central Zone.”

“Dohkfoo must be a conspirator to the uprising.” Maydeen’s face turned strangely refreshed.

“What do we do now?” fretted Shungarr.

Maydeen promptly began issuing orders. “Ms. Shungarr, go back to the West Zone and have your backers board ship. Tomasov, rioters have penetrated the Administrative Zone. There’s no point defending Wall 2. Have everyone evacuate at once, and expel the insurgents from within the Administrative Zone, before focusing all your efforts on defending Wall 3. Your Excellency...”

“Yes?” Jint took a step toward him.

“Is it possible to board ship from the West Zone?”

“If there’s a sea port or a conveyance ship, then yes, it’s possible. An **amphibious ship** can land anywhere on the sea.”

“Okay. There’s no pier, but I’ll send the marine guardship. It can’t hold too many people, but a boat’s a boat. Direct your ship to land as close as possible to the coast.”

“Understood.” Jint now saw the Chief Executive in a new light. “But as long as the sea port is in our hands, we should have one ship sent there, right?”

“You’re right; please do so.”

“Wait, so you’re letting us board first?” asked Shungarr, hardly believing her ears.

“You’re what they’re after — fertile women. Otherwise, there would be no reason to stage a revolt now. That’s why we have to prioritize your escape.”

“But aren’t there female personnel, too?”

“They’ve got their jobs to do. We’ll have them take refuge as soon as possible, obviously.”

“Chief Executive...” said Shungarr, moved. “I never would’ve thought it, but you’re a good man.”

“Of course I am. Everyone on this side of the walls is a good person.”

“Hold on, though — we don’t have relocation licenses,” said Shungarr

“Oh, right.” Maydeen turned to Jint. “There’s no time to be issuing licenses. The inmates all have distribution codes. I’d like to use those codes in place of administration-issued relocation licenses for the West Zone residents. Do you mind?”

“I don’t mind at all.” Relocation licenses were entirely up to the **landworld administration**’s discretion.

“Thank you!” Shungarr’s expression turned bright, and she flew out of the room.

Jint’s **wristgear** beeped. Lafier was calling.

“We have a grasp of the situation, more or less. I am having **Mechanics Linewing** Samson head there now.”

“You’re a lifesaver.” Jint had totally forgotten about his own safety. “Have you already directed the amphibious ship?”

“Yes, I have. The *Dacsaith* will be going to the same place as usual, but I ordered the other two ships to land off the shore of the West Correctional Zone. Is that okay?”

“Yep. You made the correct call, as expected of **Your Highness the Lady Agent**.”

“Don’t mock me; even a child could make such an obvious call. Only, it seems they can’t get too close to the coast, where the water is too shallow.”

“Then what should I do?” asked Jint.

“I leave that to you.”

“Got it.”

All the while, Maydeen was issuing orders this way and that.

“Goddammit!” the Chief Executive cursed.

“What’s wrong?”

“The marine guardship’s been shot down.”

“They can attack targets at sea?”

“It was on duty evacuating the guards that were still remaining at Wall 2. The wall was divided midway through. They blasted the ship when it reached the shore. Looks like they’d strapped explosives to the bilge.”

“I see. Then we can’t use a guardship to ferry them to the amphibious ship?”

“There are two guardships left, actually.”

That was when Jint realized something important had slipped his mind. With a guardship, getting people aboard their ship was possible — but how much time was needed to take *everyone*?

“How many people can a guardship take? How fast does it go?”

“Hold on a second, I’ll call the Ships’ Captain so they can tell us.”

The Ships’ Captain picked up immediately, and so they learned that it’d take at least ten days to get everyone into orbit... and that was being optimistic.

“Please secure the Administrative Zone’s sea port, no matter the cost. If you don’t, we won’t make the cutoff for evacuation.”

“I’m doing what I can here!”

“Unless the West Zone has a wharf or pier?”

“Of course not. Only the Administrative Zone has a sea port.”

“Then can one be constructed?”

“Within ten days’ time?”

“Faster.”

“Can’t be done, Your Excellency. All of the construction workers have already relocated. We’ll try, though. Might as well.”

“Do it, or else the people staying will come out...”

“That alone, I can’t abide by!”

“Please understand, Chief Executive, Your Excellency. We leave **landworld** affairs to you and your people because we have to. If you can just get everybody to the amphibious ship, then we can take it from there. We can take everyone safely to the prison camp. But if you can’t lay the path toward getting

them from the island to the amphibious ship yourselves, we have a problem.”

“So traversing tens of thousands of light-years isn’t an issue, but a few *üésdagh* of water are insurmountable.”

“That’s poetic, when you put it that way,” said Jint admiringly.

“In any case, we’re fine as long as we can keep the Administrative Zone sea port under our control, right?”

Jint nodded wordlessly, though he knew that was a tall task. The red blips on the map signified belligerents, and so the area whose border was made up of the red blips was effectively the insurgency’s territory. And that territory was enveloping the Administrative Zone’s coastline, drawing ever closer to the sea port.

“Is the amphibious ship still not here!?” Maydeen’s voice was tinged with panic.

“It’s currently flying down through the atmosphere.” Jint could tell where it was at all times thanks to his **wristgear**.

“Tell me the truth, Your Excellency — you don’t think it’d be better for the insurrection to succeed, do you?”

“Why would I?” he replied, shocked.

“I know you people aren’t happy being saddled with a mass relocation. Yet you did a thorough job of it anyway. I hate to say this to our invaders, but I am grateful, in my way.”

“Well, thank you.” Jint refrained from adding, *You really never looked it.*

“If I were to lose my position here, with Dohkfoo or Anguson appointed in my stead, they would without a doubt order the relocation plan cancelled, thereby freeing you of this burden.”

“Sure, that would be easier,” smiled Jint. “But the permission to relocate granted to the inmates of the West Zone would remain in effect, even if the *Saimh* (Representative) changed. If the women themselves say they want to board ship, we can’t refuse them.”

“Even if the new Citizen Representative revoked that permission?”

“They can’t revoke it if they don’t know what’s what in the first place.”

“I guess that’s true. I can just not tell them.” For the first time, Maydeen showed him an amiable expression.

As the two of them conversed, the red points of light on the map approached the government buildings. At present, they had penetrated the central park, north of the offices.

“It appears we have to abandon the building sooner rather than later,” said Maydeen.

“Are you going to the port?”

“No other choice. Though it’ll be difficult to give orders from there.”

“If you’re headed for the port, then I’ll accompany you. There’s no real point staying here.” Jint spoke into the **wristgear**: “Mr. Samson, where are you?”

“I’m sorry,” he slurred. “We’re still at the lodge house. Apparently, my subordinates mistook this surface stay of ours for a vacation, so it took a while to gather ‘em.”

“Go to the port for me. I’ll meet up with you there in no time.”

“Gotcha.”

The Port Affairs building of Rajay Sea Port was an elegant three-story structure. On this **landworld** where the buildings looked gloomy and bleak even under the bright sunshine — Jint inwardly called it the “Lohbnahss Style” — the only buildings with any amount of thought paid to their exterior beauty were the inspectors’ lodge houses and the Port Affairs Building. And considering this building was always the first a fresh ship’s-full of prisoners would see, it had to be a product either of irony or of straight deception.

Jint was on the top floor, along with Maydeen and Samson. The *Basrogrh*’s meager land brigade guarded the building, while Shungarr was at the West Zone, directing its evacuation.

A night had passed since the insurrection flared up, and the fact that they’d held onto it was close to a miracle.

From the window, they could see the inmates from the West Zone filling the plaza by the wharf. The amphibious ship *Lymsaith* caused the seawater to spray as it lifted off. Moments later, the *Luisaith* showed itself from behind the mountain.

“Does the ship that left first still have yet to return?” asked Maydeen.

Jint didn’t know how many times he’d been asked that exact question over just the last hour, but he replied politely. “The ship transfer’s complete. It’s scheduled to enter the atmosphere within the half-hour.”

“Ah...”

Jint had only slept two hours, but Maydeen hadn’t slept a wink. He was visibly irritated, and not just because of the lack of sleep. There was also the fact that the port area’s information functionality was crude indeed compared to the prime office of the Administrative Building.

“Why don’t you rest for a bit? We have a long way ahead of us,” said Jint. *Or maybe he just wants me to mind my own business.*

“The one who knows my body best is me. Please don’t fuss over me.”

“Okay, sir.” Jint shot a look behind him. Samson was nodding off, seated backwards in a chair. That was hardly a surprising sight — he’d looked about ready to collapse by the time they rendezvoused. If the uprising hadn’t broken out last night, and if there was no such thing as sober-upper pills, then the **Inspector Supervisor** of the *Basrogrh* would have been nursing a monstrous hangover right around now.

The *Luisaith* touched down with a splash. The retractable jetty began to swiftly stretch back out to sea, and with that, the crowd at the plaza surged like a wave. Several people seemingly fell into the water.

“Chief Executive, Tomasov here.” His hologram appeared. “It’s no use. We can’t hold East 12th Street for much longer.”

Jint scanned the map of Rajay Island. With East 12th Street overtaken, access between the West Zone and the sea port would be severed. They could be ferried over to the port via airship or seaship, but they were small and few in number, stalling the operation a great deal. Moreover, the two remaining

airships were currently locked in battle.

“Please allow us to extract troops from Wall 3,” Tomasov entreated.

For a moment, Maydeen stared into space, and said nothing. Then, at last, he shook his head.

“I can’t allow that. Wall 3 is the last line of defense.”

Tomasov was about to reply, but the Chief Executive forcefully cut the transmission. “Your Excellency, may I substitute my staff’s ID codes for their relocation licenses, as well?”

“Of course,” said Jint. “I was planning to, anyway.”

“Thank you.” Maydeen then called Tomasov. “Give me an hour. No, it likely won’t even take an hour. Defend East 12th until I reach the West Zone. Afterwards, divide the troops into two. One group is to defend the western sections of Walls 1 and 3. The other is to defend this port to the death. Once every West Zone inmate has boarded, I will allow the troops defending the port to board as well. They may stay aboard and relocate if they wish. As for each group’s troop numbers and commanders, they’re up to you. Am I understood?”

“But Chief...”

“Am. I. Understood!?”

“Roger.” Tomasov saluted. “However, might I suggest escape by airship as a potentially superior alternative? We could temporarily call off the mission and send them over there.”

Maydeen shook his head. “No. If the inmates waiting to board ship see an airship flying away from here, they’ll get flustered. It might cause an irreversible panic.”

“That didn’t occur to me. All right, we’ll hold the line for one hour. Over and out.” Another salute, and Tomasov blinked out.

“Now then, it’s just as you overheard — I’ll be joining Ms. Shungarr in the West. Your Excellency, I bid you return on that ship.” He jerked his chin to point at the *Luisaith*.

“A **Citizen Representative** doesn’t have the authority to order a **Lady Agent**

Adjunct,” said Jint.

“True, true. I apologize if I’ve offended you.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not offended in the slightest.”

“That’s good. Just take it as a piece of advice, then. Though I’m sure I don’t need to tell Your Excellency that.”

Jint shook Samson awake. “Mr. Samson, please take the crew and return to the *Basrogrh*.”

“What’ll you do, laddie?” he asked gently, chin still on the chair’s back.

“I’ll head for the West Zone alongside **His Excellency the Citizen Representative**, see my mission through to the fullest extent possible.”

“Then I can’t just go back. I’m your bodyguard.”

“But the *Basrogrh* has to enter **planar space** before long. And the ship needs its **Inspector Supervisor** and *Sach Scaemr* (Mechanics NCCs).

“Had to hit me where it hurts, huh,” said Samson, scratching his head. “I mean, they’re my guys, so they’re competent, but we do have loads to do. With the supervisor out and half the team missing, the people onboard would resent us for sure. But doesn’t the ship also need its **Clerk**?”

“I have three subordinates still up there, and they’re all supervisors of their own field, in a way. If I make it back in the nick of time, it should be fine. The stuff that needs a **clerk**’s approval, I can handle at my leisure once I’ve left this **territory-nation**.”

“Your Excellency!” shouted Maydeen, incensed. “What are you saying? Things are only about to get truly rough starting now. We don’t need your silly heroics getting in the way.”

“I’m not trying to be a hero,” said Jint. “I’m staying to assess things, essentially.”

“What do you mean?”

“If possible, I’d like to see every last asylum seeker board with my own eyes, but I don’t know if that’s in the cards. In fact, it’s probably safe to assume that

the chances of that are near zero. We'll probably have to abort prematurely. And I can assess that outcome more accurately here on the surface, rather than down from orbit."

"Is this all so you can help even just a few more people escape?" Maydeen raised an eyebrow. Jint nodded, and the Chief Executive laughed. "Young Count, in case you aren't aware, allow me to teach you — that is what we call 'being a hero.'"

"Really?" said Jint, miffed.

"But I'll take your heroics. At least I know now they're not 'silly,' and they'll serve us well. I ask that you accompany me. Now then, time runs short."

"I know."

Samson wasn't entirely convinced, however. "Hold on... Won't leaving you behind upset the **Captain**? Let me tell you, I'm not a brave man — I'm content to hear tell of the wrath of the Abliars, and never experience it firsthand."

Jint attempted to imagine Lafier bawling at Samson with equal parts sadness and anger... *"Why did you leave him behind!?"*

Nope. That was beyond implausible.

"It'll be all right," he said, brimming with confidence. "I'll keep in touch. You won't be witnessing **Her Highness** flip out. Not over this, anyway."

"That's an *I-know-her-best* face if ever I saw one," Samson grinned.

"Oh, no, I, uh..."

"Don't fret it. I believe you. Right then, take care of yourself out here, you hear me?"

"You take care of yourself, too, Mr. Samson."

Jint and Maydeen's **hovercar** was passing north over East 12th Street. Two guards, their escorts, were seated at the front, and keeping watchful eyes on either side. Jint was firmly settled on the right rear seat, so he had a good view of the battlefield. The Lohbnahss style buildings facing the road were the same as ever. The fires growing at full blast behind them, on the other hand, were

notable. It was only a matter of time before the buildings zooming past the car window would succumb.

The four of them were dead silent. The air was heavy, laden.

Suddenly, the **hovercar** veered right.

“We’re going the wrong way. Did you put the destination in wrong? Put in the right path,” Maydeen ordered the guards.

Startled, the guard on the left stared at their colleague. “What the...”

“What are you doing?” Maydeen’s fingers danced across the rear-seat **console**.

“Dammit!”

“What is it?” asked Jint.

“It won’t take my inputs!”

Jint wasn’t terribly well versed on the **hovercars** used in the UH, so he had to ask: “Does that mean we can’t control where we’re going?”

“Not from back here, at least.” Maydeen glared at his supposed subordinates. “The front-seat **console** is being prioritized.”

“I see.” Jint knew what this meant, but he was dumbfounded. “Another little mutiny, huh...”

“So it would seem.”

Jint tried gripping the door’s handle to jump out, but it wouldn’t budge.

“It’s no use. They’ve got them locked using the console,” said Maydeen.

“What is this? Why are jailers aiding and abetting the inmates!?” Jint asked, giving up on the door.

“This is all for sweet, sweet Alkyke,” muttered the guard on the right.

The guard’s tone was light, but his words had a strangely religious tinge to them. “‘Sweet Alkyke’? Is that the name of your god?”

The guard didn’t answer.

“For a certain breed, it might as well be their god,” Maydeen answered for

him. "Alkyke is Lohbnahss II's indigenous narcotic."

"I heard they were making narcotics here, but..."

"Yes. I don't know what it's like in the Empire, but in the UH, narcotics are illegal. Yet here, there's free reign to produce and to use. I have no idea who got the ball rolling, but they make the stuff the primitive way, extracting it straight from the plants. Needless to say, we don't let any Alkyke get exported, but there are those fools even outside the prison population who use."

"So what Your Excellency is telling me is that narcotics use has seeped into the guards, too."

"Correct!"

Jint cast another glance at the guards. They were no longer scanning their surroundings. They were just glowering at each other.

"Gimme your gun," said the one on the right.

"Never!"

The one on the left tried to whip it out in their cramped space, but the other was the quicker hand with the better positioning; they breezily pulled the trigger before the loyal guard could shift stances.

A **laser** ray pierced the one on the left, right between his eyebrows.

Jint looked away, Maydeen's words ringing in his ears: "Inhuman... You two were friends, weren't you?"

"There's something more important than friendship," he answered.

"Now you see what I was so afraid of," Maydeen told Jint. "In two months' time, this planet will be taken over by the junkies. And then it truly will be hell."

"Well, you should have made that clear to me."

"And show my weak point to the invaders?"

"Hey, Chief Executive," said the guard, turning to face him with a smirk. "Aren't you going to ask what we're going to do to you, or what we have planned?"

"What you have planned? You aren't strong-willed enough to be planning to

swear off Alkyke, that's for sure. As for what you're going to do to us, you're taking us to either Dohkfoo or Anguson, obviously."

The guard whistled his appreciation. "That's why they made you Chief."

"Of course. If I weren't excellent at my job, I wouldn't be a high-ranked civil servant in the UH."

"Uhh, actually, there are plenty of **landworlds** in the Empire with legalized narcotics," said Jint. "You don't have to stay on this planet..."

"Listen to him. Take us back, and I'll let this pass," said Maydeen.

The guard's expression turned serious. "No can do. You don't know Alkyke. It's *special*. No way there's any in the Empire."

"I mean, all you'd need is a sample to synthesize the stuff," said Jint. "I'm no expert on the science behind it, but from what I've heard, most anything can be synthesized."

"Synthesized?" He looked ticked off now. "A synthesized *fake* could never measure up to the all-natural real deal."

"I dunno about that," said Jint. "Shouldn't you at least give it a shot? If you don't like it, you can just move right back. We might be withdrawing, but we'll return in no time."

"Out of the question."

"Why?"

The guard didn't reply, so Maydeen sneeringly answered in their stead. "The fool's quaking with fear over withdrawal symptoms."

"Withdrawal symptoms? They're taking narcotics that dangerous here...?"

"You can't look for safety in drugs manufactured in a prison."

"That's not all," said the guard, sour-faced. "Even if the Empire does conquer the place a second time, by the time you're back, they'll be in control. And they don't forgive traitors. They'll torture me to death."

"And what you're doing now doesn't make you a traitor?" said Maydeen.

"I mean traitors, as in people who've betrayed *them*. They cheer and honor

people who betray their enemies.”

Jint fervently hoped one or more armed guards who weren't bewitched by narcotics would do something to stop the car, but nobody was on the road. Instead, a corner came into view where **laser beams**, gunfire, and ammunition he couldn't identify were shooting past each other. And he couldn't tell where it was coming from, but a dense shroud of smoke had enveloped the area. This was the front line.

“I can't bring you back now. It's too late,” said the guard, who'd also turned into a bundle of nerves.

“You should quit while you're ahead,” advised Jint.

“I'm telling you to take us back!” shrieked Maydeen.

But the guard kept his mouth shut. Of all the actions he could take, he must have thought that was the most sound.

Bullets pierced the car, and ricocheted inside.

“You didn't make it bulletproof!?” Jint asked Maydeen, who was likewise ducking for cover.

“It didn't cross my mind, no!”

A yelp of pain from in front. The traitorous guard had gotten shot.

“Just deserts,” murmured Maydeen.

But there was no guarantee they wouldn't meet the same fate themselves. Jint, far from feeling triumphant, only curled in even tighter.

“By the way, Your Excellency, you don't happen to be armed, do you?” breathed Maydeen.

“It didn't cross my mind,” answered Jint. He could kick himself.

Customarily, the Abh didn't carry weapons. To the Abh, the word “weapons” referred to huge warships; they saw next to no value in feeble personal-use firearms. Furthermore, on both his home planet and his second home planet, it had been illegal for civilians to be armed. As such, with the exception of his days on Claspure, he'd been a stranger to handheld weaponry. Regardless, given

their situation, he perhaps should have carried and concealed a small gun for self-defense.

Maydeen clicked his tongue. “Now that it’s come to this, we just have to hope they’re dead.”

He had no weapon, but he did have a means of communication. He’d use this opportunity to at least message Lafier. He brought his **wristgear** to his mouth.

Then a voice from above shot down their hopes. “Hey, you two gonna be lying down like that forever?”

The guard’s face was drenched in blood, but despite all of the bleeding, it seemed it wasn’t that grievous a wound. If anything, he was sprightlier than before, thanks to the nervous excitement.

Reluctantly, they stretched back up. It was true that the shooting had died down, though great big fires raged behind them. *So we escaped that mess*, thought Jint, a shudder running down his body.

A figure came into view on the road, who promptly hid behind a building.

The guard leaned out of the window. “Don’t shoot! I’ve got the Chief Executive with me. Tell whoever your leader is. I’ve already run it by ‘em.”

Jint was right cheesed. *What am I, the spare?*

Chapter 7: The *Bar Gæmh* (Abh Hell)

“Who asked you to bring a spare!?” shouted Dohkfoo.

“Yell at me if you want, but the guy tagged along, so there’s nothing to be done,” said the traitor.

Jint nearly said: *I didn’t “tag along” as a joy ride, you know.* But instead, he decided to keep quiet and watch how things played out.

He and Maydeen hadn’t been tied up, but judging by the mugs of the men surrounding them, he had a feeling it would be wise not to make any sudden movements.

They were in the conference room of the administrative building. There, Dohkfoo and Anguson, and around twenty other people, all men, had been waiting for them (or more accurately, just Maydeen).

In no time at all, the room had made quite the transformation. The tasteful opal-white walls had been smeared with primary-color paints, while bottles of booze littered the floor, along with other stuff the use of which he could only guess. They were maybe used for gambling, but he couldn’t be sure.

The second they’d entered the room, the **wristgear** was confiscated, and he was made to sit in a corner. He didn’t mind not being furnished with a seat — not least because all the chairs, big and small, had been stained and tarnished. There were still a few spots on the floor.

“This just means we’ve got another hostage,” said Anguson.

“Don’t be absurd. Do you wish to stir the animosity of the Empire? If we’d just kept it at the Chief Executive, then we’d have kept things internal. But if an imperial noble gets wrapped up, then who knows what could happen...”

“If that’s what you think, then release His Excellency,” said Maydeen calmly. “I’d thank you to release me while you’re at it, but I daresay that’s not going to happen.”

“You have that right. Releasing you would be quite daft.” Then a sly smile came upon his lips. “Unless, that is, you wouldn’t mind revoking the relocation authorization in exchange?”

“As if I would ever do such a thing.” It appeared as though Maydeen had known they’d make that demand, because his reply was swift.

“You like kids?” asked Anguson out of nowhere.

“What’s this all of a sudden?” scowled Maydeen. “Yes, I do. What of it?”

“I like kids, too. Got five of ‘em, here and there. But I’ll never get to see ‘em again. So I want new kids. And if all the broads leave, that’s no more new kids.”

Maydeen groaned. “All this, for *that*...”

“What do you MEAN, for ‘*that*’!?”

Anguson made to punch Maydeen.

“Now, now, settle down,” said Dohkfoo, stopping him. “Why don’t you try putting yourself in his shoes, Chief? That man just dreams of a harmonious family life, that’s all.”

“And if you’d lived good, honest lives, nobody would’ve bothered to sever you from your families,” said Maydeen. “Not to mention, the people you goons murdered had families, too...”

“We’ve no interest in the past,” said Dohkfoo. “Nor do we wish to hear your sanctimonious lecturing at this stage. We’re interested in the future. A future where healthy, happy children run across the surface of this planet called Lohbnahss II. And you’re trying to wrest that vision away from us.”

“Then you should’ve negotiated with Ms. Shungarr. If she would’ve gladly assisted you in creating a beautiful future full of scampering children, then I wouldn’t have put the women on ships out of here. But no. The women were the ones who asked me to get them out.”

“Whatever — just stop off-planeting all the dames!” demanded Anguson, with maximum concision.

“Uhh, as I’ve told you in the past,” butted in Jint, “you can make use of artificial birthing technology to—”

“Kids need mothers!” shouted Anguson, pointing a finger at Jint. “How do you not get that? No matter how much love and affection a father pours into his child, they’ll only ever pick up a tiny bit. There’s a thick cloud hanging between a child and their father. A mother’s love is different, though — a kid picks up on it without a cloud blocking it off.”

“But half of the Abh don’t have a mother...”

“That’s why you’re so messed up!” proclaimed Anguson.

“Mr. Anguson’s beliefs may be on the extreme end,” said Dohkfoo, “but my own opinion isn’t too far removed from his at all. The ideal state is a complete family. To be frank, it irks me to be told I’m a broken man just because I was raised without knowing who or where my parents were, but I can’t deny that my childhood was extremely lonely. And I know I don’t want my children to feel the same way.”

“Be that as it may, the majority of the inmates in the West Zone refused to make families with you lot. What was I to do?” Maydeen objected. “Besides, you can insist the children need a family’s love, but what need is there to be so fixated on natural childbirth? There are plenty of women in the Central Zone. Make your families with them; pour your affection on kids birthed artificially. There’s no way Mr. Dohkfoo’s lot, in particular, will leave behind their kids. Given the same love, what difference is there between children born naturally, and children born artificially?”

“What a horrible person you are,” said Dohkfoo. “Are you telling us to raise children mass-produced in some factory as our own?”

“We can’t love children who don’t have our blood running through their veins,” said Anguson.

“Gentlemen, there seems to be a misunderstanding,” said Jint. “The children aren’t ‘mass-produced in a factory,’ and it’s more than possible to birth children who bear your genes. In fact, that’s how the Abh usually do it.”

“But it’d be a kid with a mother whose face I don’t even know!” Anguson brandished a fist.

“Count, Your Excellency,” said Dohkfoo, “we have no intention whatsoever of

adopting artificial-birthing technology. Is that clear?”

Jint just nodded. It seemed there was nothing else he could do. No choice now but to keep quiet and resign himself to the proceedings.

“If you don’t plan to adopt the technology, then give up on having kids. Your choice isn’t between artificial and natural birth, it’s between artificial birth or a childless future,” said Maydeen. “Well, I suppose you can call for female immigrants. Mind you, I don’t know that there are any out there with strange enough taste.”

“So you’re not going to revoke it, no matter what, I take it?” Dohkfoo pulled out a gun.

“No, I won’t! Enough already!” said Maydeen bluntly.

“If you don’t, then...” Dohkfoo raised the gun showily.

“I’m a high-ranking official in the UH. Your threats are empty...”

“I’ll kill *him*.” He thrust its muzzle square into Jint’s forehead.

“What, me!?” Looking back on this moment later, he knew that was a stupid reaction, but at the moment, he was assailed by pure surprise.

“And what will that get you?” said Maydeen, himself startled. “You’re the one who said you don’t want to start something with the Empire. Do you really think you can get away with killing an imperial noble?”

“I don’t need to tell them I killed him. He’ll just go down as missing on the surface of Lohbnahss II. Alongside the Chief Executive, that is.”

“And what then?” he grimaced. “That’ll just put you in a worse position.”

“You know who else it’ll put in a worse position? The asylum seekers who’ve already left Lohbnahss II. I don’t know what might happen to them, specifically, but I look forward to finding out. What’s certain is that their relocation will be suspended.”

Staring at Dohkfoo’s demented eyes, true fear slowly but steadily reared its ugly head inside Jint, seizing his entire body. His head suddenly felt flaming hot, while an unpleasant dampness clung like syrup to his face. His teeth didn’t want to come together, as his jaw shook uncontrollably.

Maydeen tried talking sense. “You wouldn’t! Our position would worsen, that much is true, but yours would even mor—”

“Don’t worry your head over us. This is the bet we’re making for a kid-filled future.”

Jint suddenly noticed Dohkfoo was sweating, too. Those eyes were more than demented — they were afraid.

“Give me your answer!” said Dohkfoo.

“The answer is NO!” Maydeen answered instantly.

Jint tried to say something, anything, but his teeth were chattering, so he gave up.

“You’ve got me.” Dohkfoo heaved a sigh and withdrew the gun.

Jint, too, breathed a sigh. Everything turned cold, and he held onto his own shoulders; the shaking wouldn’t stop.

“Why won’t you kill him?” Anguson glared at Jint contemptuously. “Damn pansy!”

“He may be a pansy, but he’s a noble. And killing an imperial noble wouldn’t bode well at all. The risk is just too great.” Dohkfoo pressed the gun against the Chief Executive’s head. “You, on the other hand, I won’t hesitate to kill.”

“Go ahead. Do it.” Maydeen was unperturbed. “But what will you do after you kill me? Who’ll be around to revoke the relocation for you?”

“I’ll revoke it as the new Citizen Representative.”

“You’re in for a disappointment. I’ve already submitted to Her Highness the Lady Agent the list of successors. Everyone on the list is an asylum seeker, but so long as they continue to walk this planet, then the role of Citizen Representative will be inherited by the formally decided next-in-line.”

“Oh? And I assume one Mr. Tomasov is at the top of that list?”

Maydeen’s eyes reeled open with alarm.

“What an easy man to read. Hit the bull’s-eye, have I?”

“It doesn’t matter who’s on the list,” said Maydeen brusquely.

“It does matter. Do you really think *he’s* the only one communicating with us?” said Dohkfoo, pointing at the guard who was just standing idly.

“No, I... there must be more, but...” Now he was visibly disturbed. “Tomasov is the one man I know would never touch Alkyke.”

“So you admit it. It is Mr. Tomasov after all.”

“You can think whatever you like.”

“Thank you for your permission. Now then, you won’t revoke the authorization, correct?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you’ve outlived your usefulness.” Dohkfoo pushed the gun between Maydeen’s eyes.

“Don’t do it...” Cold sweat ran down Maydeen’s face.

“If you would just revoke it, I would gladly refrain.”

“I... I can’t do that...” Then his conviction returned to him. “There’s no way Tomasov is with you. If he’d revoke it for you, you’d kill me without hesitation.”

“You may not believe me, but I don’t like killing. That’s the only reason I hesitate. I assure you, Mr. Tomasov will listen to anything I say. Also, if you revoke it for us, then we can sort this out in the most peaceable way possible.”

“Forget it...” said Maydeen, voice strained. “Tomasov being one of you is a terrible lie, you third-rate conman.”

“I shall give you five seconds. Five, four, three...”

Maydeen screwed his eyes shut.

Jint hoped that, just like when it was his turn, Dohkfoo would change his mind at the last second. But that all it was — hope. His body didn’t, wouldn’t move. All he managed to do was look away from Maydeen.

“...two, one. Your time is up.”

The gunshot rang out.

At that moment, what struck Jint was what he ought not to have dwelt on: So

that's the sound a powder gun makes.

Timidly, he looked over to Maydeen. Once it hit him what he was seeing, something forced its way up his throat.

Maydeen's life had been snuffed out. After all, it was hard to believe anyone could live with the top half of his cranium blown off. The mass of meat that was once the Chief Executive collapsed facing up, a large quantity of blood pooling behind it. Bits of brain matter were scattered over the blood.

Jint vomited.

"Is this wimp really a soldier?" sneered Anguson.

"He's a soldier, but he's a noble first and foremost. I'm sure he's never laid witness to a corpse before."

Dohkfoo's supposition was mistaken. It was just that Jint thought the corpse to which he laid witness wouldn't be quite as grisly.

Finally, the urge to vomit subsided. "That man... I may not have liked him very much, but he was a good man with a solid sense of responsibility..." He glanced at the lifeless cadaver. "So why'd you need to kill him!?"

"This too is war, O Imperial Noble. You people have killed scads and scads of even better people. I'm shocked a soldier like you would level such a charge at me."

Dohkfoo was technically correct, but hearing that come out of Dohkfoo's mouth stoked a towering anger inside him.

"Now then, what do we do from here?" Dohkfoo crossed his arms.

"We ought to message ol' Tomasov," said Anguson.

"Don't tell me you *believed* me when I said that? That man is far too square to be wallowing in narcotics. He is, of course, an enemy to be respected."

"So you TRICKED me?" Anguson's face turned red, possibly out of indignation.

"I didn't trick you. It's the Chief Executive I aimed to trick. Think how *trite* it'd be to let him pass on with a clear mind, secure in the knowledge he'd entrusted his future affairs to a trusted subordinate."

“You’re rotten, Dohkfoo,” said Anguson.

Jint concurred.

“Pay your respects to the dead, mates,” said Anguson, looking at the subordinates behind him. “He was a nasty rotter, but he wasn’t a coward.”

While Anguson’s men stood confused, Jint got up and saluted the heap that used to be Maydeen.

Anguson shot him a surprised look, but soon he was mimicking Jint’s Abh salute in his own crude way. Anguson’s henchmen followed suit.

“Never mind that, we need to think about our next moves,” said Dohkfoo, spoiling the solemnity of the moment.

“We have another hostage,” Anguson pointed out. “He’s a crybaby, but come to think of it, that makes for a better hostage.”

“Listen to me: we cannot afford to be picking fights with the Empire. I don’t think we’ve any other option besides letting His Nobleness run back home. He’ll be a bit unnerved, but he’ll forget all about goings-on on this tiny planet soon enough.”

“I can’t,” Jint whispered to himself. *Could you not talk like I’m not here, please?*

“That right? If it were me and I got a gun pressed on me, I wouldn’t ever forget about it. Though that might just be because I’m not a baby,” said Anguson.

“That’s all well and good, but we can’t make the situation any worse than it already is.” Dohkfoo crossed his arms and fell silent.

“Then MANAGE,” ordered Anguson, with a mighty aura of intimidation.

“That’s easy for you to say, but...” Dohkfoo looked at Jint with pleading eyes. “Ehm, I truly don’t want to start a fight with the Empire, but if we were to, say, threaten you, could you stop them from boarding?”

“I’m just the **Lady Agent Adjunct**. I don’t have the authority,” he answered, voice flat.

“All right then, could you please recognize me as the Citizen Representative?”

“I’m just the Lady Agent Adjunct. I don’t have the authority,” he repeated expressionlessly.

“Dammit, I’m at a loss,” said Dohkfoo, scratching his head. He flinched at the idea of antagonizing the Empire, but he was even more afraid of antagonizing Anguson. Looking at Anguson’s thick brawny muscles, it wasn’t hard to see why.

“Who’s got the authority, then!?” asked Anguson, irate.

“The **Lady Agent**, obviously,” Jint deigned to respond. “Her Highness is currently in orbit.”

“Threaten her. Using him as a hostage!” said Anguson, pointing at Jint.

“But... but...” Dohkfoo looked as though he could break into tears.

“If you can’t, then you’re a coward. And I won’t shake hands with a coward. I’d never be able to face my dead mother. So I’ll be killing your ass first.”

Half of the men in the room raised their weapons, glaring at Anguson. Seconds later, the other half brandished their own with a chorus of clanks. Nervous tension permeated the crowded room.

“Now, now, that’s enough of that. A shootout in a place this cramped? Between allies?” said Dohkfoo, waving a hand.

“Then do it! Show us you’re not a coward!”

“Fine, I will.” Dohkfoo’s shoulders slumped, but a moment later he’d collected himself. “Establish a line with the Lady’s Manor, if you would!”

Jint gazed at the leader of the Central Zone with pity in his eyes. While Anguson was even worse, Dohkfoo was clearly lacking in knowledge about the Abh. To think he would choose issuing threats to the Empire over the more sensible option: dying here and now.

Lafier was staring at the map of Rajay Island on the main display screen. Now was right around the time Jint’s group would arrive at the West Correctional Zone. Yet there had been no call, no message.

“**Captain**, a message from the next-term **Citizen Representative**,” said Ecryua.

“Ignore it,” ordered Lafier. She couldn’t ignore a message from the current **Citizen Representative**, but Dohkfoo was still just a **landworld citizen** at the moment. Dohkfoo was only slated to inherit the role once the current one, Maydeen, left Lohbnahss II, and the *Basrogrh* left this **territory-nation**. If things proceeded smoothly, she might never have to return, and moreover, she might never have to see Dohkfoo’s stupid face again (not even over the communication line).

“**Captain**, this time it’s a message from **Rearguard** Lynn.”

“Put it through.”

“It’s from his **wristgear**.”

Is there no transmission equipment at the new command post? Lafier could only frown. The circumstances must be harsher than she’d expected.

“Are you there, Your Highness?”

Lafier’s expression turned grimmer still. The voice the **bridge** was playing host to wasn’t even Baronh, let alone Jint.

“Who are you?”

“The newly inaugurated Star System Premier, as of right now. Dohkfoo. Now please, receive my call. This thing is too difficult to use. Though I do admire its small size.”

“**Captain**, a call from the next-term—”

“Put it through.”

Video of Dohkfoo replaced the map of Rajay Island.

“Explain,” said Lafier.

“‘Explain,’ as in explain why I’m holding your Adjunct’s transmission device? Uh, well, to be frank with you... I took it.”

“Is the man alive?”

“Yes, of course. See for yourself.”

The camera panned toward a sitting Jint. He clearly didn't know what to say. "Hey," was all he said, smiling a bashful smile.

How very like you, Jint, she thought to herself.

Dohkfoo strode back into the picture, next to Jint.

"Now for my demands."

"The answer is no!" she cut in immediately.

"Please, at least hear me out," said Dohkfoo, wounded. "We *are* holding His Excellency, your Adjunct."

"Return him. Now."

Dohkfoo looked up at the ceiling. "Honestly, doing so may be in our best interests..."

"Quit that," said somebody offscreen. "Talk terms with her, Dohkfoo!"

"You aren't the one in charge?" quibbled Lafier. "If so, show the face of whoever is."

"No, I, uh, *am* the one in charge, so to speak. Or at least, I like to think I am."

Sobash came to her side and whispered: "**Captain**, we've cross-referenced that voice print. He's the leader of the East Correctional Zone, the man who only ever called you the one time. Named 'Anguson.'"

Lafier nodded as a sign she'd understood. It came as no surprise — she knew the inmates of the East were the ones who sparked the uprising to begin with.

"I never signed up to be *under* you, Dohkfoo," came Anguson's voice. "I refuse to return the baby. Not as long as those Abhs keep taking away the girls!"

"Jint is NOT a 'baby'!" Lafier shouted angrily, despite herself.

"But he is! He was shaking in his boots, even hurled chunks!"

"Oh yeah," said Jint, "I forgot to tell you something important. Mr. Maydeen got executed. You should name the new **Citizen Representative** in accordance with the line of succ—"

"You keep your mouth shut!" A burly leg kicked Jint in the head from

offscreen.

“Bastard...” Lafier’s hands curled into fists. She wanted to touch down onto the **landworld**’s surface that instant. She wanted to teach that filthy criminal reprobate (even just hearing his *name* in the back of her head made her skin crawl) by her own hand just how nasty the vengeance wrought by the **Kin of the Stars** could be.

“I’m not afraid of death, Abh.” Anguson finally entered the video. “Being unable to have kids is the same as being dead. Stop taking the women. If you don’t, I’ll kill him. You may be able to kill us, but you can’t ensure he stays alive.”

“*Kill* you?” Lafier was a little taken aback. “Are you joking? We aren’t that merciful.”

“What do you mean?” Confusion warped Anguson’s face.

“Oh, allow me to explain, Mr. Anguson, Mr. Dohkfoo,” said Sobash, in a pleasant manner. But that was where the pleasant facade ended. The agreeability of his smile lasted for a mere moment, soon shifting into the type that had grown notorious throughout humanity — the “smile of the Abh.”

“We think exacting revenge in a conscientious and upright fashion is a reason to get up in the morning. And we make it our policy to have those who are involved in a fellow Abh’s unjust demise experience for themselves the fact that in this galaxy, there’s something far more abhorrent than death. Mr. Anguson, you say you aren’t afraid of death. But what form of death do you refer to? If you’re picturing us simply blasting you with a **laser beam**, then your assumptions have deluded you. And I guarantee that you will be given ample time to realize how delusional you once were. Once you’ve had a taste of the vengeance of the Abh, you will beg to be allowed to die. You will beg for death, no matter how agonizing. But you will not be granted permission to die. We don’t believe in any religion, but we do believe in hell. We know it’s very real. That is because it exists in this very galaxy, in ours, the realm of the Abh. I invite you to see firsthand just how despicable what our ancient Emperor, *Dugnac*, and the dark corners of science and technology have devised.”

“Wait, hold on a second,” said Dohkfoo, flustered. “Revenge only breeds

more hatred. Then hatred gives rise to even more hatred, leading to a never-ending cycle...”

“Revenge may not be very productive, but our reputation for exacting vengeance does protect us. When I was young, I would often visit strange lands, and tread over exceptionally thin ice. That I remain in good health to this day is, I think, a testament to how thoroughly that Abh notoriety has safeguarded me — far more than the thickest armor ever could,” said Sobash. “I hope that holds true now as well, Mr. Dohkfoo. For you and us both.”

Dohkfoo looked at Anguson with pleading eyes. Anguson, for his part, stood there, expressionless. There was no means whatsoever of asking him what was running through that head of his.

“No,” he uttered. Whatever he was feeling, it didn’t bleed into his tone of voice. “I’m not like you — I believe in God’s teachings. And I believe in a hell that’s *not* within this galaxy. I realized when I was thirteen that that’s where I’m headed. Experiencing the phony hell you people cooked up will be good training for the real one God created. So if you take the girls, I kill him.”

“Is that right?” said Lafier coldly. “Fine then. But don’t you dare die before I get there.”

“I’m against this!” yelled Dohkfoo.

“You’re a coward, too, Dohkfoo,” railed Anguson.

“What a shame,” said Sobash. “Please drop us a call if you change your minds.”

“Hold on...” Dohkfoo wasn’t willing to give up — he sought to keep this powder keg in check.

Yet Lafier was no longer paying Dohkfoo’s words any heed. “Jint...”

In fact, the eyes of the **Royal Princess** were no longer registering the two inmate leaders.

“I am an Abliar. Abliars do not cry. If I weren’t an Abliar, then...” She herself didn’t understand what she was saying. The second she cut the transmission, she cast her eyes downward.

“**Captain**,” called Ecryua without delay. “The *Luisaith* has been on the line. It’s a call from **Mechanics Linewing** Samson.”

“Put it through,” said Lafier, head still hanging.

“I’m so sorry, **Captain**,” said Samson. “I should have followed him.”

“It isn’t your fault. The man made his decision.”

“But...”

“It’s okay. It’s his responsibility that he got caught, and my responsibility that I’m abandoning him.”

“Are you planning to abandon him? Because I’m calling in the hopes you’ll order me to return to the surface and rescue **Rearguard** Lynn.”

It was tempting, very tempting. If she dithered for even a moment, she knew she’d wind up issuing just such an order, with herself standing at the head if at all possible. But Samson and his subordinates were hardly land war experts, and they were few in number to boot. The rescue operation would be tricky in the best of times — this was just impossible.

“Come back aboard,” she murmured.

“But **Captain**! They said outright that they don’t want to fight the **Imperial Star Forces** head-on. I don’t think they would fire at people wearing these **uniforms**.”

Given the preceding transmission, she knew Samson was being overly optimistic. First of all, there was no way the insurgents were that disciplined. They were an armed mob first and foremost. Moreover, the leader of the East Zone would never forbid his henchmen from engaging in combat. And most importantly, they were already threatening to kill an **imperial noble** — it was hard to think they’d then abstain from killing **starpilots** and **NCCs**. She could easily see the mission ending in her losing her precious subordinates.

“You had best resume your actual work duties,” insisted Lafier.

“I’m begging you, **Captain**, allow me to fulfill my responsibility. I don’t plan on taking my subordinates. I’ll go it alone. I aim to throw the dice, because I bet they’ll try to avoid a fight. All they need is a jolt. They’ve failed, and deep down,

they know it, but people are generally poor sports about acknowledging it when they've blown it. My going down there will jolt them into admitting their failure, and they'll give us our kiddo back. So please, let me make that wager."

"SILENCE!" A white hot anger flared inside her head. Anger not toward him, but toward her mission, and toward her own powerlessness. Still looking down, she pounded the **console**. She was thankful to her bluish-black hair for masking her face. "Don't disregard me, and don't tell me you'll go it alone. I told you already — you don't bear any responsibility in this. So be silent, *Samsonn Borgh Tiruser Tirusec!*"

Samson was speechless.

"**Captain,**" said Ecryua. "The *Merctérh* is calling. It's **Unit Commander Gabautec.**"

Before she could order her to put it through, the line came through.

"**Your Highness,**" said *Gabautec*, saluting hurriedly. "I'm aware of the situation. I can organize a land platoon of no more than fifty. I believe it would be optimal to land the **traffic ship** within our corps near where *Lonh-Roïcfarriac* (His Excellency the Lady Agent Adjunct) is being held, and storm the compound."

Lafier raised her head, only to realize Sobash and Ecryua were staring at her.

"What are the chances of success, then?" asked Lafier. A small ray of hope had emerged.

"There are too many unknowns to be sure, but I'm told it's anywhere between 0.08 and 0.21."

"And if you were to fail, what would become of the ground platoon?"

"They would all be stranded. The chances of success are the same as the chances the traffic ship remains intact by the end of the **landworld** operation. We haven't taken into account the possibility of making it through the rioting all the way to the **amphibious ship**, so it may suit us to view the actual rate of success as slightly higher. Please, your orders."

Lafier stayed silent for a moment. Then, at last, she quietly stated her orders .

“Lend all your efforts to making sure the relocation boarding goes smoothly.”

“Are those your orders?”

“Correct.”

“Understood.” End transmission.

Ecryua sighed disappointedly.

“Who is the next **Citizen Representative**? Skipping over the man who called me earlier, of course,” asked Lafier.

Sobash pulled up the info. “Looks like it’s a person named Tomasov.”

“Call this Tomasov immediately. We’ll make it official summarily.” Lafier sat up straight. “For the time being... we have to forget about him!”

“*Can* you forget him? **Your Highness**,” muttered Ecryua.

Lafier scowled at the **Rearguard Starpilot**. *This is the first time she’s ever called me “Fiac,”* she thought.

Guess they left me to die.

But in his heart, Jint felt strangely relieved. His mortal fear hadn’t gone, but when she said, “if I weren’t an Abliar,” he noticed her long eyelashes were shaking, and felt something close to contentment.

Meanwhile, Dohkfoo was pacing the room in a state of agitation. “Do you realize what you’ve said? I, for one, want nothing to do with an actual living hell. Besides, you don’t even do Alkyke.”

“Because it goes against God’s teachings. What about it?” replied Anguson vacantly.

“What other reason is there to be so attached to this planet? Granted, we can’t exactly get them to put us on the next flight out, but we ought to take the next opportunity to relocate wherever we so choose. Then we can have so many kids we’d struggle to remember their names.”

“...Ah.” Anguson’s eyes opened slightly wider. “Hadn’t occurred to me.”

“Give me a break!” Dohkfoo sank to the floor right then and there, like a

feeble leaf. “The only reason *we’re* stuck on this miserable rock is because we can’t forget the sweet taste of Alkyke. But the first thing I do once I become the official System Premier is give you a license to relocate. So don’t be so obstinate; let’s let this young man go home.”

“No. A real man never goes back on his word. Besides...” To Jint’s surprise, Anguson’s expression looked sad and lonely. “There isn’t a planet out there that’d take me in. This is the only place I’ve got, Dohkfoo.”

“Even so, at this rate we’re doomed.” Dohkfoo tried talking him down with a calming voice. “You heard them, didn’t you? The Abhs have no intention whatsoever of leaving the women behind. So what use is killing the lad? The outcome won’t be pretty, that much is certain. Come on, let’s just cut our losses. I’m going to call them and say we changed our minds. I trust you’ll let me?”

The other men in the room traded uneasy glances. Uneasiest of all was the traitor guard. Jint considered that a bit of cosmic justice. Furthermore, the situation was taking a turn for the favorable. Only one man in the whole room wanted to kill Jint, and that man seemed at quite the loss. Inadvertently, a self-assured smile crept over Jint’s face, but he made sure to smother it immediately — if he got caught looking as though he had composure to spare, they might mistake it as a mocking smirk, causing the number of people who wanted him dead to spike. For whatever reason, this **landworld** housed an impressive crowd of hot tempers.

“No.” Anguson proved a stubborn mule indeed.

“But *why*?” Dohkfoo grumbled. “You don’t have any real reason to resist the idea! I fail to believe you honestly mean to rehearse your own stay in God’s hell. At least, *I’m* not having it, you hear me? There is no ‘God’s hell,’ anyway; there couldn’t possibly be. An *Abh* hell, on the other hand, probably does exist. If you ask me, their kind is plenty inclined to create one.”

“No,” repeated Anguson.

“For heavens’ sake!” Dohkfoo didn’t hide his irritation. “Listen, I’m going to have them cease fire. Nothing good will come of kicking up any more of a fuss out there. I despise the counter-productive.”

“I can’t let you do that,” said Anguson. “Now that it’s come to this, we just have to use force. Let’s join forces and prevent them from hauling off the girls.”

“I have no intention of doing any such thing,” said Dohkfoo. “If that’s what you want to do, do it yourselves. But I’ll warn you to watch your backs.”

“Well what do you know, now there *is* a reason to keep the crybaby hostage, Dohkfoo.” With those words, Anguson’s fingers were suddenly around Jint’s neck. “Cease the fighting, and he dies. And to top it all off, I’ll tell the world *you* did it. That way you can really savor that pretend ‘hell’ of theirs.”

Jint tried his damndest to pull off those logs Anguson called arms, but they failed to budge.

“And what reason have I to roll over and let that false charge slide?” Dohkfoo’s eyes narrowed. “I have plenty of men who will attest to the truth. You’ll be the only one making a pit stop at the ‘pretend hell’ on your way to the real one. That is, if the ‘real one’ even exists.”

Jint’s consciousness was beginning to fade, but he managed to open his eyes a smidgen to take in the room. How peculiar, that even though the two head honchos were now in open conflict, the inmates were merely looking on, as though amused by some droll spectacle.

“Fine, then I’ll be waiting for you in the real hell. And I look forward to seeing if the Abh are gonna hear out your explanations.”

“Urgh... That’s playing dirty...”

“You could do the same, if you didn’t fear death, Dohkfoo.”

“You’re a coward, just like the rest of us, Anguson,” choked out Jint. He knew full well saying that was digging his hole even deeper, but he couldn’t help giving him a piece of his mind. “If you had any courage, you’d accept the consequences of your actions.”

“Oho, so the little baby does have some balls. Mouthing off to me, the one and only Anguson.” The man tightened his grip around Jint’s throat. “But what I hate a hell of a lot more than a coward is a snot-nosed smart ass.”

“Good god, man!” Dohkfoo shook his head hotly. “You think I’m going to go

along with your idiotic posturing? It's suicide! Now, let the young man go." Dohkfoo then addressed Anguson's lackeys: "How long do you intend to follow this man?"

"Shut your trap; all you are's a gutless weasel!" spat one of the inmates.

Then, the bangs of several bullets ripped through the room.

The hell's going on in here? Such was the last thought Jint registered, in his frustration, before blacking out.

Chapter 8: *Daimdh Abliarser* (Abliar Tears)

The **patrol ship** *Lachcaü* had now entered the **Countdom of Lohbnaahss**, taking twenty-one of **Hunter Fleet 1**'s ships with it. They were thought to be about 2,100 *cédlairh* away from the enemy fleet. Said fleet was making a beeline for them, but they still had just under twenty-four hours before the enemy reached the **Countdom**. And in that time, another eleven ships would join their fighting force. The *Byrec Casna Blaigr Glagamh* (Hunter Fleet 1 Command Center) was scheduled to wait in place until right before the enemy arrived.

This was no different from the usual *modus operandi* — they had repeatedly squatted on areas until mere moments before potential contact with the enemy's projected path. The enemy fleet was slow, so Fleet 1, composed entirely of patrol ships, could easily outdistance it. It was Fleet 1's mission to closely observe the enemy as they approached, and then beat a hasty retreat when they were on the cusp of battle.

The enemy had presumably grown tired of this (and who could blame them?), for at one point, they split into patrol ship-centric and **assault ship**-centric corps and flew in firing. But even then, Fleet 1 wouldn't engage, and the incident ended with feeding the belligerent ships some mines, leaving the Abh contingent unscathed to this hour.

As far as **Chief of Staff** Cfadiss was concerned, **Commander-in-Chief** Sporr had taken quite a liking to this endeavor. When she was in fine spirits, all of the typical problems were as good as absent. **Kilo-Commander** Cfadiss felt relaxed in his **Chief of Staff's** Seat.

"Fleet spotted!" reported the **Communications Officer**.

Tension gripped the **Commander's Bridge**. Cfadiss rose to his feet and gauged her expression. But on the surface, she didn't seem the least bit fazed. She remained in her bespoke chaise, her smile as bewitching as ever.

"They're likely allies," the officer continued. "Ship cross-referencing complete. Two *Cetairh*-class ships, one *Saith*, one *Rogrh*."

“Whatever are they up to?” Sporr raised her blazing blue eyebrows. “They should have received their orders to withdraw ages ago. Who is their commander?”

“Judging by the fact that it’s **supply ship**-centric, I believe a **liege agent** or **magistrate** might be in charge.”

“Okay, then who is it?”

Cfadiss pulled the info from the **terminal**, and felt a mite lightheaded at the revelation: “The **Lady Agent** is **Her Highness the Viscountess of *Parhynh***.”

“At a guess, I’ve seen the little princess around ten times,” said Sporr, her pointer and middle fingers on her brow. “One of those times, I encountered her when I oughtn’t have. And this will be our second inopportune meeting.”

“You two must be bound by fate,” said Cfadiss, still nursing his vertigo.

“That’s enough of that talk. Now, put me through to *Fiac Cfarér*.”

Her orders were actioned at once, but they had to wait five minutes for the other end of the call to pick up. Finally, the **Viscountess of *Parhynh*** appeared on screen, saluting silently. It was the military salute, the sight of which spurred a faint smile upon Sporr’s lips.

“**Deca-Commander** Abliar,” said Sporr, calling her by her **rank** within the **Star Forces**. “What are you doing here? The enemy fleet is pointed straight for this **territory-nation**. They’ll be here without a shadow of a doubt. I bid you flee at once.”

Paradoxically, Lafier’s wording was unsuited to addressing a superior: “I can’t yet, **Archduchess**.”

“You can’t yet? Could you please explain yourself?” Sporr didn’t censure Lafier for her language, but she maintained the bearing of a superior.

And so the **Royal Princess** went into it. Sporr listened without interrupting, but her temples gradually began twitching.

“In other words, **Deca-Commander** Abliar, the gist is that this **landworld** is full of criminals, and not only must we relocate them all, we have to do so before our temporary withdrawal. And you, in your kindness, would listen to their

pleas.”

“It’s not just criminals. There are guards, too.”

“Either way, we’re talking about land folk. Might you be fussing over a **landworld** too much, Deca-Commander?”

“That may be true. But I’ve made a promise.”

“I see. Promises are important.” Sporr lightly tapped her **command staff** against her forehead. “But as I mentioned earlier, the enemy will arrive in the midst of the boarding process. What in heaven do you plan to do about that?”

“I’m hoping this **territory-nation** can be held until boarding is complete.”

*Don’t tell me she’s expecting us to hold the **territory**?* Cfadiss groaned. He never could have expected they’d be asked to do something so crazy. Was the **Royal Princess** aware how weak they were to be clashing head-on with the enemy fleet? How they’d ultimately be unable to escape defeat?

Lafier was in no position to be ordering the Fleet 1 command center; hers was merely a request, and nothing more. Yet Cfadiss felt as though he *had* just received an order. It wasn’t that the **Royal Princess**’s manner was particularly high-handed or overbearing. She made it clear from her comportment that she understood full well that she was the suppliant. But even so, the unique aura of one born with the title of *Fiac* inspired him with awe. Nor was Cfadiss more fawning or sycophantic than the average person — most felt the same way in her presence. That being said, his superior officer was the head of the Sporr clan, so neither of them was “most people.”

Cfadiss covertly examined his **Commander-in-Chief**, and took solace. She didn’t appear to be cross. On the contrary, he could sense almost too much composure coming from her, as though she was delighting in this exchange. A different seed of worry soon germinated within: *Don’t tell me she’s planning on accepting Her Highness’s request?*

“Please don’t spout such nonsense. If we did that, my ships would come to harm,” she said, though that was a massive understatement.

“But if you don’t, my **landworld citizens** will die, **Archduchess**.”

“I think you’re rather exaggerating. They’ve managed to make lives for themselves up until now, haven’t they? Besides, until very recently, the **territory-nation** belonged to the United Humankind — the ones who are coming are their allies. And most importantly of all, the Empire can’t be faulted no matter who should perish, however tragically, in a domestic **landworld** conflict,” said Sporr, who then rose slowly from her chaise. “Also, please don’t forget that if we were to defend this **territory**, a number of my subordinates would give their lives to do so. Is there any point spending the lives of our subordinates in order to protect those **landworld citizens** of yours, who should be paying for their crimes anyway?”

Lafier nodded wordlessly. She appeared fully confident, without the slightest hint of self-doubt.

“Look,” said Sporr, “I hate to admit it, but the truth of the matter is: if we fight, we’ll lose. Judging by the sheer difference in numbers, without a miracle to help us, we’ll suffer an utter defeat. I wouldn’t be surprised if we got wiped out completely. Can you promise us a miracle, **Deca-Commander**?”

“No,” said Lafier, shaking her head. But she made no sign of taking back her words. “I’m not requesting for you to win the fight. I just want more time.”

“Well, that’s an awful thing to say. You would have my ships and my subordinates fling themselves into a hopeless battle just to buy time? I can’t order you to leave, so take this as my advice to you, but I urge you to depart this **territory** at once. Do you understand?”

“I won’t leave,” stated the **Royal Princess** sharply. “The **citizens** are afraid they’ll be left behind, **Archduchess**.”

“I don’t wish to admit this, either, but I’m afraid, too. Afraid I’ll be humiliated in the worst way possible. I don’t want the name of *Sporh Aronn Saicsepatr Painaigh*, **Archduchess of Laitpanh**, to be synonymous with making subordinates die in vain.”

“It wouldn’t be in vain.”

“Because they’d be fighting to help you keep your promise? Is that it? As I said earlier, promises *are* important. And I know that in order to fulfill their promises, your clan drips extraordinary amounts of zeal. But it all depends on

the time and place. If it were only your precious life at stake, you could martyr yourself for the sake of your clan. More to the point — though it may not be my place to say this — if the price had to be paid in the lives of your or my subordinates, then it's a different story."

"It's not just to keep my promise."

"Then pray tell, what is it about?"

"The dignity of the Empire." Her striking jet-black eyes locked onto Sporr's eyes of crimson. "As **Lady Agent**, I humbly request you secure the **Countdom of Lohbnaahss** until boarding is complete!"

Sporr's expression turned severe indeed. From her pursed lips, a whispered rage: "You... you *clasononn* (stubborn mule)!"

I hope no one heard that, prayed Cfadiss, for his superior's sake. It would wound her pride if anyone were to discover she'd once let slip her unvarnished feelings without any witty or sarcastic bent.

"May I ask you a question?" On the surface, Sporr's tone of voice was composed. "What were you planning to do if we didn't stop by this **territory**?"

"The enemy fleet is chasing after your ships, **Archduchess**. If you hadn't come here, then neither would the enemy."

"That is true," said Sporr, smiling. "But if I were to turn down your request, then what would you do?"

"I would have no choice but to hide on the surface."

"Hide on the surface? But how?"

"I would have the assault ship and supply ships, which have no surface-landing capability, to accompany your fleet. The **amphibious ship** would descend, and hide in the middle of the ocean, but not before I got as many people as possible aboard. I would board, too, of course."

"That's a dangerous gamble, **Deca-Commander**. From what we've observed, they stay in a single star system for, at minimum, five days. They've even squatted for as long as ten days or more. And what's worse, the durations are getting longer. Do you honestly believe they won't scan the surface while

they're here? Once you're under attack, your mere *Saith*-class ship will sink without a prayer."

"This is war. I can't help whose side fortune is on."

"It's just as you say. And right now, fortune is very much not on our side." Uncommonly for her, Sporr heaved a sigh, and changed her tone. "Okay, **Your Highness Lady Agent**. I will accept your request."

"Please, **Commander-in-Chief**, don't be hasty!" shouted Cfadiss, astonished. "You know our situation. It would be reckless..."

"Understand, however," said Sporr, ignoring him "that I can't make any heroic claims. I can't promise you we will protect the planet without fail. And we don't have any intention of defending this **territory** for very long if it means our annihilation. We reserve the right to retreat at the appropriate time. All I can offer **Your Highness** is a tiny bit more time. Is that quite all right?"

"That's all I need, **Archduchess**. A thousand times, I thank you. I would like for you to bring my assault ship under your command."

"That request, I must decline, **Your Highness**. It would only serve to get in our way. Never mind us — I ask that you devote your complete attention to getting your work done as quickly as possible."

Shamefaced, Lafier lowered her gaze. "Understood. I'm counting on you."

The call cut out.

"Why are you humoring such an absurd request, ma'am?" Cfadiss knew there was a shade of reproach in his voice, but he didn't care.

Sporr's eyes remained on the screen. "Just who do you think I am? I am the **lady** among all lieges, the **Archduchess of Laitpanh**. I can't just refuse the pleas of a fellow liege, even if that lord or lady happens to be acting as an agent."

"However, we need you to be acting as the **Commander-in-Chief of Fleet 1**, ma'am," said Cfadiss, objecting flat-out.

"I am at that," said Sporr, taken aback. "One of the vital tasks of the **Star Forces** is to defend the prestige of the **Empire**."

"But there's a ceiling to that. To expose the fleet to danger just to assuage the

victim complex of a small handful of **landworld citizens**...”

“I don’t know if it’s a victim complex, but I understand where you’re coming from,” said Sporr, biting the joint of her pinky. “She’s harassing me, and it’s working.”

Cfadiss blinked. “You think she made that plea in order to harass you?”

“Not on purpose, obviously.”

“I suppose not.”

“Abliars jerk us around by pure *instinct*. They suss out the predicament that would most displease the Sporr by *instinct*. That’s how they drove me into this position.”

“Uh-huh...” *Looks like victim complexes aren’t the sole province of **landworld citizens***, he thought, but naturally he wasn’t so foolhardy as to voice that sentiment.

“That aside, kindly put all **traffic ships** currently loaded onto each of the ships under my command under the command of **Her Highness the Lady Agent**. Tell them that they’re allowed to abandon the traffic ships in the end, should it come to that. Oh, actually, leave one traffic ship with us, just in case.”

“They’re to assist with the relocation, I assume?”

“Don’t ask me what you already know the answer to. Come to think of it, let’s throw in some supply ships, too. Can we send some over?”

Cfadiss summoned the **supply staff officer**, inquired as to the space available aboard the supply ships, and reported back to her. “We can, but only one.”

“I see. Right then, get to it for me, **Chief of Staff**.”

He returned to his Chief of Staff’s Seat and made the necessary arrangements. He organized a temporary traffic ship corps, and appointed the **Captain** of the supply ship that was to be deployed as the *Sarérh* Commander. Even as he set about making it happen, a swift torrent of information flowered from the *Basrogrh* to the *Lachcaü*. After finishing one of his tasks, he read the notifications, and a particular nugget caught his eye.

“**Commander-in-Chief**,” he said. “It seems the **Lady Agent Adjunct** has been

captured by **landworld** insurgents.”

“The **Lady Agent Adjunct**? Who would that be?”

“Lonh-*Dreur Haïder*.” Cfadiss recalled the **landworld**-born **noble**, whom he’d only ever met once.

“My heart goes out to him.”

“Why didn’t *Fiac Cfarér* mention it, I wonder?”

“She must have concluded there was no need to inform us.”

“But our fleet is capable of forming a very large-scale land corps. I think we could assist in his rescue.”

“And chip away at our already meager forces?” she said quietly. “That won’t do. I can’t have my subordinates engage in a land battle, not when they have so little experience.”

Warship crew numbers had been set high to compensate for possible casualties. Yet fewer people working inevitably meant lesser combat strength, and accommodations weren’t spacious enough to house any true reserve crew. The patrol ships under her command had to give up personnel to the traffic ships, and even though it was a small number, it still hurt. Moreover, there were ships that were damaged from small skirmishes, along with ships that didn’t have enough crewmembers to begin with. By deploying some workers to the surface, the figure of ships that could barely fly would only increase.

“Fair point. Keeping holding capacity in mind, sending a land corps might prove difficult,” Cfadiss concurred. They could hardly afford to sit in this **territory-nation** for a leisurely stay.

“Besides, Count Hyde is an **Abh noble**,” said Sporr, her gaze distant.

Cfadiss nearly asked her what she meant by that, but there was an assertiveness in her tone that gave him pause. “What a shame. At this rate, all we can do is hope he makes it out okay.”

“I think it a shame myself. I’ve only met him once, but I like him. Not least because he forced an Abliar to wear that *delightful* attire. Granted, I won’t be sobbing or whimpering over him like **Her Highness**.”

“Was she ‘whimpering’?” Cfadiss couldn’t comprehend what Sporr was saying.

“Abliars never shed a tear. Do you know why?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“The **Emperor** must always be impartial. Or at least, they must appear impartial to their subjects. If they were to cry for one person’s sake, they would have to cry for every individual in the Empire, which is impossible. They can’t weep for someone they’ve never met, whose name they don’t know. That’s why the Abliars, each of whom could become the **Emperor**, can’t cry for anyone else’s sake.”

“Is that why,” Cfadiss replied perfunctorily. “**Her Majesty the Empress** can push us to our deaths with a point of her finger. If people start to think she’s favoring someone over everybody else, they’d be unhappy, to say the least.”

“Right. But us Sporr’s can see right through the facade. Abliars *do* cry from time to time. And **Her Highness** was sobbing like a wee girl.”

“That’s not what it looked like to me,” said Cfadiss.

“Don’t trouble yourself over it, **Chief of Staff**. It’s normal not to notice,” said Sporr tenderly. Then she low-key boasted: “Only, I could never have inherited the title of **Archduchess of Laitpanh** if I wasn’t able to see the tears of a young Abliar.”

“Commander, don’t tell me you’re putting our **soldiers** in harm’s way out of sympathy for her?” Cfadiss couldn’t help but ask.

“Sympathy? For an Abliar? *Me?*” Sporr’s eyebrows turned cross. “If I should ever hear such rubbish ever again, I’ll feed your tongue to my adorable birds.”

Crowded around the amphibious ship *Baursait* floating atop the seas of Lohbnahss II were a number of barges... or more accurately, rafts. And poorly constructed rafts at that. They were constructions made by amateurs without blueprints using whatever materials were on hand, such that they could just barely float. The rafts, which seemed prone to sink under the weight of their occupants, were being pulled by guardships, themselves crammed to the rails

with passengers.

Next to the *Baursaiith* came its fellow *Saith*-class ship, the *Dacsaith*, sliding across the waves.

“This is terrible,” muttered Lafier, who was on the *Dacaith*’s **bridge**.

“It sure is,” agreed *Gabautech*. “To think, to board **interstellar ships** flying across the heavens, they had to resort to barely functioning rafts. But thanks to that, the time it will take to get everyone aboard has been drastically reduced. We might even make it in time.”

Already, only one *Cetairh*-class supply ship, the *Natcetairh*, was still in the **territory-nation**. The others had rushed into **planar space** with full occupancy. The one remaining ship was slated to lift off soon, too. And once the *Baursaiith* itself reached orbit, there would be no other ship to transfer its passengers; it would dash for the **prison camp** as is. Needless to say, the same went for the *Dacsaith* and for the *Tlecsaith*, which were transferring the asylum seekers to the last *Cetairh*-class currently in orbit. The *Baursaiith* was to depart a step ahead, alongside the *Natcetairh*. The *Tlecsaith* and the *Dacsaith* would form a small corps with the assault ship *Basrogrh*, and be the last to flee this **territory**.

Lafier probably wouldn’t have time to return to her own ship, but she wasn’t particularly worried about that. While Sobash was of relatively low rank, he was a skilled hand on deck. He could competently command in her stead.

“We’re already full up,” lamented the *Baursaiith*’s loudspeaker. “Please disembark. We can’t take off with this many aboard.”

“That’s the first time I’ve ever seen the outer loudspeakers get used,” said *Gabautech*. Then he told the **Captain** of the *Dacsaith*: “Hey, this ship’s got it equipped too, right? We’ll definitely be needing it.”

“We’re all right on that front,” replied the Captain.

“I’ve got to say, I’m glad he remembered the outer loudspeakers exist,” he said, referring to the captain of the *Baursaiith*. “But at the end of the day, I’ve got to hand it to whoever designed this ship. Just what circumstances were they picturing when they came up with outer loudspeakers?”

“Circumstances like *these*, I would imagine.”

Due to the reduction in required time, the **Unit Commander** and the Captain were both hopeful. Yet Lafier was not unreservedly joyful. Jint hadn't returned yet.

"Can we call the **Citizen Representative**?" Lafier asked the **Communications Officer**.

"Yes, ma'am. One moment."

A moment later, a window-screen showing Tomasov appeared.

"This is your **Lady Agent** speaking. How is it going on the surface?" she asked.

"The fighting continues," he answered. As one might expect, he couldn't hide his sheer exhaustion. "Compared to the height of hostilities, the intensity has gone down, but there is still some sporadic combat. Also, it seems the inmates have also begun fighting amongst themselves, though we have yet to confirm those reports."

"Only males remain, I'm certain. Why don't you tell them their objective is lost? You can also tell them the port ought to be given back."

"That's a good idea. To be frank, I don't expect it will do much good, but I'll do as you say, and we'll see what happens."

"Unrelatedly, have you obtained any news regarding my Adjunct?"

"I'm afraid not. If something does come up, you'll be the first I inform."

"Please." *Why must I be asking such futile questions?* she admonished herself. She knew she'd be apprised the moment Jint's status or whereabouts came to light.

"Er..." Tomasov seemed uneasy. "If, heaven forbid, the worst were to happen to Your Excellency's Adjunct, would some kind of punishment be levied against us?"

"No. It wouldn't be your fault."

"Thank you very much," he replied, visibly relieved.

While she'd have liked to point out to him that there was no reason to thank her in this case, she refrained from prolonging the conversation. Tomasov was a

busy man.

When the window-screen disappeared, Lafier looked again at the screen displaying what was going on outside. The barges were trying to depart from the *Baursaith*, but way too slowly. It would take some time for the amphibious ship to be cleared for takeoff.

There was nothing for her to do. Lafier took an open chair. Of its own accord, Jint's face floated to mind. Before she realized it, she was staring fixedly at the door.

"You're not thinking of pulling something odd, are you, **Your Highness?**" said *Gabautech*.

"Something odd?"

"If Your Highness tries to leave the ship, I will have to stop you, even if it means getting a tad rough."

Now she understood what *Gabautech* was worried about. She returned his stare.

"Do not fret. I'm not as foolish as that. I don't even know where he is, anyway."

"I'm relieved to hear that," nodded the **Unit Commander**.

She kept her gaze off the door and looked directly in front. But in her heart, she spared no thought toward the enemy ships that would soon arrive, nor toward the congestion on the high seas. All she cared about was one single question: was Jint still alive?

Jint was still alive. But he could hardly be called "okay."

He was barely even twenty years old, yet this was the third time he'd been stranded in hostile territory. And this time was the worst. The first time was with the **former Febdash Baron**, and the second time he had Lafier by his side, but now he had no one. He looked for a bright side. The only one he could think of: at least this time, he didn't have to worry about Lafier.

I bet they're all pretty worried about me, though. Jint felt a bit guilty about

that. Then he smiled. *Boy is that the least of my worries.*

He was the only person in this room, the Office of the Chief Executive, or at least, the only living person. When he'd come to, he spotted five assemblages of guts amidst the vast pool of blood and fleshy bits, and one of those corpses was, of course, Maydeen.

What the hell happened?

Jint hadn't the foggiest clue. All he knew was the enemy had seemingly left him to rot.

He'd have liked to open up some means of escape and join back up with his allies, but that wasn't very realistic. He didn't even know if the **Star Forces** were still on this **landworld**. That said, he didn't think he was out for very long, so they probably were. There was the problem of being unarmed; he wasn't confident he'd survive walking such hostile territory. Of course, being armed wouldn't have changed the math much.

Jint placed a hand on the wall and stood up. His throat still hurt from when Anguson strangled him, but apart from a few scrapes, he wasn't wounded. He examined the outside through the window. Due to the black smoke blocking out the sky, he couldn't see very far. But at the very least, the building's immediate surroundings were quiet.

The floor wasn't the only surface strewn with various objects and fragments of humans. So too were the desk and chairs. Most of the objects amounted to useless trash, but Jint began scouring the place for anything that could prove handy.

Jint was surprised he was so emotionless in the face of these gruesome and gory bodies. But upon seeing one frozen face in particular, even he had to stop in his tracks.

Dohkfoo's visage looked so very peaceful, in death.

Jint really couldn't muster the urge to mourn the man who had so nearly become the planet's **Citizen Representative**. As for the other dead men, he didn't even know their names, let alone whose side they'd been on. But there was something else he had to be focusing on:

So Anguson must still be out there. A dark and sobering thought, to be sure. Of course, he might have already guessed. After all, had Dohkfoo's faction won out, they would have given back the **Abh noble** they'd only ever kidnapped accidentally, and without a moment's dallying. On the other hand, if Anguson's faction did win, why did they leave Jint alive? He could think of two possibilities. One, they thought him dead. Two, they didn't have the time to finish him off. Either way, were they to come back and see he was alive, there was no way they'd be happy about it. He shuddered at the idea, and went about rummaging at a quicker pace. What he most desired was his **wristgear**. It had been taken from him, but he didn't spot them take it out of the room. He wouldn't be shocked if it was still somewhere in this room.

While his efforts to find the wristgear were fruitless, he wasn't completely without loot. For one, he'd found stuff to eat, which he categorized into three groupings: 1) stuff he wasn't totally certain was edible 2) stuff he'd only find appetizing on the verge of starvation, and 3) stuff he'd make a small show of enjoying if he was served it by his host as a courtesy, but likely wouldn't try otherwise. He decided to take food in Categories 2 and 3 with him.

He also picked up a weapon off one of the stiff. Unfortunately, only powder guns were on the menu.

He was a **Budget Branch** starpilot, but he was still a starpilot, so he'd received firearms training. His firing instructor had once appraised his skill thusly: *"**Trainee Starpilot** Lynn, if you absolutely must shoot, first make sure there are no allies in the area. It doesn't matter if they're right behind you — knowing you, you might still shoot them."*

Jint then asked what he should do if there were allies around. He was told to give them his firearm and ask them to do the shooting before taking cover.

Well, I've never received training for powder guns, so my grades don't matter in this case, Jint consoled himself. He wasn't quite sure how to handle a powder gun. It did have a trigger, much like a regular **lightgun**; something was bound to happen if he pulled it. But he refrained from testing it. In the process of examining the gun's structure, he'd gotten the feeling that that something would be the shooter's finger getting blown off.

I'll only use this thing as a very, very last resort, he thought. Then he tucked it into his **pocket**.

Jint put his ear to the door, to hear whether there was any sound on the other side. But then he remembered how Maydeen bragged about how soundproof the room was. Apparently, a brass band could be performing in the hallway, and they'd have no way of knowing.

He hesitated to open it. Looking behind him and through the window, he witnessed a glowing object fly through the billowing black haze. It was a **Star Forces** amphibious ship.

If I'm not wrong, Lafier could very well be on that ship.

Suddenly, he was visited by the mental image of Lafier in front of him, her back to him. In his mind's eye, he saw the back of the **Royal Princess** as she, in her rage, stomped toward armed UH officers empty-handed.

It was so nostalgic now, that era. The time when they knew each other as the girl not shackled by some mission, and the boy who didn't even know what he was. While they couldn't possibly regress in age, they could, conceivably, go back to that dynamic. It would be exceedingly difficult, but not impossible.

But Step 1 of any tough-to-realize life goal was *not dying*.

Jint pushed the door forcefully open.

Chapter 9: *Borandnonn* (What Needs Defending)

A **conveyance ship** ejected itself from a **patrol ship** cruising across the **planar space**-side vicinity of the **Lohbnaahss Portal**. The conveyance ship passed through the portal and sent a report to **flagship** *Lachcaü* on standby in **3-space**.

“The enemy fleet has reached the 300 *cédlairh* point from the **Lohbnaahss Portal**. We believe that in approximately three hours, they will begin infiltrating this **territory-nation**,” the **Communications Officer** reported to the **Commander-in-Chief** dispassionately, here on the **Commander’s Bridge**.

“How are things on the **landworld** looking?” Sporr asked.

“According to **Unit Commander Gabautech**, they need another five hours for complete withdrawal to **planar space**,” replied Cfadiss.

“I see,” Sporr nodded. “I knew my ships would end up taking a lick or two from this.”

The one good thing going for them this battle was the fact that the supply ships (the **amphibious ship**, which could be called an enlarged version of a **traffic ship**, plus the supply ship they’d deployed to the planet) were fast enough to keep pace with a recon squadron, as they were smaller and lighter than typical supply ships.

“All ships, set sail!” she commanded.

Just as scheduled, eleven patrol ships joined the flagship’s sides. Twenty-one ships had passed through the **Lohbnaahss Portal** alongside the *Lachcaü*, making for a total of thirty-three.

Thirty-three ships. Those were all they had. Even just a single **recon sub-fleet** boasted more firepower than their combined forces. Since the ships belonged to various different corps, Sporr grouped thirty of the ships into five temporary squadrons, and took the other two under the direct command of her flagship.

“I never thought I’d have to fight like some *rüaboriac* (watchguard fleet) for the sake of some backwater **landworld**,” she griped.

“I totally agree,” nodded Cfadiss, all but pointing the finger in her direction.

The *Lachcaü* was at the head of the pack when it soared through the **Lohbnahts Portal** into **planar space**.

“Signal for assembly,” ordered Sporr, once the enemy had reached the 10 *cédlaish* point from the **Lohbnahts Portal**.

One by one, the patrol ships under her command nestled close to the *Lachcaü*. In order to save on fuel, they formed battle lineups three ships to a **space-time bubble**. By the time their preparations were complete, a mere 200 *cédlaish* separated them from the enemy fleet. The tension seizing the **Commander’s Bridge** was thick as glass, the kind of tension that only came right before combat. No matter the ship or the post, everyone felt it.

“They’re not running,” muttered Sporr.

“Yes. Because they’re the ones with the massive advantage,” said Cfadiss.

“The utter humiliation of it. To have to fight even though we know we’re on the back foot.”

The formation of this stopgap *Raicporiac Lobnasr* (Lohbnahts Defensive Fleet) was as follows: Sporr’s ship was front and center, with one **squadron** to each side, and three squadrons forming a rear line.

“The folks over on the enemy side seem cool under pressure,” said Sporr as she gazed into **planar space**. There was something barbed in her tone, though. A **recon fleet** was meant to trample roughshod over the opposition in grand fashion. Yet the enemy was approaching in their orderly ranks.

“Perhaps they’re just confused,” said Cfadiss. “And if they are, I feel their pain.”

The enemy had to be well aware what kind of star system Lohbnahts was, and it was no strategic base. Why were the Abh mustering such hopelessly meager forces to defend such a worthless **portal**?

“I’ve made up my mind,” said Sporr, lightly whipping the palm of her hand with her **command baton**. “**Chief of Staff**, send an **inter-bubble communication** to the enemy fleet.”

“What do we tell them?”

“That this battle is meaningless for both parties. Obviously, there’s no need to explain why it’s pointless for us. But isn’t it a bit absurd for the UH people to be taking losses just to reach **3-space** a few hours sooner? But above all else, the enemy must think the **Star Forces** commander — namely, me — is an idiot, given they don’t know our extenuating circumstances. And I can’t stand the thought.”

“Understood.” Cfadiss pretended not to hear the latter half of that explanation (even though she rather thoroughly emphasized it), and thereby regained his footing. “It’s certainly true that if the enemy fleet remains on alert for a while, then there’s no point in commencing battle from our side.”

“The message should read... hmm... how about: ‘This is the **Commander-in-Chief of Hunter Fleet 1, Commodore** Sporr. Our objective lies in securing the **Lohbnahss Portal** for a brief period. Resistance is futile, so stay here and behave until we make our retreat.’”

“I think it could use a little revising, ma’am,” Cfadiss offered nervously.

“Is that right?” Sporr seemed displeased, but: “Fine, I leave it to you, then, **Chief of Staff**. There’s no time, so hurry.”

“Roger that.” He saluted, and strode over to the **Communications Officer**. He’d completed the text of the message in the time it took him to make three steps. “You must have overheard about the **inter-bubble communication**. Here’s the text of the message: ‘This is **Hunter Fleet 1** of the **Imperial Star Forces**. We do not wish to exchange fire. We promise we will leave this sector in six hours’ time. We hope you will refrain from advancing further.’ Got it?”

“Understood.”

And so the **inter-bubble communication** was sent. Moments later—

“The enemy fleet has ceased moving,” said the **Communications Officer** happily, but their voice turned gloomy quickly. “A message from the enemy fleet’s Communications Officer: ‘This is the Sarrye Area Fleet of the United Humankind Peacekeepers. We will grant you a one hour grace period, after which you are to retreat at once.’”

“If I could leave at once, we wouldn’t have taken positions to begin with. Are you telling me our opponents can’t even figure that out for themselves?” Sporr bit the joint of her pinky. “Tell them that one hour isn’t enough. Tell them we request a twenty-four hour grace period.”

“Twenty-four hours?” Cfadiss looked back to face her, surprised. “I requested a six hour window earlier.”

“They said it would take them five hours to relocate at the fastest. Realistically, we want twelve hours.”

“But if we ask for twenty-four hours now...”

“**Chief of Staff**, tell me, have you never engaged in trade?”

“Correct. I’ve been in the **Star Forces** ever since coming of age.”

“Then you might not know this, but the galaxy isn’t held aloft entirely by *fixed prices*. I could never be so *gauche* as to rob the enemy of the joys of haggling.”

“Uh-huh...” Left with no other choice, Cfadiss composed the message and ordered it transmitted.

One of the many difficulties facing **inter-bubble communications** was how long it took for back-and-forth exchanges to proceed. Fretful minute after fretful minute passed as they waited for the reply back.

“It’s their reply,” said the Communications Officer. “Let’s see... ‘Earlier, you requested six hours. Now you request twenty-four hours. We are totally dumbfounded.’ End of message.”

“The previous message was some sort of error. Ask them for twenty-four hours once again,” pressed Sporr, with a beguiling little smile. “With all due respect, the enemy commander is an amateur. The more they make unnecessary remarks, the longer the negotiations last.”

“They might not be such sticklers regarding the norms of trade,” warned Cfadiss. “Especially the norms of trade in our society.”

“Then we just fight them,” she said resolutely.

“We’ve received another message: ‘We would like an explanation as to why you multiplied the grace period you are asking for by four.’”

“Tell them we’ll explain why only after negotiations are complete.”

“Message received: ‘We would like an explanation as to why you are keeping your reasons so secret.’”

“That is also a secret.”

“Message received: ‘It is difficult to regard you as negotiating in good faith.’”

“Ask them whether we should take that as a notification that negotiations are off,” said Sporr, who was clearly enjoying this from the bottom of her heart. She didn’t even get this lively in the midst of one of her beloved trample-blitzes.

“Aren’t you coming off a little strong?” worried Cfadiss. “If the enemy responds with a yes, then combat commences then and there.”

“The enemy fleet hasn’t made a move. They’re attached to the idea of avoiding battle.”

“But I think we should hedge our bets, just in case...”

“It’s a thing of sadness when a business deal fails to coalesce. But it’s only by overcoming that sadness that people can attain greatness as traders. I think this will serve as good experience for you.”

“I plan to serve the **Star Forces** for the rest of my days!”

“Then you do yourself a disservice, **Chief of Staff**. You’re as good as throwing away half of the fun in life. Oh well. It’s your life, and I don’t mean to tell you how to live it. In any case, I’m the one making the deal here. Ask them the question, and ask them now.”

“Roger.”

This time around, it took an especially long time for the reply to reach them.

“Message received: ‘We acknowledge it is too soon to draw a conclusion. We also understand that you have requested twenty-four hours’ time. However, we still ask that you retreat within one hour’s time.’”

“The enemy commander is a good egg,” Sporr chuckled. “I don’t know who they are or where they’re from, but they pass muster as my playmate.”

From the time they sent the first **inter-bubble communication**, thirty minutes

had already passed.

“How should we reply?” asked Cfadiss.

“Explain to them the circumstances of why we’re stuck here. Take your time. Make it a real missive. I don’t mind if you embellish it a little, either.”

“Understood, ma’am.” Cfadiss set himself to the task of drafting the missive, but he found himself racking his brain from the outset.

“What is it?” asked Sporr.

“I’m just puzzling over where to begin.”

“How about beginning from the genesis of the universe?” suggested Sporr.

“I’m afraid that would *definitely* be taken as just buying time.”

“You really are a humorless sort through and through, aren’t you, **Chief of Staff**,” said Sporr, putting a hand to her forehead. “Fine. Start the story from when we arrived at the **Lohbnaahss Countdom**.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Even starting the story from such a recent point, it would take some time to write out a neat and involved explanation. Cfadiss addressed the **Communications Officer**: “For the time being, tell them: ‘We cannot possibly retreat within an hour’s time. We will explain why shortly.’”

The reason **inter-bubble communication** took so long was because the amount of information transferred per unit time was excruciatingly tiny. And though EM waves and **space-time particles** were different, they were forced to transmit information via various combinations of small and long dash marks, much like the telegrams of the dawn of the age of science and technology. Moreover, if the gap between the mark was too short, they’d link up into one long indistinguishable mark, so they had to have a time gap of five seconds between each dash. In other words, even semaphore of old was more efficient than this.

But at the moment, Cfadiss thanked this method for being so slow. It would easily take two hours for the whole body of the explanation to make it to them, and that was two hours of time in the bag. As soon as the missive was finished, it was handed to the Communications Officer and sent off.

Yet a mere half hour after the beginning of the explanation, the enemy fleet interrupted with a response.

“We do not need an explanation as to your situation. We have circumstances of our own to deal with. Those circumstances do not concern you. If you are still here in two hours’ time, we will boldly advance with intent to rout all who would block our path.”

“Well if that isn’t a sincere reply. Their commander must be a dyed-in-the-wool **soldier**. Just like you, **Chief of Staff**,” she said, with an air of disenchantment. “I suppose any further negotiations would be pointless.”

“Might it be supply troubles?”

“Probably. If they stick around here for more time than they ought, they’ll disperse into **space-time particles** without ever fighting.”

It took vast amounts of energy to maintain a **space-time bubble**. No matter whether the bubble was staying in place or advancing at full speed, **planar space** sucked out the same amount of energy at any given point in time. If all of the energy was expended, the ships and people once wrapped in a cocoon of **space-time particles** would be exposed to the altogether alien physical laws of a parallel dimension, and disintegrate on a subatomic level.

“On the other hand, if they’re talking of routing us, then they have enough stocked up to fight. Likely more than enough. We wouldn’t be able to chip away at their fuel reserves by prolonged negotiation, I reckon,” opined Cfadiss.

“That’s enough. No more talk of prolonged negotiation,” said Sporr with a hateful tone. “When it comes to the art of the deal, you need to know when to call it quits.”

“How do we reply, ma’am?” asked the **Communications Officer**.

“Hmm. Oh, I know: ‘Your intentions have come in loud and clear. We are currently working to shift out of the way within two hours’ time, but we regret to inform you that it will be quite difficult. At present, we are freshening each other up for the work to come.’ How does that sound?”

Surprised by the reasonableness of the message, so uncharacteristic of Sporr, Cfadiss nodded his approval to the Communications Officer.

“We need to psych ourselves up, **Chief of Staff**.” She played with the **command baton** over her elegantly crossed legs. “The ladies and gentlemen of the enemy will be coming at us like bats out of hell. Even if they don’t, we still need to cope through an unfavorable scenario. What a drag.”

“I’d like to avoid that if at all possible.”

“I would, too. Send a conveyance ship. Let’s relay our back-and-forth up until now to *Fiac Cfarér*,” said Sporr. “Though of course, they must be working their hardest to round up bodies as we speak,” she added under her breath.

Needless to say, the boarding process was proceeding with all due diligence. Whenever a raft would reach the **amphibious ship** *Dacsaith*, it would be left there without making a return trip. There was no longer any need to bring them back to shore. As a result, the *Dacsaith* was surrounded by a sort of makeshift terrain composed of rafts, floating unsteadily on the waves, and upon which lines of people awaited boarding. Those people weren’t inmates — the women of the West had all already entered **planar space**. The only ones left on the surface were the armed guards, exhaustion written all over their faces. Some were injured, and receiving medical attention even atop the unstable footing of the rafts.

Meanwhile, the traffic ship deployed by Hunter Fleet 1 had alighted and was picking up personnel. The seating capacity of the kind of traffic ship that could be stowed inside of a larger warship was thirty at most, so in terms of numbers the staff wasn’t of much help, but the fact that they could get other asylum seekers to orbit without having them make it to shore first certainly made Tomasov’s task a whole lot easier.

At last, seacraft arrived without pulling any more rafts. Once their crews embarked on the *Dacsaith*, the newly unmanned ships were quietly scuttled out to sea. No sadness sparkled within the eyes of their former passengers. Instead, they were clearly relieved to be freed from their strenuous toil.

“The last traffic ship has taken the air,” reported the *Üass Drocér* (Communications Chief) of the *Dacsaith*.

“Is that so?” Lafier nodded. She refrained from the pointless act of asking

whether Jint was aboard it.

“Fifteen minutes remain until the enemy fleet begins advancing,” stated the **Senior Staff Officer** of the **Transport Unit**.

“Fifteen minutes, you say...” groaned **Unit Commander Gabautech**. “Now it’s just a matter of how much time **Commodore** Sporr can buy us.”

Lafier nodded again, but she didn’t say anything. She was tired of chatting.

“An airship is requesting deck-landing,” said the Communications Chief.

“Is that airship the **landworld administration’s**?” The Unit Commander turned to the **Captain**. “Are they technologically advanced enough?”

“So it would seem. At least, it can land on deck. It can’t do resupplying or outfitting, of course.”

“Then there’s no issue here.”

The airship landed on the **take-off deck**, and down came about ten armed guards. At the head of the contingent walked Tomasov, the man who was determined to end his extremely short stint as **Landworld Citizen Representative**. As for the airship itself, they had no choice but to discard it, which the crew set about doing. As they busied themselves readying it for disposal, Tomasov entered the **bridge**.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person, Your Highness Lady Agent.” He saluted.

Lafier returned the courtesy.

“Erm... please, take this...” Tomasov proffered something.

Lafier’s eyes reeled wide. There was no room for doubt. In Tomasov’s hands lay Jint’s **wristgear**.

“What are you trying to say?” Before she realized it, she was grilling him.

“Well, you see, at some point the uprising became much more disorganized, and even exhibited signs of infighting, so we thought we might still be able to rescue His Excellency your Adjunct if we could just pinpoint his location. As such, we asked the manor for their help, and they scanned the planet’s surface

and calculated his current position.”

“I had no idea...” Their **Captain**, namely herself, hadn’t been there, so Sobash, who was still aboard the *Basrogrh*, must have handled Tomasov’s request. It was strange, however, that they hadn’t apprised Lafier at all. Perhaps Ecryua had done it by herself for some reason. No matter: it wouldn’t serve her to pry now, of all times.

“Actually, they didn’t pinpoint his position so much as the position of this, err... what’s this thing called again? In any case, they found this mobile computer...”

“And?” said Lafier, her body seizing up in anticipation of the worst. “What has become of the man?”

“We don’t know. All we found was the mobile computer. It had been on the person of one of the inmates. Said inmate apparently believed it to be a simple watch, and showed no indication of knowing its true worth. As for His Excellency himself...”

Her eyes, which were darker than dark and yet radiated with great luster, bade Tomasov continue.

“We couldn’t find the time to locate his exact position.”

“I see...” Lafier tried to bottle up her disappointment so no one would notice. “I commend and thank you.”

“I never thought I would hear those words in reply, ma’am,” Tomasov saluted again, moved. “I’m truly sorry I don’t have any welcome news for Your Highness. Now then, if I may take my leave.”

As she watched Tomasov walk away and out of the **bridge**, Lafier clasped the **wristgear** to her breast.

“All have boarded,” said **Unit Commander Gabaute** quietly.

“Then we shall take off immediately,” ordered Lafier.

Slowly, the amphibious ship *Dacsaith* began to move, thereby throwing off the rafts that had encircled it over the water. Its huge frame accelerated in the blink of an eye, rushing up into the blue yonder even as the brine sprayed.

“It’s time,” Cfadiss whispered to his **Commander-in-Chief**.

“The enemy fleet has begun to advance,” reported the **Communications Officer** nary a moment later.

“I love it when people are hard and fast with the time,” said Sporr, pointing at the officer with her **command baton**. “I command all of my ships to prepare for **mine battle**. Now, punch the **signal of challenge**, if you please.”

“We’re engaging?” asked Cfadiss.

“Of course, silly,” she responded casually. “We still have ships of ours stuck in the **Countdom of Lohbnahss**.”

“But we bought so much time through the negotiations. Haven’t we already fulfilled our mission?”

“You could interpret it that way,” she said, cocking her head and placing her **baton** on one cheek. “But, interpretation overruled, **Chief of Staff**.”

“Understood.” If his commander had decided to engage, then there was nothing left to say. Cfadiss screwed up his resolve.

The enemy fleet was splitting into two, each half with varying speeds. There were the ships advancing ahead of the rest, and the ships left in their wake.

“Can I assume the ships at their rear are there for resupplying?” asked Sporr.

“If they are, then they’re being pretty obvious about it,” replied Cfadiss.

“Yes, exactly. That’s what’s got my interest piqued.” On that note, Sporr went silent and stared at the **map of planar space**. The gears were working, underneath that marvelously artistic hairdo.

Cfadiss joined her in scanning the map. If they let a single solitary ship enter the **portal**, it would spell defeat. The standard tactic would be to extend the flanks and intercept, but the defensive battle formation that would allow them to do so was just too full of holes. It would get blown through without a sweat.

If, however, they could aim all of their attacks at the supply corps, the enemy would no longer be able to afford to focus on entering through the **Lohbnahss**

Portal, and would instead come right at them, guns blazing.

What they needed was to make this a rough-and-tumble melee as far from the **Lohbnaahss Portal** as they could manage. That was what they could hope for. They'd fulfill their objective with the fewest casualties on their end.

"The enemy vanguard has entered within range of the **mobile space-time mines**."

But Sporr remained silent.

Do we try skirting around? pondered Cfadiss. They could circle around their left or their right and attack the troops at the rear... But Cfadiss soon reached a conclusion: *No, that won't do*. After all, the enemy vanguard would just wedge themselves between in response, and the Abh forces hadn't the maneuverability to evade that. And while the vanguard was thwarting them, the rear troops would swiftly make their way through the **portal**. If that happened, both sides would lose any reason to keep fighting, and the small ships still within the **countdom** would be easy pickings for the enemy.

"They're not firing at us..." Sporr muttered to herself.

"The enemy probably can't afford to waste their **mines**."

They'd be able to resupply fuel and food in any old star system on the map, but the same didn't hold true for weapons.

"I've made up my mind."

"You have?"

"Squadrons 4 and 5 are to stay in their current positions and intercept the enemy there. They may not let a single ship pass through the **portal**. The rest will join me in breaking past the enemy vanguard to attack the rear troops."

"Please, hold on!" shouted Cfadiss, horrified. "We're already at a disadvantage! If we split out forces even more, it'll be suicide! If we can't break past them, we'll get surrounded and wiped out in one fell swoop!"

"Let me tell you something, **Chief of Staff** — Artists from twenty-eight **territory-nations** are currently working together to construct the coffin of the **Archduchess of Laitpanh**. Once the coffin is complete, we plan to display it in a

grand and magnificent feast in the star-fief. That's our family tradition."

That's a questionable tradition, he thought, but that was the least of his worries at the moment.

"What does your coffin have to do with this, Commander!?"

"I can hold the feast in about twelve years. I will be inviting you, too."

"It's an honor, ma'am, and I thank you, but I can't make plans twelve years in advance. Right now, I think we should focus on surviving—"

"*Caü*-class patrol ships are good ships. But at the end of the day, they're still mass-produced products — not nearly beautiful enough to be my coffin. They're positively sorry-looking. So don't worry; we won't get wiped out. I won't let that happen. I'm confident we'll succeed. All ships, make single-ship **bubbles**, and assume Cluster Formation 8!"

"Please, at least have them make half-**squadron** bubbles!" Cfadiss all but shrieked.

A half-squadron was three ships, and a single **space-time bubble** holding three ships was like an iron wall, capable of brushing aside most attacks. Naturally, they weren't impregnable, but even if one ship within the bubble fell to pieces, they could still rescue its former passengers. In this situation, fighting in half-squadron bubbles was, by Cfadiss's thinking, the minimum requirement if they wanted more ships than not surviving this.

"Overruled, **Chief of Staff**. There's no time to explain. Just do as I say."

"Yes, ma'am," Cfadiss nodded reluctantly. *I've followed her orders up until now, and it's always been the right choice*, he consoled himself. Yet at the same time, all the disagreeable things that resulted from following her orders came flooding to mind.

*Okay, sure, that was less than pleasant, but nobody died. And actually, when it comes to war tactics, **Commodore** Sporr has always been an outstanding commander, hasn't she?*

And yet... This scenario was a first for her. Commanding in such a disadvantageous position was a first for her. His misgivings refused to abate.

You know what? It's fine, Cfadiss Üémh Ésepir Séspic. All humans will one day die. And if I die in battle on this day, then I won't have to worry about how to turn down the invitation to the coffin feast. Thus did he force himself to accept.

Twenty-one patrol ships assumed a tight wedge formation. They would attempt to smash through the overwhelming enemy onslaught. In other words, they were getting up close and personal.

“Only the ships at the very front, unleash your mines,” ordered Sporr. “Target the lead ships.”

The eleven ships that made up the edge of the wedge fired their **mines** simultaneously. After traveling a negligible distance, they promptly **fused** with the space-time of the enemy ships. Some of the **bubbles** popped like fleeting dreams.

Despite that, the enemy did not fire back. They probably didn't think **mines** were necessary against such a feeble resistance.

The tip of the wedge formation was near to making contact with the sturdy wall that was the enemy, when the enemy rear made their move — they were in the process of splitting into two (left and right) contingents.

“Release the conveyance ships,” said Sporr. “Have 4 and 5 shoot the right rear flank. We will assume half-squadron bubbles. Hurry.”

The twenty-one **bubbles** combined into seven.

“Change course. The target is the left rear flank. Cut across the enemy ships now!”

Cfadiss was now beyond surprise. Among the other orders she'd laid down during this battle, this fell under the heading of valid and proper.

The second they changed course, the nearby enemy corps came attacking like a raging avalanche.

“Launch mines in all directions!” As per her command, the ten ships that hadn't fired their **mines** earlier shot them now. Yet the enemy showed no sign of flinching. They slipped into the post maintained by the trio of three patrol ships.

“The *Lymbiruch* has taken heavy damage! It has lost any and all ability to engage; they request permission to abandon ship.”

“Granted,” Sporr nodded, her crimson eyes pointed at Cfadiss. “**Chief of Staff**, you do know your job, I trust.”

“Yes,” he said, blinking. He didn’t know about other **command centers**, but in this one, the tasks on the plate of the Chief of Staff were without exception mentally taxing.

“If I must guess... we are to reorganize the ships’ formations and **bubbles** on the fly, such that they are always half-squadron bubbles.”

“Exactly. Now get to it, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The *Raumcaü* has exploded!” While they were briefly exchanging words, more bad news.

Cfadiss devoted himself to his mission without delay. He was grateful to have something to focus on, but soon he realized what a rocky task it was. They were surrounded on all sides, and some enemy ships were even inside allied **bubbles**. If, in the process of making three-ship bubbles, some ships ended up in single-ship bubbles, they’d get ganged up on. On the other hand, if too many ships gathered inside a single **bubble**, it would exceed the mass limit allowed by **planar space**, leading to uncontrolled **space-time splitting**.

“The **bridge** of the *Slyzbiruch* has been destroyed, and they’ve lost space-time bubble generation capabilities. All **starpilots**, including the commander, likely dead. Ah, it exploded!”

“The *Bhzaitcaü* has lost propulsion capabilities.”

“The only intact ship of Squadron 2 Platoon 1 is the *Sumbiruch*. They are urgently seeking to join another corps.”

One after the other, they were pelted by tragic news. Meanwhile, a dense, hot clump of gas shook the **flagship** *Lachcaü*. Something must have exploded nearby.

Please be an enemy ship, Cfadiss hoped.

“It’s the *Clelucaü*!”

Upon hearing the name, Cfadiss cast his eyes down. One of the two ships under the flagship’s direct command, gone.

“Have the *Sumbiruch* join the command center **bubble**,” ordered Cfadiss.

As yet, they had only reached the halfway point. The enemy was building an ever-thicker stronghold at the front, while groups of **bubbles** thought to be supply ship corps were moving at high speed toward the **Lohbnaahss Portal**, with the long-stretching lines of the rear units as proof. They were stampeding toward the **portal** in order of arrival, starting with the head of the line.

“Oh no, the *Sumbiruch* has exploded!”

“Have the ships on Lohbnaahss still not escaped?” screamed Cfadiss, succumbing to sheer frustration.

“Don’t raise a fuss on my **bridge, Chief of Staff**,” chided Sporr. “That’s what everyone is waiting for, so that news will be the first to come.”

“Right, of course.” Cfadiss bit his lip.

“The enemy **bubbles** have begun disintegrating!”

At least one or two enemy ships were coming to the end of their ropes energy-wise, their **space-time bubbles** dissipating as the laws of nature demanded. Cfadiss hoped the other enemy **bubbles** would follow suit in short order, but the UH command center was not so incompetent. They must have been paying attention to which ships were low on fuel. There was no string of dissipating **bubbles** to be seen. The **bubbles** that did fade away must have had unfortunate circumstances of their own.

While Cfadiss was embracing convenient pipe dreams, the enemy continued their merciless assault. The **Commander’s Bridge** rumbled; it was finally the *Lachcaü*’s turn to take some hits.

“For a ship with the **golden crow** flag to take damage... what humiliation...” said Sporr, chagrined to her core.

Cfadiss looked at the **map of planar space**. The detached contingent was doing its job admirably. The enemy right rear flank must not have much of any

presence of defense ships to speak of. A small number of patrol ships were chasing down the **bubble** flock. However, things looked bleak indeed for the main contingent. Only six ships remained, and not one of them was undamaged. If they were to surrender here and now, it would already break records for crushing defeats.

“Now’s the time,” murmured Sporr. “Pressing our luck any more really would be suicide. We’re retreating!”

Retreating? But how? Cfadiss despaired as he kept his eyes on the **map**. The other contingent was doing fine, but they had found themselves besieged closely. No matter what direction they fled, they’d have to open a path first, and each of the ship’s battle capabilities had tanked massively to boot.

“It’s okay, **Chief of Staff**. This whole fight is futile. At least, it is to us, since we weren’t able to buy enough time for supply ships on Lohbnahss to escape.” Sporr frowned ruefully. “But the moment we begin retreating, it will clearly be a pointless fight in the enemy’s eyes, too. They won’t give chase, not unless they’re idiots, and I don’t think they are.”

“I suppose you’re right,” he said, though he was a little skeptical.

“Change course! We’re headed toward the center of the **Milky Way Portal-Belts!**” she ordered. “Retreat is fair play.”

“How do we tell the detached contingent?”

“Don’t bother. They’ll come following,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Roger that.”

The main contingent (if a mere two **bubbles** could be called that) shifted direction. Cfadiss fixed his eyes on the **map**, his dread redoubled. The concentration of enemy ships right in front of them was growing thicker.

“The enemy *are* idiots!” Cfadiss yelled despite himself.

“Maybe they resent us,” said Sporr, cocking her head in puzzlement. “Well, just break through!”

“The *Doübiruch* has exploded!” The **Communications Officer** reported the death of one of their six precious remnants.

“Dammit, did I, of all people, choose the wrong time to call it quits?” Sporr bit the joint of her pinky.

“Enemy ships are entering the **Lohbnaahss Portal**.”

But Cfadiss couldn't bring himself to care about that anymore.

“The detached contingent is headed towards us.”

“Maybe they're aiming to open up a path for us,” said Cfadiss.

“So it seems.” Sporr clasped her fingers together and hung her head.

Could it be? Is she expressing gratitude? Cfadiss wondered.

The **Lohbnaahss Portal** was roiling, with countless ripples appearing over its phosphorescent surface. At the center of the ripples, a spaceship's nose.

“Enemy fleet is entering **3-space**!”

“Have we run out of time?” **Unit Commander Gabautech** bit his lip.

Lafier grasped her **command baton** with both hands and glared at the screen. Until they passed through that **portal**, she was in command.

“What do we do?” asked the **Unit Commander**.

“What other choice do we have, apart from proceeding? All ships, generate **space-time bubbles**!”

Every one of the ships (“every one” being two amphibious ships and one **assault ship**) did as ordered, activating their **space-time bubble generators**. They were already cruising at the maximum speed of an amphibious ship. The *Basrogrh* was flying alongside them, at speeds relatively slow for an assault ship. The three Abh vessels and the vanguard of the enemy fleet were rapidly drawing closer.

“They won't attack, will they?” **Unit Commander Gabautech's** voice was as parched as a desert from the stress.

The moment anyone crossed through a **portal**, there was no telling where they'd appear. If they were crossing into **3-space**, they would appear at some point on the surface of the gaseous orb, but they couldn't know in advance

where that would be. Consequently, a ship usually had to exercise caution when passing through a **portal**, especially when there were enemies on the other side. Otherwise, their formations and chain of command would turn anarchic, leaving open a window for their enemies to crush them while they were left reeling without shepherds.

Yet from what they could see, the enemy fleet had not prepared very meticulously for the crossing. This could be a stroke of good luck. They had no orders for how to deal with the enemy before their eyes.

At last, the sphere's faintly shining skin was full of ships. There was nothing but enemy ships all around it. Perfect. Lafier knew they were safe then. If the enemy attacked now, they'd not be able to avoid friendly fire.

"Passing through the **Lohbnaahss Portal!**"

At that moment, elation washed over the bridge.

"Quiet!" said the **Unit Commander**, bidding the command center personnel not to let their guards down. "This is where things get dicey."

The enemy ships that had passed through the **portal** had lost their bearing temporarily, yes, but chances were high that over on the **planar space** side, their command line remained rigorous.

"I agree," said Lafier, offering her **command baton**. A **lady** separated from her **territory-nation** was powerless. At the moment, she was a mere **Deca-Commander**.

"Now then, I hope you don't mind if I take command," said *Gabautech*, as respectful as ever, as he took the **baton** in hand.

The **Royal Princess**, divested of her **baton**, looked at the **planar space map** as a humble passenger. The **Lohbnaahss Portal** looked like a gently distorted spiral on the **planar space** side, with a proverbial galaxy of flocks of **space-time bubbles** surrounding it in a whirl. They were almost all — no, they were all enemy ships, each and every one.

"Single-ship **bubbles**, at maximum battle speed. Break free from the bowels of the enemy, and do not let them **fuse** with our space-times!" Commander *Gabautech* ordered hoarsely. "Where are the remaining three ships?"

“We can’t tell yet,” said the **Communications Officer**. “Should we signal to assemble?”

“It’s too early for that. It’d have no effect,” he said, shaking his head. “In fact, it’d only serve to attract the enemy’s attention.”

The enemy **bubbles** made no sign of coming to attack them. Not yet, anyway.

He never returned, in the end, thought *Aicryac Üémh Tlyzr Naurh*, lost in her reverie. **Quartermaster Rearguard Starpilot** Lynn was the first Lander she’d ever had a conversation with. The Ecryua clan had been a poor soldier clan for generations (for whatever reason, she’d never heard of a single ancestor of theirs who had succeeded in trade). Without any **servant vassals**, and with people without *froch* spatio-sensory organs unable to attend the **starpilot academy** that she did...

...In any case, she didn’t like cats. That was because cats aged. They didn’t change that much in appearance, but before she knew it, they would become reluctant to play with her. She’d downplay it — the cat just wasn’t in the mood. But the number of times they would play together would decrease over time. And then, one day, even if the cat came to her to play, she’d realize: *this cat is old*.

Back before she’d enrolled in the **academy**, she’d once discovered a cat who seldom felt like playing with her deceased by her bedside. There were many cats in her household, but that was the only one she’d regarded as hers. While stroking its cold fur, she resolved never to raise a cat again.

The way the Abh grew old was much different. Even as the end of one’s lifespan approached, the only thing that would change was that they’d sleep for longer at night.

Ecryua had once bidden her great-great-great-grandfather farewell. He’d still looked young, but his waking hours grew shorter and shorter as sleep overtook his life. When he was awake, he was as active as ever. In the Ecryua clan, it was a matter of etiquette paid toward the dying to spend some time playing with them. Her great-great-great-grandfather liked *bairhoth* (microgravity games). They were easy to learn but hard to master, and they were traditional sport

among the Abh. His opponents were children, his descendants, and Ecryua herself was one of them. She'd been fifteen at the time. As children, their experience levels paled in comparison, and their physical strength was still inferior to his. Some of the male children picked up wins against him here and there, but she couldn't rack a single victory in her corner until the very end.

Eventually, his waking hours grew short indeed. He would sleep for days at a time, only to awaken for a handful of hours before the cycle repeated itself. By that time, the adults had gathered to hold a feast for him, but he himself seemed to prefer playing *bairhoth* with the kids. When her great-great-great-grandfather passed away, she and the other kids who'd played against him dedicated a *bairh* (sports ball) to his bedroom.

For a large family like the Ecryua clan, death was a relatively common event. But that was the first time the girl named *Naurh* had witnessed the death of someone she held dear to her heart, which became seized with grief. She could remember wiping her tears against his cheeks like it was yesterday.

In what way did a Lander age? Like a cat, or like an Abh?

And when she knew for sure she'd never be able to watch the first Lander that ever caught her interest age, would she feel the same way she felt when her great-great-great-grandfather died?

“**Rearguard** Ecryua,” said Sobash, who was sitting in the Captain's Seat. “What is the situation with the enemy?”

At the moment, only three people were aboard the *Basrogrh's* bridge, Sobash, **Inspector Supervisor** Samson, and Ecryua. With the **control gauntlet** equipped, Sobash was in charge of maneuvering the ship in **3-space**, in anticipation of needing to **fuse space-times** with the enemy. The **Deputy Starpilot**, Ecryua, was single-handedly undertaking bubble steering, communications, and information.

Ecryua glanced at the **planar space map**. “Everything around us is the enemy.” That being said, there were gaps between enemy ships all over. They were probably spaces created after they'd formed units. Ecryua thrust the *Basrogrh's* **space-time bubble** through one of the gaps.

A **space-time bubble's** speed was inversely proportional to the square root of

its mass. As such, lightweight assault ship bubbles boasted high mobility. They wouldn't be **fusing** with enemy bubbles unless they wished to. It was a different story for **mines**, however. Assault ships were weak to **mobile space-time mines**, which were really just unmanned ships whose only purpose was to destroy the enemy target. Fortunately, the enemy didn't seem to be coming at them with any mines. It looked as though they would survive.

However, the situation for the supply and amphibious ships, which were sluggish from the assault ship's perspective, was not as optimistic. While there were no signs of battle taking place as displayed by the **planar space map**, with the gap in might this overwhelming, they could be cleaned up relatively quietly.

...In what way did land peoples age? Could she hope to be taken care of on her deathbed?

Which died more blissfully, her great-great-great grandfather, or the cat?

Were the people who died in this sector happy?

Would Ecryua join them in death?

Unconsciously, she had been staring at the empty Clerk's Seat.

Was he alive or dead? If he was dead, there was no way he'd died happily.

She wanted to ask him: *What does it feel like to you Landers, to age?* But he was still too young to give her a precise answer. Of course, **Rearguard** Lynn wasn't just among the first Landers she'd met (Samson was another) — he was the first Lander *her age* she'd met as well.

When she snapped to, she realized the *Basrogrh's* **space-time bubble** was about to ram into an enemy bubble flock. Ecryua veered away and corrected course. Then, an **inter-bubble communication** came through.

"Interim **Captain**," she said. "We've received a signal to assemble from the *Lachcaü*."

"Understood. Let's join up with **Commodore** Sporr for the time being," said Sobash. He seemed relieved. "Does this mean **Fleet 1** is doing okay?"

Ecryua looked to the **planar space map**. The bubbles thought to belong to Fleet 1 numbered all of two in total.

“I think the answer is no,” muttered Ecryua.

“Is this the end of Fleet 1...?” groaned **Unit Commander Gabautech**.

Lafier, too, was looking at the footage of the outside with disbelief.

Ugly fissures ran down the exterior of the Hunter Fleet 1 flagship, the *Lachcaü*. The **eight-headed dragon** crest was cracked into two. According to what they were told, twenty-six out of the thirty-three patrol ships were completely destroyed.

This is a giant blow, thought Lafier. She'd steeled her heart for the eventuality, but it still hurt to see. So many **soldiers** had died. And while Lafier didn't want to believe their deaths could have been in vain, the **Royal Princess** couldn't be sure. She supposed her grandmother, the **Empress**, had to think such thoughts every single day. She wondered whether she could endure the same...

She'd never wished fervently to be **Empress**. Nevertheless, she'd been taught that as long as she was an Abliar, she had to aim for the **emperorship**, so she hadn't doubted she could handle the track to the throne. She'd even thought she might become **Empress** after the results she won as a **starpilot** earned her renown.

Am I not actually cut out to be a starpilot? she thought, doubting herself for the first time.

Her father had, at every opportunity, claimed “I'm not suited to be a soldier.” Perhaps it was because he felt he couldn't bear the weight of the blood coursing through his veins.

She wanted a nice long chat with her father. Come to think of it, their last long conversation had taken place quite a while ago. She hadn't met him in person since she'd become an **assault ship captain**.

I'm growing weaker in spirit, she derided herself.

“We now know why we weren't attacked,” reported the **Communications Chief**. “We surmise that what we passed through was an enemy supply corps. They must not have had much firepower.”

“Not that we’re any different in that regard,” said *Gabautec*, smiling with relief. “If we’d gone at it head-on, we’d have lost, supply corps or no. Also, from outside the **bubble**, we must have come across as a patrol ship, too.”

“We were incredibly lucky.”

“There’s a very good chance that by the same token, the *Luisaith* is intact, too.”

“True.”

Sure enough, before long, the *Luisaith*, which they’d not known the whereabouts of, was detected, alive and well.

“Concluding **information linkage**,” said the **Communications Chief**.

“Okay. Now **split space-times**. We’re leaving this horrid sector right now,” said *Gabautec*. He probably hadn’t meant anything by it, but Lafier felt a tad attacked.

He has every right to criticize me, she thought. I’m more worried about one life I don’t even know is gone than thousands of lives I know are lost...

“Is something the matter?” asked the **Unit Commander**.

“It’s nothing,” she said, shaking her head.

Chapter 10: *Sorh Blaignach Gyne Üaca* (When the Hunters Lay Down Their Bows)

Twenty-three days had passed since the **Lady** of the **Countdom of Lohbnahss** had stepped out.

At the *Üéch Sauder Sarcsr* (Portal-Sea of Sarcss) clashed **Hunter Fleet 21** of the **Humankind Empire of Abh** and the United Humankind Sarrye Area Fleet, which had clearly designated the *Dreuhynh Sarcsr* (Countdom of Sarcss) as their next pit stop. Unlike on Lohbnahss, on Sarcss the evacuation of the **magistrate** and their staff had proceeded smoothly, and so the **Empire** wasn't really required to defend the *Saudec Sarcsr* (Sarcss Portal). But **Commander-in-Chief** Tlife wanted to settle this here and now. Thanks to the efforts of **Fleet 1**, they had a full and accurate understanding of the enemy's configuration. Less than half of the ships were combat vessels, and the rest were merchant ships that were each either nearly or totally unarmed.

"We can win this," said Tlife, who was in a royal mood. The enemy's estimated force of arms was less than half of his own fleet's. Moreover, the enemy needed to resupply, and wouldn't see another day without entering the **Sarcss Portal**. As long as he didn't commit some gross error, they would prevail.

"I have prepared two battle strategies," said **Chief of Staff** Cahyoor. "One has us not letting them enter the **portal** at all, and the other has us letting them enter and then imprisoning them. Which will you implement, sir?"

"Protracted battles don't agree with me. I'm going to finish this now."

"Then you would be amenable to the plan that prevents them from entering."

"Yep. I feel sorry for the bastards, but let's blow them to smithereens."

"Roger that."

And so their orders flew out from the **flagship** *Sulbiruch*. Subsequently, **Fleet 21** took up a line-abreast formation.

They're moving sluggishly, thought Tlife, who was gazing at the enemy **bubbles** on the **planar space map** with his arms folded. They'd known from the start that the enemy was advancing at a creeping pace, but they weren't even assuming battle formations. Did they even want to fight?

Eventually, the enemy came within firing range of their **mines**.

"An **inter-bubble communication** from the enemy," reported the **Communications Officer**.

"What's that?" Tlife recalled the time when he was very young and tried to go someplace to play, only to be stopped by his parent. Back then, the premonition that he'd get waylaid by some tedious chore grabbed hold of his heart. And this message was giving off the same dark vibe of *work*.

"The enemy is surrendering."

"Surrendering?" Tlife's shoulders drooped. "Really? They're really surrendering?"

"They really are," stated the officer strongly, leaving no room for doubt. "They're repeating their offer even now."

"This is a good outcome," Cahyoor consoled him. "This way we'll sustain no casualties whatsoever."

"I understand that!" said Tlife, his mood no longer so royal. "What I'm trying to say is that if they were going to surrender here, then they shouldn't have tried to escape to begin with!"

"I see," said Cahyoor. "Shall I persuade the enemy to give up hope of surrendering, since what they've done can't be undone?"

"Don't bog us down with something so tedious. I'll just refuse their surrender."

"You'll *refuse* their surrender, sir?"

"I'm annoyed because I *can't* do that!" He was not going to be so foolish as to waste his soldiers' lives on an unnecessary battle. "I swear, what was the enemy trying to pull, exactly? Were they really aiming to break through our siege?"

"They successfully lured our troops from the front lines, albeit only for a fixed

period of time,” said Cahyoor calmly. “If I were the enemy army’s top commander, I would hold their actions in high esteem, given that if they engaged here, it would end in their annihilation, and would only barely chip away at our war potential. Their conduct is eminently logical.”

“Why don’t you tell that to the enemy commander, then? I’m sure they’ll be pleased as punch.”

“Don’t mind if I do, sir.”

“But wait, they may have thinned out the front lines, but if they never capitalized on it, then wasn’t that pointless?”

“That isn’t the fault of the enemy troops before our eyes.”

“Look, if it’s all as you say, then what is our role here? Are we the clowns that get led around by the nose by people who won’t even fight?”

“We don’t need to abase ourselves to ‘clown’ level, sir...”

“I’m not the one dragging us down to that level!”

“Sure... though in any case, we have done what we needed to do. Besides, even if we somehow didn’t, the *Glagamh Byrer Blaigr* (Hunter Fleet Command Center) would shoulder the blame...”

“I *UNDERSTAND* that! Are you ever gonna get around to ditching your habit of waxing on and on about what we all already know full well!?”

“My apologies, sir.”

“Inform all that the battle is suspended. Stow the **mines**, too — even though we painstakingly prepared them for the occasion. Lower the electric power on the **laser cannons**. And remove the victory-celebration decorations. Then I want you to disengage everyone’s battle positions and go to sleep. I’m going to sleep out of spite, so I leave all of the fiddly little details to you. Oh, and don’t forget to shower the enemy commander with your praises.”

“Roger.” Cahyoor saluted. Then he remembered: “However, I suggest we leave the victory-celebration decorations up. We *have* won, just through another means.”

“Wait, you *actually* went ahead and decorated the place?” marveled Tlife.

“No, sir. I just thought that perhaps **His Excellency** instructed us to prepare for a celebratory banquet.”

“Wouldn’t feasting before the fight be rude to the enemy?”

“Then what shall we do about the celebratory banquet?”

Tlife gave it some thought. A victory was a victory, after all, and everyone seemed bored these days anyway. It would be nice to see some revelry and merrymaking around these parts.

“All right. Plan a feast. But the **Commander-in-Chief** won’t be treating anybody to drinks, got it? And make the fleet quartermasters happy by keeping expenses minimal.”

“Shall we make it a pay-your-own-way party, then...”

“It’s all well and good to trust in our subordinates’ loyalty, but let’s not get greedy here,” chided Tlife. “Why should they have to celebrate an **Empire** victory out of their own pockets? I could never issue such a miserly order.”

“Understood, sir,” said Cahyoor, saluting once more.

Bascotton was a remote, frontier star system that seldom ever changed, but just as an ordinary person could become famous by some accident of fate, so too could a star system bask in the spotlight. The accident of fate that had bumped the spotlight onto the Bascotton Star System lay in the **closed portal** situated around 4.1 light-years away.

That **closed portal** was named VRGE1447 by the UH, and **Portal 193 of Caysh** by the **Empire**. The UH had, in order to bring the **Humankind Empire of Abh** to ruin in one stroke, secretly hatched Operation Heracles, and put into effect another plan named Operation Iolaus as the groundwork.

Operation Iolaus revolved around the search for pathways that would enable attacks on the core of the **Empire** from the shortest possible distance away, and plenty of time and money had been allocated to it. The Operation Iolaus HQ had found several promising candidates, and focused their attention on two potential pathways in particular: FLIST0223 (or **Portal 882 of Seev**, as the Abh called it), and VRGE1447. Both led to the most lightly guarded region in the

Empire, the **Ileesh Monarchy**. And it was thought that by making good use of both portals, they could cause the **imperial capital** of *Lacmhacarh* to fall after a brief and decisive battle.

The temptation was great. If the dragon whose eight heads stretched across the galaxy lost its **capital**, it would be rent asunder, enfeebled and prone to the slaughter.

With the realization of Operation Iolaus, Operation Heracles was now achievable. The United Humankind respectfully made its case to the Military Affairs Council of the Nova Sicilia Treaty Organization, which was established to counter and oppose the **Humankind Empire of Abh**. Its Military Affairs Council was run by people who wished for the immediate extinguishing of the **Empire** from the bottoms of their hearts, so there was no way they would reject Operation Heracles. The only wrinkle was the *name*. Heracles, the hero of legend, had certainly taken down a large, multi-headed snake, but it was said that monster had *nine* heads — one more than the symbol they were really after. Even more inauspiciously, one of those heads was immortal, and the others had the off-putting quality of multiplying upon getting severed. One of the councilors latched onto this discrepancy, but most didn't care at all.

The name of the mythological figure who slew the *Gaftnochec* had also been imparted through the generations, but naturally, it was the indirect ancestors of the Abh who had passed down that tale, so there was hesitation to adopt their name. Besides, the monstrous serpent that Heracles had slain was much more formidable than the *Gaftnochec*. As such, it stood to reason Heracles would be able to slay the eight-headed dragon with ease.

In the end, this topic of discussion was buried without reaching a decision, and the tag of {PROVISIONAL TITLE} was silently removed at some point. By the time the title of the operation was finalized, the member nations of the Treaty Organization confidentially approved of the operation, and the alliance's principal military force, the United Humankind Peacekeepers, was tasked with taking care of the details.

The main invasion path adopted by the Peacekeepers was through FLIST0223, with VRGE1447 (which had been moved closer to the Bascotton System) reserved for diversionary troops. And since they were diversionary, the troops

assembled in the Bascotton System took the lead and jumped into imperial territory.

This was where hostilities blossomed. The Bascotton System was the hometown of this war.

The **Commander-in-Chief** of **Hunter Fleet 4**, Noble Prince *Biboth Aronn Nérémr İarlucec Nélaith* gazed at the *Saudec Bascottonr* (Portal of Bascotton) with some emotion. **Fleet 4** had the **Bascotton Portal** in a state of siege. And there were no enemy ships to detect as far as their **mass-waves** reached.

“I command each **sub-fleet’s strike squadrons** to prepare for preliminary mine strikes,” said Neleth

“Is there a need for that?” replied the man who was both his **Chief of Staff** and his twin brother, Nefeh. “There’s no sign of the enemy. Surely reconnaissance would suffice?”

“There’s a good chance there’s an **orbital stronghold**,” rebutted Neleth.

“But Neleth, you must know mines won’t do much against an orbital stronghold.”

“We’re making assurance double sure.”

“Why are you only ever this cautious during times like this? Especially when the dictionary defines you specifically as the opposite of ‘prudent.’”

“See, this is why I tell you that you’re a poor judge of character, Nefeh. I’ll have you know, I’m an exceptionally prudent man.”

“I can tell you’re a poor judge of your own character, Neleth.”

“Never mind that, just prepare the mines.”

“Only because you’re **Commander-in-Chief**,” Nefeh acquiesced reluctantly. “But shouldn’t we at least reduce the scale?”

“Why must you be so tightfisted? We’re not waging war on *your* dime,” said Neleth, utterly mystified.

“Because no matter whose dime is at stake, I can’t bear to see such waste.”

“Nefeh, Nefeh,” said Neleth, shaking his head. “This is all to tie a bow on this

long operation. We can afford to send off our mission with a handful of fireworks, can't we? In fact, I'd love to order not just the strike squadrons, but all of the **battle-line ships** and **patrol ships** to fire all of theirs, too."

"But we wouldn't be able to see the 'fireworks,' Neleth. **Mines** explode in separate time-spaces. I think that detonating **fusion shells** in **3-space** would make for a better show. Plus, it'd be cheaper."

"That is true, but..." As Neleth stammered, he felt something was off. At some point in their conversation, the point of the mines had gone askew.

"Prepare the mines."

"Fine, Neleth. Just don't forget how I warned you it was a waste."

All at once, the **mines** were fired by the battle-line ships of Fleet 4, which was encircling the **Bascotton portal**. The mines proceeded to plunge into the coiling spirals of **planar space**. If something was lying in wait on the other side of the **portal**, then the **mines** would adjust their trajectories to collide with it automatically.

Preliminary mine strikes were recommended whenever it came time to infiltrate a star system under enemy control — depending, of course, on whether the situation called for it.

Despite getting shot with **mines**, the **Bascotton Portal** remained as still as death. Neleth commanded the **recon sub-fleet** to pass through. This time, his always-captious **Chief of Staff** found no fault with the order.

With **nuclear fusion shells** loaded into their **EM cannons**, a flock of patrol ships flew through to **3-space**. Soon, one of them returned to **planar space** and sent an **inter-bubble communication**: "No enemy presence detected in the Bascotton System," read off the **Communications Officer**.

"I never said the enemy was definitely there," Neleth told Nefeh. "It's just that commanders should always be prepared for the worst."

"I didn't say a thing."

"Only because you were letting that overworked tongue of yours rest. Your smug expression said it all."

“Let’s agree to disagree.”

“Wait, sir,” said the Communications Officer. “There’s more: ‘We have, however, detected several allied ships.’”

“Allied ships?” Neleth unintentionally kicked the **Commander-in-Chief’s Seat**. “Where did they come from?”

“From the **Ileesh Monarchy**, obviously,” reasoned Nefeh.

“Nobody’s told me a thing about them making inroads from *that* direction, dammit!”

“It must’ve been decided on the spur of the moment. But why are you so annoyed, anyway?”

“You’re not annoyed, Nefeh?”

“If you wouldn’t mind, why don’t you tell me what I’m supposed to be annoyed about, Neleth?”

“That they beat us to the punch, obviously! Does even that much elude you?”

“Utterly,” Nefeh fired back. “Actually, now that I think about it, you’ve been oddly obsessed with leading the charge, haven’t you? An obsession you share with no one else.”

“How dare you,” said Neleth, grinding his teeth.

“Look at it this way — we’ve planted the very first **Star Forces** footsteps on so many different star systems. Is that not enough to sate your mania to be first?”

“But this star system is *special*, Nefeh. I was planning to make the conquest of Bascotton the swinging highlight. And now that dream is dashed.”

“‘Swinging highlight’? Of what?”

“Of Part 2 of my memoirs. What else?”

“Oh, yes, of course. How silly of me. What else indeed.”

Needless to say, that meant there was a Part 1. Neleth expected his spitting image to ask where Part 1 began and ended, but it appeared Nefeh didn’t care to linger on Neleth’s memoirs.

“You must agree that the climax wherein we zoom in unperturbed after another corps already took the area doesn’t quite stir the soul.”

“Must you always be so childishly hungry for glory, Neleth?”

“Childish!?” he fumed. “What are you talking about!?”

“You’re childish in that nobody apart from you thinks you’re a man of honor and prestige. If your false impression that *every* member of the *Biboth* Clan shares your notion that being first equates to true glory, then I couldn’t live with the shame,” said Nefeh, sticking a finger up. “And that’s not all. If people start thinking the clan’s made a tradition of fighting just to spice up some personal memoirs, I’ll throw away the **surname** of *Biboth*! I’m not entirely comfortable with the phrase ‘the florid insanity of the *Biboths*,’ but there is something appealing in it. Your insanity, on the other hand, is far from ‘florid.’”

“I didn’t think you were capable of feeling shame. I guess there’s a first time for everything, though.”

“If only you weren’t my brother,” said Nefeh, gnashing his teeth himself, “then I’d have a mind to malign you and all your ancestors three generations deep!”

“Wise of you to realize you can’t, Nefeh.”

“Now that you’ve confirmed the commonly known truth, how about you issue your next order?”

“Right,” nodded Neleth. “All ships, advance slowly toward the **Bascotton Portal**. I leave the entry sequence to you, Nefeh.”

“Roger that.”

And so the **flagship** of **Fleet 4**, the *Scacaü*, led the pack in passing through the portal.

“Establish a line with the enemy... with the *allied* flagship,” huffed Neleth.

The ears of the one who saluted through the main display screen were pointed. “This is **Grand Commodore Abliarsec Néïc Dubreuscr Dubeusec**, the *Glaharérh Byrer Mata Fageucr* (Commander-in-Chief of the Snow-Skift Fleet 2) speaking.”

“This is **Commodore Biboth** of Hunter Fleet 4 speaking. It’s a great honor to meet you, *Fiac Lartr Clybr*,” he added, for no other reason than as a social pleasantry.

“I too am pleased to have crossed paths with your fleet. How serendipitous,” he said, with a carefree grin. “Now, that was a rather by-the-book entry pattern, **Commodore**.”

“I have something to ask you, sir,” said Neleth. He wouldn’t be happy if he couldn’t run at least one question by the King of *Clybh*. “Why, if you’d already taken the star system, did you not send an alert-ship to **planar space**? We might have spared some **mines** that way.”

“We might have spared ourselves getting excited over nothing, more like,” muttered Nefeh.

“We tried to send a patrol ship to **planar space** so as to apprise others, only to find a sudden storm of **mines** blocking the way. Incidentally, **Commodore**, do you know the name of the developer of the friend-or-foe identification apparatus?”

“I’m afraid not, sir.”

“Well, that’s a shame, because we ought to give that developer our thanks. Had it not been for that apparatus, how many of my **fleet**’s ships would have taken damage?”

“Are you saying the mines were unnecessary, sir?”

“Perish the thought. I would have done the same if I were commanding Fleet 4.”

While the two **Commanders-in-Chief** were conversing, their respective flagships were exchanging the necessary data though a language incomprehensible to humans, via an **information link**. As such, the commanders’ chat was nothing more than a mutual courtesy.

“By the way, I hear my daughter is under your wing, Commodore *Biboth*.”

“You flatter me, sir. She’s taking care of herself out there,” said Neleth humbly. “Besides, she isn’t actually under my command at the moment.”

“Due to some kind of irregularity?”

“Heavens no. I gave her a mission as a **lady agent**. And though I’m not sure why, she seems to have taken more of a liking to it than to military matters, which is why she’ll be continuing in the role for some time.”

“That’s...” The eyes of the **King of Clybh** were wide open. “That’s unlike her. Are you quite sure?”

“Quite, sir. She even applied for leave.” Neleth got a nice charge out of knocking an **Imperial** off guard, so his mood improved.

“She applied for leave? I did not know that.”

“Plus, she was searching for a **mercenary corps**.”

“A mercenary corps, you say?” The **King of Clybh** cocked his head. “I’m learning more and more.”

“I believe you’ll be fully informed as to the context of the matter once the **information link** is done.”

“True. But never mind my daughter. Tell me, what will your fleet be doing from here on out?”

“We await orders from the **Hunter Fleet command center**.”

“Which is to say you don’t have any orders currently.” Dubeus saluted, signaling that he’d end their conference. “We leave this star system to you. We shall be headed towards our next destination, the **Countdom of Vorlash**.”

“Hold on, please!” said Neleth, rising from his seat, “Will you not send a **liege agent** for this place?”

“I told you — we leave it to you.”

“But it was **Your Highness**’s fleet that came first, that conquered the system. It doesn’t make sense for commissioning the liege agent to be our responsibility.”

“I find it hard to believe you’re that short on personnel, **Commodore**. Oh, I know — as long as you’re still waiting for orders, why don’t you take up the position?”

“I’ll think about it,” said Neleth.

“I was forced to take the position myself, when I was younger. Dreadfully tedious job. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule. But the tedium level is crushing, so crushing that no one who hasn’t gone through it themselves could fathom it.”

“I see.”

“Now then, I shall take my leave. I wish you success.”

“Not that I have any fleets to succeed against, sir,” said Neleth, saluting.

He could hear voices. He couldn’t, however, make out what they were saying. In fact, he was only barely able to tell they were human voices to begin with. He couldn’t even figure out what language they were speaking.

They were quarreling, loud and hot. Over what, though? He had no idea.

Lately, whenever he tried to fall asleep, he’d hear voices, but these were altogether different voices — the kind his ears had nothing to do with. And lucky that, or else he’d be quailing for no reason.

Actually, maybe this isn’t a trend to champion, thought Jint as he nodded off. Perhaps he was beginning to crack.

He didn’t know how many days had passed since he watched the amphibious ship return to **space**. He’d survived this far by single-mindedly avoiding other humans. He also regularly changed where he slept. At first, he hid in a warehouse near the government building, since it had been pillaged of every last object and was now empty. But it was difficult to tell from the outside that it was empty, so more looters did show up from time to time. He’d even bumped into a posse of five at one point. Yet, with just an intense glare on his part, they decided not to lay a finger on him. It was almost as though that lot believed they’d get struck down by a bolt of divine wrath if they came near him. It looked as though Sobash’s threat was working its magic. But in his sheer isolation, Jint wished they knew there were rewards in it for them if they came as *allies*.

In the end, Jint found some rest in the semi-basement of a fire-damaged

building. The building was so ravaged that he couldn't yet tell what its purpose used to be, and it was accordingly uncomfortable, but all that mattered was that it didn't put his life in danger.

That being said, there was a possibility that, after all this time, Jint was being too cautious. The first week after the **Empire's** withdrawal had been wild, to say the least, but now there was no sign of people in town. He didn't think they could all have died; they must be holing themselves up somewhere. No sign, either, of what Jint feared most — UH land war troops.

Time just passed. Seconds after seconds, hours after hours, days after days.

Starvation was the most pressing danger. All the food had been exhausted a while back. He remembered the last thing he ate being a fragment of *ariraimec* (choc-cocoa), but he didn't remember how much time had passed since then. There was food to be had somewhere, that much was certain, but chances were extremely slim anybody would share with him gladly.

He'd rationed what little food he had, and now he simply rested in order to preserve any strength at all. There was plenty of time to sleep. After all, he had nothing whatsoever to do. His sleep took the form of an extremely light sleep that lasted the whole day. That was one factor as to why he'd lost all sense of time.

When he was steeped in his daylong dozing, he dreamed a lot. For whatever reason, life in space never appeared in his dreams. Martin, Delktu, Clasbure, landworlds he'd only ever seen in videos, landworlds he'd never seen at all. And in every dream, beside him throughout it all was...

Jint snapped awake through his own coughing fit. Of late, his coughing had grown very bad. He could feel ounces of precious energy get depleted each time the air exploded out from his lungs.

"Water."

Jint rose waveringly to his feet. He reckoned that the amount he'd speak out loud had risen rapidly in recent days. When he first noticed he was talking to himself, he'd been speaking in Baronh, but now the only words coming out of his lips were in Martinese. At times, he found himself wondering whether his days as an **Abh noble** were just a dream.

In fact, maybe this planet wasn't Lohbnahss II.

He was on Martin, and due to some inciting incident he wasn't privy to, he was now stuck inside a dark room where the light never shone. Maybe that was the real truth.

Water...

Drinking was another issue. There was no running water, so he'd use cans to collect some to slake his thirst whenever it rained. He'd have liked to boil and sterilize the stuff, but there was no fuel.

He poured some into a glass. Holding the glass was the only time in the day he felt more civilized than a caveman.

The water gave off a rather foul odor.

Near the ceiling of the semi-basement lay several skylights, through which the rays of the sun, also named Lohbnahss, trickled. Jint made sure the light didn't reveal the glass's precious contents before downing it.

He squatted by the wall. *"Born in the dark, to die in the dark,"* he whispered. "Eh, too hackneyed, and it's not even that accurate, either."

To tell the truth, when he wasn't asleep, he was trying his hand at poetry. He wanted to leave some evidence he'd existed in this place, so he used a piece of metal to carve letters into the wall, but he was far from satisfied with this endeavor. The only fruit of his efforts was discovering in no uncertain terms his lack of literary talent.

"Wait, why am I writing this in Baronh?" he said, scanning the Ath glyphs he'd engraved.

He was talking to himself in Martinese, but his poetry was all in Baronh. If he tried composing something in Martinese, he was sure he'd be able to come up with some magnificent poetry. That in mind, he picked up the piece of metal and set toward the blank portion of the wall.

Then it dropped right back out of his hand.

What was he doing? The one to whom Jint wanted to communicate his feelings wasn't some Martinese person. Sure, she'd be able to decrypt the text,

but what would she think upon seeing his last message was written in Martinese?

He entertained the notion of translating the Martinese poems he knew into Barohn, but all he remembered were lullabies.

“Lullabies... That might actually work.” He elected to strive his hardest not to dwell on how, exactly, as he hummed a Martinese lullaby.

Jint’s shoulders jolted up with a start. A voice! An outside-the-head voice! And unless he had a bad case of hearing things, somebody was trying to enter.

Fortunately for Jint, up to this point, he hadn’t had a reason to use either the powder gun or a bomb that would activate in his hands. If he’d had his way, he’d never have a chance to use them. Alas, the universe did not flow as Jint saw fit.

Jint held his gun at the ready.

Chapter 11: *Cfazaitec Flaucsa* (A Personal Game Plan)

Off the coast of Rajay Island, the *Raügeuch* landed.

The *Raügeuch* was one of a rare breed of ship. It was capable of descending to a planet's surface before returning to the vacuum of space, yet it wasn't military-use.

The vast majority of the inhabited planets of the **Abh Empire** (including those in outlying regions) had **orbital towers**, so the demand for supply ships that could enter an atmosphere was low. Such vessels typically weren't used for much besides orbital tower-less **landworlds** in the initial stages of terraforming. And while there weren't many of the ships out there — which, according to supply and demand, made them a valuable commodity — the galaxy was at war, and **landworld** development was on the backburner.

Up until now, the *Raügeuch* hadn't made use of its unique feature, employed only as a **supply ship** like any other. And the one who commissioned it was none other than the **Royal Princess** of the **House of Clybh**.

The *Raügeuch* approached the island from the south, and coughed up multiple **hovercars**. A **mercenary corps** that had only recently begun to exist was not about to get handed military-grade *üsiac gora* (armed hovercars). They were standard commercial vehicles, with one not-so-standard exception: a peculiarly-shaped, giant-sized car.

Originally, it took tourists on rides through the savannahs of a **landworld** named *Cyrsaü*, and so was equipped with defenses of the lowest possible level to deter the beasts of the wilds. But those defenses were good enough to deflect the bullets of mere powder guns.

The safari trips of *Cyrsaü* were the dream of many an **imperial citizen**, as well as of many a **landworld citizen** (and since landworld citizens couldn't travel the stars with as much ease, there was a significant percentage that had settled in

Cyrsaü simply for the safari, which lasted a whole month). That was why the car's interior was so spacious. It was practically a land-roving inn.

The eye-pleasing kitsch had been removed, but there were still curves in the contour with no practical purpose. The lookout platform on the front-end was also a vestige of its former touristic purpose.

The lookout platform upon which Lafier was standing.

The salty sea breeze was making sport of her waving bluish-black hair. Her jet-black eyes were fixed dead ahead — right on the isle of Rajay. And her heart was suffused with anxiety, with apprehension and fear. *Is he alive?*

Since the **Empire** made it back to this **countdom**, they'd tried making contact with Lohbnahss's **landworld**, to no avail. They had no idea what state this planet was in. All they knew for sure, thanks to some scanning from orbit, was that at the very least, there were living people.

Lafier unconsciously covered the lower half of her face with a *lédunec* (handkerchief).

"Are you all right?" asked Samson.

"Now that you ask, no, I'm not," she admitted. She had already had her fill of this. This was the first time the **Royal Princess** had been hit by whiffs of sea water, and her nose found this aroma disagreeable. Moreover, the feel of the wind on her skin was creeping her out. She imagined the air current entwining her body and holding her tight. "Is this world always like this?"

"I was under the impression that the seas were the one thing Lohbnahss had going for it," said Tomasov, all but wincing.

"These seas are really invigorating. Plus, the weather's great," said Samson in consolation. "It's okay, Abhs just aren't well-acquainted with oversized puddles like this."

Tomasov's current title was "Maydeen-Memoriam Security Brigade Chief." The organization which bore the name of the last Chief Executive of Lohbnahss was a private mercenary corps, and had been formed within the **amphibious ship** *Dacsait*. Such was what resulted when the planet's former guards, who were uncertain what their futures held, gathered together, spurred in part by

some advice from **Unit Commander Gabaute**. There was no shortage of parties that were in the market for muscle and guns.

Needless to say, not all of them joined. Many rejected the idea of working for the Empire, or for an aristocratic class. Furthermore, while public security was supposed to be their bread and butter, this was still a job that would put their lives into greater danger than before. Of course, that there would be those among their number who desired more tranquil lifestyles was more than expected, and there were others who wanted to decide whether to join only after they'd decompressed.

As such, the Maydeen-Memorial Security Brigade now stood at a little over two thousand members.

The start-up costs were all financed via loan. This was a mercenary corps without any deeds to its name. Even if they issued bonds, nobody would bite. Of course, it would be even harder to be accepted for loans under normal circumstances, but when a genuine **royal princess** was one's guarantor, the picture changed considerably.

The corps' first client was the **House of Clyb**. However, it was a stretch to claim this was an official commission of the **Royal Family**. The head of *Clyb* was naturally **King Dubeus**, and they were operating under the behest of the First Princess without his express approval. On the other hand, that was of zero concern to the contractors themselves. As long as they were paid what they were owed, they couldn't care less. And Lafier would stake her honor on fulfilling the terms. Plus, if push came to shove, and her father the King didn't consent, she could collateralize her future revenue as **Viscountess Parhyn** and borrow from elsewhere.

That was just how worthy this mission truly was.

No... no, it wasn't a question of "worth." There was something that she needed to achieve, come hell or high water.

Where Samson stood in all this wasn't entirely clear. This operation wasn't **Star Forces**. At the end of the day, it was Lafier's personal campaign. And he certainly wasn't a **servant vassal** of the **House of Clyb**. On paper, he had nothing to do with the whole endeavor. Yet he seemed to feel the weight of

responsibility on his shoulders, so he insisted he be included, and went so far as to hand in a request for leave.

Lafier couldn't deny that request. She just couldn't.

The two remaining **starpilots** aboard the **assault ship** *Basrogrh* did give joining some thought (though Lafier had never once gleaned what was going through Ecryua's head), but they'd ultimately decided to prioritize their service duties.

The **hovercars** zoomed over the coast and pressed inland, before reaching the roads. The giant command vehicle could no longer progress.

Lafier attempted to run down from the lookout platform.

"Wait!" said Samson, lifting his arms to stop her. "Please, stay here, **Captain**. It's dangerous."

"This is my operation," she said, pushing back verbally. "What you're doing is uncalled for."

"But your clothes will attract too much attention," he pointed out.

Lafier wasn't in starpilot garb. Until now, while she'd been a "**lady agent**," a technically non-military position, she'd understood her mission to be partially military in nature, so she'd worn a **military uniform** underneath her **long robe**. But this mission was zero percent **Star Forces**. Consequently, the **circlet** that adorned her bluish-black head was not the elegant but simple circlet of a **Deca-Commander**, but the exquisitely crafted circlet of a **royal princess**. In addition, instead of the black **military uniform**, she wore a dark purple **jumpsuit** under a light green **long robe**. Certainly, this ensemble would catch some eyes on most any **landworld**. In fact, it would do so in the realm of the Abh, too.

"I echo his plea, **Your Highness**," said Tomasov. "If I were to let my first client come to harm, it would damage our reputation going forward."

"Worry not. Protecting me isn't what I'm paying you for."

"Still..." said Tomasov, discomfited.

"Where would you even go, ma'am?" said Samson. "We don't know where the lad is. Wouldn't it be wiser to stay here until he's found?"

That left Lafier at a loss for words.

“**Captain.** If you think you can atone by exposing yourself to danger, then you’re mistaken,” he continued.

“You think I’m doing this to atone!?” Lafier raised her voice, but not because he’d missed the mark in his assessment. On the contrary, she was seized by the sudden feeling he’d laid bare what she herself hadn’t been aware was her subconscious aim. “...I’m still convinced I made the correct call that day.”

“All the more reason not to fly into harm’s way,” said Samson, laying the finishing blow.

“Yes... you’re right,” nodded Lafier.

Tomasov looked relieved as he went down toward the command post. The mercs of the Maydeen-Memorial Security Brigade stepped out of their vehicles and spread out. With the **hovercars** out in front, they infiltrated the streets. Or rather, what was once the streets. Now they were scorched ruins. More than a month had passed since land war had been waged in this area, but the signs of destruction were fresh and sundry. There was no hint of anyone living here, either.

Lafier felt distinctly empty inside as she watched the backs of the brigade members pushing quietly through the grievous devastation.

“Must be tough for them, too,” said Samson.

“What do you mean?” asked Lafier.

“I mean, this is where they used to live. They must have made a handful of memories here. Sure, they may have abandoned the place, but it can’t be a laugh seeing everything lie in ruins.”

“True.” It was quite possible some would wind up encountering the corpses of their former colleagues as well. That would shake the most stoic of souls.

“Well, it’s time I head out. I’ll be back soon,” said Samson.

“Where are you going?” said Lafier, raising her eyebrows. “Don’t tell me you consider stopping me from ‘atoning’ as your own atonement, and now you’re done here?”

“No ma’am. We atone in our own way.”

“‘We’? Who’s ‘we’?”

“Ah, ‘we’ as in my people. This is how it’s done on my home planet.”

“How it’s done?” Lafier’s interest was piqued, slightly.

“We cook. Meet with a friend we haven’t seen in a while, and put all our skill into making something to delight the taste buds. That’s the custom on my great and gorgeous planet of Midgrat. Obviously can’t do the cooking here, though. I brought a set of kitchen tools, so I’m going to do it over there on that patch of ground,” he said, pointing toward the vacant turf visible from the lookout. “I won’t be far.”

“You brought *kitchen tools*?” said Lafier, astonished.

“Of course. Why do you think I came?” he laughed impishly. “And, circumstances being what they are, I’ll be whipping up a meal grand enough to greet a friend after ten years’ absence. I’d like it if you could get back here before it gets cold. If it went to waste, then...”

Lafier waited wordlessly for him to continue.

“...Do you know what the rudest thing you can do in Midgrat is, ma’am?” he asked, a serious look on his face.

“Putting a meal to waste?” she asked, with equal seriousness.

“You’re nearly right. It’s having somebody prepare a meal, only to stand them up. And I don’t think our laddie’s that rude a guy.”

“This is just a suggestion, but... Shall I assist you?”

“You want to help me cook, **Captain!**?” said Samson. “Umm, that’s... well, you see, Midgrat cuisine makes use of unique techniques, and, well, I only prepared a single set of tools, so you don’t have to.”

“I said it was a suggestion,” she said, miffed at how put upon he seemed.

“Then please, leave it to me. Besides, you haven’t ever cooked before anyway, right, Captain?”

“Of course not, but I was thinking there must be some simpler tasks as well. It’s fine, never mind.”

“All right then, we’ll leave it at that.”

“Wait,” she said.

Samson turned back to face her. “What is it?”

“Well...” Lafier looked positively bashful. “What expression should I make when I greet the man?”

“That depends on who ‘the man’ is,” Samson shrugged.

“What do you mean? Isn’t it obvious?”

“Ah, allow me to explain,” he said, scratching his head. “If what ‘the man’ is to you is a subordinate you left behind, and you think that was the correct decision, then I think it’s probably good enough to give him a pat on the back and say, ‘job well done.’”

Lafier caught on to what he was insinuating. “And if he’s not just a subordinate to me?”

“I’m about to cook in celebration of a friend’s coming through okay. But my head can’t get a fix on how you’ll respond, **Captain**. The way it’s done in Midgrat is different from how **Imperials** do it, that much I know. I could never even guess at the ways of the **Imperial Household**.”

“Forgive me. It was a stupid question.”

“Oh, no, I’ll treasure this conversation of ours for the rest of my life. I look forward to getting back home and being thought of as dubious due to bragging how I once taught an Abh princess a valuable lesson.”

And with that, Samson descended to set upon his task. Lafier looked down at the empty lot from her perch, and soon enough, the mechanic was walking over with two pieces of **automated luggage** in tow, one of which proceeded to unfold into what was essentially a kitchen (lacking little besides a roof). The other had the ingredients and a collapsible table and chairs.

They weren’t that far from the ocean, so the smell of the sea was as pungent as ever. And now that Samson was using spices she’d never smelled, the fragrances were mingling into something too heady for her to take. Even so, Lafier didn’t let her discomfort show on the surface, and remained upright and

at attention.

From the bottom of her heart, she hoped the recipient of Samson's wining and dining would show himself.

"We have yet to find His Excellency, but we now have a near complete grasp of the situation on-planet," reported Tomasov upon ascending back up to the platform.

"Is the situation something he could survive?" she asked.

The **Royal Princess** was technically still the **Lady Agent** of the **Countdom of Lohbnaahss**, and so the conditions on the ground of her **landworld** were supposed to be of sizable importance to her. Despite that, in the interest of candor, she didn't care a jot. The only thing on her mind was Jint. Was he okay? That was all that mattered.

"I'm terribly sorry, we still can't say for sure..."

"It's okay. So then, what's the situation?"

"It seems they've split into two main groups. There's the Dohkfoo Faction, and the Anguson Faction, but both have different people at the helm."

"What happened to them?"

"This isn't confirmed, but it seems Dohkfoo was killed. As for Anguson, we hear he's been kicked out by his former henchmen. It's unclear whether he's still alive. Would you like us to search for Anguson as part of our mission objectives as well?"

"Not for the time being. If the **Count of Hyde** should be alive, then we have no business with him," she replied immediately.

"Do you mean to say that if His Excellency is alive, you won't seek justice?"

"It's not for me to decide," said Lafier, shaking her head.

If one kidnapped a **noble** or **imperial citizen**, that person would be tried under the law of the **Empire**, even if the perpetrator was a **landworld citizen**. Nevertheless, a statement by the victim was required. In other words, if Jint didn't sue, then **Empire** courts couldn't touch Anguson.

Knowing Jint, he won't bother to press charges, thought Lafier. And if he consulted her, she planned to recommend not pressing charges, too. Deserted by his lackeys and forced to wander this barren **landworld** was a fitting punishment.

As much as she was loath to entertain the possibility, if Jint did want to press charges but couldn't due to... then Anguson's fate was sealed. He would be sent to the Abh Hell without question.

"In any case, the two factions are still at war. Anguson's has taken over the former East Correctional Zone, and the eastern part of the former Central Correctional Zone, while Dohkfoo's is holed up in the former West Correctional Zone. There appear to be other smaller groups as well, but we don't know their numbers."

"It seems like chaos."

"'Chaos' is definitely the word, ma'am. It boggles my mind how they were able to drag this place to this level of lawlessness in such a short time."

"And neither group has the **Count of Hyde**."

"That is correct, unfortunately," Tomasov added. "Though His Excellency is *not* confirmed dead, either."

Lafier flared with anger at the word "dead." By speaking aloud the possibility Jint was dead, the Security Brigade Chief had committed a faux pas. But then, her ire subsided. She recalled how Jint would always tell her how there were cultures out there she didn't know the first thing about. She knew Tomasov didn't mean anything by it.

Jint being Jint, he could well be eking out a comfortable day-to-day existence with some small-time gang, she wanted to believe.

"This may not be the appropriate time to broach the subject," said Tomasov, changing the subject, "but what will become of Lohbnahss from here on out? How will the Empire run the planet?"

"You're curious?" said Lafier, surprised.

"Of course."

“I see. Well, I’m afraid I don’t know, either. The rightful **magistrate** has already been appointed; I just had them let me stay on as **Lady Agent** a little while longer so I could fulfill my own personal mission of rescuing the man.”

“Ah...” Going by Tomasov’s expression, he seemed a bit adrift.

“That said, I am still Lady Agent. If you so desire, I can reinstate you as **Citizen Representative**.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” he said, waving a hand. “My responsibilities lie in making a go of this new enterprise.”

“Then there’s nothing I can do.”

“**Your Highness**, would you mind descending down soon? It’s rather nippy up here.”

“Down to the command post? Surely I’d just be in your way.”

“While I greatly appreciate the sentiment, you needn’t worry about that. Besides, there’s a rest station in case anything comes up...”

“I’m fine,” she declined firmly.

“If Your Highness insists,” said Tomasov.

Meanwhile, Samson was throwing multifarious ingredients into his giant cauldron. The **Royal Princess** hadn’t the faintest inkling as to whether he was approaching completion or whether this was just prep work. Thinking on it, this was the first time she’d ever seen somebody hand-preparing cuisine (as opposed to using machines).

She watched Samson’s kitchen for a while, but then she looked straight ahead once again. Several **hovercars** were rushing over.

Are they bringers of good news, or of... She felt her heart race, her jet-black eyes fixed on the flying vehicles. Multiple people jostled their way out the doors — it seemed they had a female survivor in custody. Perhaps this woman knew of Jint’s fate.

Lafier couldn’t hold back any longer, and descended to the so-called “command post,” which was originally the conversation lounge of the safari car; it was not stuffed to the gills with sophisticated implements or machinery. All

that was installed was transmission equipment that could be called luxurious were it in a common household.

“I’m telling ya, I’m not the one who killed the guy!”

The moment she entered the command post, she heard the middle-aged woman slurring through her testimony.

“What is the meaning of this!?” said Lafier, halting in her tracks. “Who’s been killed?”

“Ah, Your Highness!” stammered Tomasov. “I was just about to report back to you. We recovered this.”

The **Royal Princess** grabbed what the Security Brigade Chief offered. It was a **circlet**, specifically, one made without *frocragh* functionality, for a **starpilot** without a *froch*.

“Jint...” Lafier clutched the **circlet** to her breast.

The name of its owner wasn’t written anywhere on it, but there was only one person that a **circlet** which had wound up in some crevice of this **landworld** could belong to, and that was **Quartermaster Rearwing** Lynn.

“What happened to it? What happened to its owner?” she peppered the woman with questions.

The lady looked at her with glazed-over eyes. “I’m telling ya, I’m not the one who killed the guy,” she repeated.

“Was Jint... was Count Hyde murdered?” she asked Tomasov (as she didn’t think asking the woman would yield any meaningful response).

“We don’t know for sure that His Excellency was killed...”

“He was already dead by the time I got there,” said the woman. “And a dead guy hasn’t got any use for that tiara thing. That’s why I swiped it. It’s nothing to look at, but it’d be a waste to just throw it away.”

“Shut up for a second!” shouted Tomasov.

“Oh come on, you were barking at me to talk a minute ago.”

“That’s enough!” After silencing the lady, Tomasov faced the princess. “I’ve

told some subordinates of mine to hurry over to the place this woman's testimony is pointing us towards. As you can see, we can't truly trust what she says, but if there is a body, we can confirm right away whether it's His Excellency's."

"I'm coming, too!" blurted Lafier.

"But ma'am, it's a dead body. Won't it be rather gruesome for you..."

"I'm a **soldier**. I'm used to corpses."

"In all honesty, I thought you might say that," said Tomasov, shrugging. "In any case, we'll have to have you confirm it. Let's head out together."

Samson couldn't come with them; he said that they'd caught him at the most crucial moment of the process, so he couldn't leave his cooking station. But still, he was actively praying that the corpse wasn't Jint's, in his own way.

Alongside a contingent of heavily armed guards, Lafier boarded a **hovercar** and headed for the scene. Needless to say, the woman was brought along, as well as a medical team, just in case.

Shortly afterwards, they reached the inmates' dormitory in the former Central Correctional Zone from the former Administrative Zone. The woman guided the group to a room in the dormitory, which had been reduced to a shade of its former self. There was already about one squad of security personnel there.

"Is this the corpse?" asked Tomasov.

"Yep, that's the one. Look at how funny he's splayed out. Ended up on the floor sometime before I removed the tiara thing off his head," she said gleefully.

Lafier was afraid to look directly at the body. Gradually, she raised her downcast eyes.

The body was lying on one side, its legs tossed out in front. The man had likely died while seated against the wall, and had tipped over after rigor mortis had set in for a while. She didn't think it looked like Jint, but sometimes hope and longing clouded one's perception of reality. Lafier couldn't be sure she wasn't lying to herself.

"Running the DNA profile?" Tomasov asked a subordinate who'd gotten there

before them.

“Running it right now, sir. Please give it some time. The results will come up shortly.”

Lafier squatted, anxious in the extreme as she peered at the corpse’s face. She’d been holding her breath, but not in order to avoid smelling the stench of death. Relief washed over her heart. This was not Jint.

“So this isn’t His Excellency after all?” asked Tomasov, his voice also tinged with solace. He must’ve read her expression.

“The results are up on our end, too. This is clearly not His Excellency’s DNA.”

“I *told* ya!” said the woman, pointing at the corpse. “I told ya his name ain’t ‘Hizex Sellensee’ or whatever. That’s Jahn!”

“You said no such thing!” said Tomasov, goggling at her. “You should have told us!”

“Oh, did I forget to mention that?” she cackled, before suddenly cranking the waterworks. “Ahk! Jahn, you poor thing! You were a truly good man. Apart from being a bit stingy. I’m gonna be keeping this tiara thing as a memento of you!” At that, she put her hands on Lafier. “So please, you’ve gotta give me Jahn’s tiara thing back!”

The **Royal Princess** glared at her in stony silence.

“Yeesh, you don’t have to get that pissed. You can keep it, okay?” she said, averting her gaze.

“What was this idiot doing with His Excellency’s **circlet** to begin with?” asked Tomasov, quite saliently.

“Hmm, what’ll ya give me if I tell ya?”

“How about some food? Or maybe accessories would suit you better?” said Tomasov.

“Gimme food,” she answered instantly. “They’ve got a monopoly on food round these parts, and it ain’t making its way to us.”

“They” could only refer to one of the two big gangs. Or, perhaps, to both.

“Okay. I’ll give you some. Now tell us.”

“I heard some singing.”

“Singing?”

“Yep. Strange song, too. So I thought I’d swing by and you know, see who’s there. Who should I encounter but a young man wearing that thing on his head, singing away.”

“And you robbed him for it?”

“I wouldn’t have minded, but Jahn, he went and traded some food for it. There was still plenty of food to go around back then, and once our Alkyke kicks in, we get all nice and happy. I know, pretty shameful to get all nice on this godforsaken rock. Besides, Jahn wouldn’t have liked it if we ended up stealing it back and forth among ‘friends.’ We each had our guns, and what Jahn buys is his to own. If he’d known they wouldn’t give up any of their food, he would’ve taken greater care with his own share. Oh yeah, I just remembered, that guy had a gun, too. That’s why we didn’t wanna start nothing. Else something would’ve went down, good vibes or no. Plus, we were packing a gun or two at the time, too. But as I’m sure you already know, when you’re high off Alkyke, well, your aim ain’t so great. And also, handguns, they ain’t too reliable. So if Tiara’s shooting straight and we’re shooting at our feet, that wouldn’t’ve been a fun time. Oh, and—”

“How many are in your group?” interrupted Tomasov. “Is it just you and Jahn?”

“No, there’s more of us, but that’s for me to know and you to find out. If ya really want me to tell ya, then...”

“No, that’s quite all right. More importantly, where was this? Where did you go?”

“That, I’m gonna have to charge you extra for.”

“Fine. So you’ll take us there. One last question, and the most important of all: *When* did you lot lay your mitts on the circlet?”

“You mean the tiara thing?” the woman replied, begrudgingly. “I’m telling ya,

it wasn't me who took it, it was Jahn."

"Oh, right you are," said Tomasov, striving to maintain his patience. "When did Jahn obtain the circlet?"

"Beats me," she said, scratching her filthy head of hair. "Maybe it was yesterday, maybe it was a month ago, maybe a year ago... Who could possibly know that?"

"It can't be *yesterday*! Nor a whole year ago!"

"Sounds like you're a whole lot more up on things than me!" she cackled once again.

"You damned junkies!" Tomasov spat ruefully. "Never mind, just guide us there. You do remember where it is?"

"Course I do. It's in our precious territory. My house is nearby, too. It's a wonderful house."

Tomasov signaled to the rest with his eyes. Lafier nodded in return, and they ambled toward the exit.

"I have a request of you," said the **Royal Princess**.

"Name it, **Your Highness**."

"Could you give that 'Jahn' a proper burial? I don't know your funerary customs."

"Understood. But I must ask, why, ma'am? Is it because he shared his food with His Excellency?"

"No. We treat all trade partners with the respect they deserve. And that man was a trade partner of Count Hyde. As such, I'd like to at least erect a gravesite where visitors can pay tribute with flowers."

"But we mustn't put too much credence in the words of that woman. They may well have taken it by force."

That is a distinct possibility, thought Lafier, who fell silent.

"The chances that His Excellency is alive have grown likelier. I think we have time to run it by him if possible."

“Yes, right.”

The destination was only around five minutes away by **hovercar**. They were the longest five minutes of Lafier’s life. Hope and unease entangled within her. Her breathing was labored now.

Soon, they reached a building in an even more pronounced state of ruin than the one with Jahn’s toppled corpse. The brigade members fanned out and kept watch over the vicinity. Lafier attempted to enter, but she froze from the fear. It looked as though she’d exhausted her store of courage earlier.

“What’s wrong, Your Highness?” asked Tomasov.

“I’ll be waiting here,” said Lafier. She tried her level best to remain expressionless, but she wasn’t confident her face wasn’t reflecting raw emotion unbecoming of an Abliar.

“Oh? Actually, that is perfectly valid,” nodded the Brigade Chief, having convinced himself. He raised his hand to draw the notice of the medical team. “All of you, you’re coming with me. Don’t forget the stretcher.”

Half of the armed guards and the medical team followed Tomasov, rushing into the building.

“Your Excellency! Are you in there!”

“Please respond!”

She could hear them shout even from outside. Before she knew it, she had her eyes closed shut. Then, she noticed the voices had ceased, and her eyes reeled open. The lull lasted mere seconds. The very next moment, voices of thrilled excitement exploded through the air.

“He’s alive!”

“There’s no doubt about it! It’s His Excellency!”

“We did it!”

Lafier found herself breaking into a run. Her chest was boiling, near to erupting out into the world.

Jint, Jint, Jint!

Just like the majority of **landworlds**, the gravity level on Lohbnahss II's surface was around two times the Abh space-life standard. Despite that, her legs couldn't have felt lighter as she dashed with purpose.

It was easy to follow the voices. She knew right where he was.

It was a semi-basement. A place that was typically dimly lit, but was now filled with the dazzling light provided by the brigade members' illumination devices. Upon recognizing it was her, the mercs made way.

There was an automatic stretcher. Somebody was spread out atop it, and receiving the doctors' first aid. The initial emergency treatment must have already been mostly administered, for the doctors also let her through.

Lafier extended both hands out to Jint's face and held him. His cheeks were hollow and thin, so much so she might think him dead, but he was definitely breathing.

Jint's eyes opened slightly. "So bright..." came the words from his cracked lips.

"Dim your lights a little!" But Lafier didn't register Tomasov's voice as he issued orders.

Jint knew who it was looking down over him. "'Sup, Lafier... Long time no see, huh."

"Sorry to keep you waiting." The princess drew closer to his face. "You've gotten a bit gaunt."

"Wow. You know, you sure know how to make whopping understatements sometimes," he smirked. After which he immediately hacked half a lung.

The doctor hurried to help, but Jint raised a hand to decline. She abstained from asking him whether he was okay. One foolish question was more than enough today.

And what a foolish question it had been, what she'd asked Samson. What expression should she make when facing him? No matter what Samson said in reply, there was only ever one expression she *could* make. What other emotion could possibly be reflected in her countenance?

"Let's go back. Samson has prepared a meal for you." So she said, but even to

her untrained eye, she could tell he was in no state to ingest solid food. “I’m sure the doctor will approve of some *reurec* (clear soup) or **hot soup**.”

“Sure. Sounds good.”

She knew she ought to hand down the order to have him carried off. Yet she couldn’t tear her eyes from his face, which was so transformed but at the same time, so very familiar. The irrational impulse that he’d disappear if she glanced away took hold of the **Royal Princess**.

“I dreamed...” said Jint abruptly.

“What sort of dreams?”

“Oh, I dreamt a ton, so I’ll recount them all to you at some point... But in every one of them...” Suddenly, a glint of surprise in Jint’s eyes. He stopped there. And then, a roguish grin curled his lips.

His feeble hands stroked her bluish-black hair. Lafier thought Jint must want to tell her something, so she drew her face even closer to him.

“I thought Abliars don’t cry?” he whispered in her ear. “*Far Fiac Cfaina* (My Dear Highness).”

“**You idiot.**”

Epilogue

Dyaho was unwinding in the **Cats' Refectory**. In the past, humans would come and play with him around this hour, but lately no one was dropping in.

Of course, Dyaho and his feline kindred wanted for very little. Their feed was fresh, plentiful, and always available. Furthermore, they enjoyed a bevy of others of their kind with which to spend the time. Besides, if the urge to see a human did arise, they could always leave the refectory. There were even more humans than there were cats, so that was far from an issue. Some of them did seem to harbor a measure of antipathy toward Dyaho's clan, but most were friendly. It was more often the case that he didn't feel particularly obliging on his end. After all, when he was outside the refectory, it was because he was guarding his territory, and a tad wound up.

That was not to say he did not, from time to time, feel inclined to deign to play with a human or two. Diversions provided by humans offered a different kind of stimulation compared to playing with his fellow cats.

And yet, occasionally, Dyaho felt pangs of loneliness. And even a little *concern*. Are they well-fed? Are they successfully defending their stomping grounds? Are they managing to get other cats to play with them?

He didn't feel like patrolling his territory, but he did shift locations. Within the refectory, there were sunbeams created by guiding the rays of Abliar through *labh ihosr* (fiber optic bundles), and one of them was a favorite of his.

Nimbly, he alighted from atop the table. There just so happened to be a female cat there, with fetching white fur and pale brown mottles. Dyaho did not disdain her, but he wasn't yet in heat, so he passed her by without incident.

No one else had taken the sunbeam. Dyaho stretched, curled up, and gave himself up to the delights of its cozy warmth.

Until, that is, he was lifted off the ground.

As was his inalienable right, Dyaho mewled in protest.

“Man, cats really are cold. He doesn’t remember me,” said a voice that was striking the cat as familiar, somehow.

“You’re just too rough with cats, Jint.”

“You’ve probably got a point there.”

The name “Jint” had the power to stir memories of a bygone age in Dyaho. He was that bumbling housemate. In deference to their bond of old, he granted him permission to stroke his fur, purring all the while.

“You’re going to take Dyaho, too?”

“I mean, yeah. He’s my cat.”

“But in Dyaho’s eyes, this place might be the more blissful of his homes.”

“He does look pretty debauched. I remember his eyes used to have a sheen of the wild in them.”

“Don’t speak such nonsense. This cat has been far removed from ‘the wild’ since kitten age.”

“Sure, but ‘kitten age’ was before I taught him everything he knows.”

Dyaho picked up on how reprehensibly he was being slandered, and squirmed in Jint’s arms.

“Don’t get testy with me... You know what, it’s all right. It’s not like we’re leaving immediately.”

The second Dyaho landed, he sprinted away from his former housemate. Then he stopped by the brown speckled female, turned his head, and looked back at the former housemate and the other human standing in place near him.

“See? Looks like he likes it here,” said the other human.

“Ah, he’ll forget the place ever existed in a few days. Unless he’s got himself a girlfriend?”

“He must have.”

“Could it be that white one? The one with the brown spots all over? He’s not budging from her side. Granted, he’s not touching her or anything. That cat female?”

“She is a consummate maiden. Come, *Sercrucac*.”

Sercruca rose to her paws and slowly edged up to the human who’d summoned her. The human picked her up.

“If you’re going to be with Dyaho, then I’ll take this one. They suit us.”

“She comes to you when you call her name?” said the former housemate, impressed. “Hey, Dyaho! Come over here!” he said, beckoning by hand.

Dyaho looked the other way.

“See? Such a wildcat,” he shrugged.

“You’re just that unpopular.”

“Thanks.”

The human holding the brown speckled cat caressed her around the ear with love.

“You’re fine with this, right, Sercruca? You’ll come with me, won’t you? We’ll be going to a place named *Martinh*. It’s a **landworld** that’s packed to the brim with exotic creatures. You just might be able to enjoy more unique prey-hunting.”

“Say, Lafier, are *you* honestly sure you want to come?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, leaving the **Star Forces**, just to accompany little old me...”

“We’ve already discussed this at length. Counting my time at the **academy**, I’ve already been in the military for around ten years. I won’t get punished for taking a break.”

“A break, huh... But if you take a long break now, it’ll obstruct your path to becoming a stand-up **Empress**.”

“**Her Majesty the Empress** is of the **House of Clybh**. If our house doesn’t produce another emperor for a while, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I guess, but, I dunno...”

“I’d be too worried to let you go by yourself. When I didn’t know whether

you'd survived, I... I just don't want to go through that again."

"I'm honored, really, but it's my home planet. I'll be all right. Probably."

"Oh? But weren't you deathly afraid of your home planet?"

"Urgh... If I'm being honest, I'm afraid. But it's also something I've got to face at some point. On the other hand, it's not really your problem, and I'm worried that I'm dragging you into a whole big thing."

"Just be straight with me. Do you want me to be by your side, or don't you? Be straight with me, *Linn Ssynec Raucr Dreuc Haider Ghintec*."

"...I want you by my side."

"I can't hear you."

"I would be overjoyed if you could be by my side, Lafier."

"Then it's settled," she said, her voice triumphal.

Sercruca still in her arms, the two humans made for the exit of the **Cats' Refectory**. Gazing at their backs as they strode away, Dyaho felt unfairly neglected. His tail upright and wagging, he paced their way with dignity in full. Yet the humans simply would not look back to face him.

Once again, Dyaho protested.

"Would you look at that? So you are coming, Dyaho," said the former housemate, crouching.

This time around, Dyaho jumped into his arms willingly. The former housemate's arms were oddly relaxing.

Dyaho's eyes met the eyes of the cat the other human was carrying, the eyes of Sercruca.

But before he could even contemplate what this eye contact portended, the sandman came for him. Dyaho felt as helpless as a newborn kitten, and then, succumbed to sleep.

Appendix: On the Feudal Sovereignty System of the Humankind Empire of Abh

It is a well-known fact that, during the dawn of what would become the Abh Empire, Abhs dwelt together on the city-ship Abliar, roaming through space as a mercantile race. In those times, they constituted the thin and delicate thread that connected a human race that had spread across an area of the cosmos one light-century in diameter. What's not nearly as well-known is the fact that Abhs traded amongst each other within that city-ship as well.

Unlike what some believe, Abh society before the founding of the Empire was not primitive communist in nature. Granted, the remuneration for the complex work that accompanied interstellar navigation was nothing more than the guarantee of food, clothing and shelter, and there was no disparity between occupations. The only real differences revolved around living environments, based on the respective required skill levels of the vocations in question.

Yet at the same time, the Abh owned property through family units, and through the loose groupings that constituted clan units. Abhs strove to increase their own personal fortunes by exchanging these family properties. It was as good an activity as any to kill time during long voyages.

What makes inter-Abh commerce more difficult to understand from the outside is the fact that that property existed in the form of information. Valuable information could be sold for handsome prices to the outside, but Abhs would trade for information with information, so ultimately, it's difficult to pinpoint who was the wealthiest figure in the period before the Empire.

Eventually, and in concurrence with the establishment of planar space navigation, the Abh set about the construction of their empire. It was very natural that the basis of the Empire had to do with trade.

The first ones to accrue large amounts of holdings were the Abliar clan, who inherited the position of Ship's Captain. The head of the Abliars became Emperor, and came to own all ships equipped with planar space navigation

functionality. Some objected to this, but those words of protest had to be withdrawn once persuaded that unity in the Empire was necessary to ensure its permanence.

Additionally, the Abliar clan would go on to keep eight portals for themselves. Ships that passed through portals (the ruined husks of groups of yuanons, the particles that once propelled the city-ship Abliar) had to pay a toll to their custodians. Yet more objected to this, but the process that led to broad consent was a series of events too complicated and bizarre to get into here.

In any case, the military force of arms accumulated to protect the city-ship could now turn toward the outside via planar space navigation. Immediately, three star systems were conquered, forming the Abh Empire's first territorial possessions. Emphasis on the word "possessions," for the Abh had no interest in exerting full governmental control over the landworlds from the very outset. Instead, they were more than satisfied establishing exclusivity of trade rights. To the Abh, "governance" entailed making their presence known to the autonomous administrations of the populations of their fiefs, thereby impelling a desire for interstellar trade, and wangling increased trade profits.

A principal clan was appointed to each of the three star systems, monopolizing space trade. That being said, there was some friction during the Empire's foundational period, as the lords' style of reigning was not yet refined, and the general rule not to interfere in the politics of the landworlds lacked consistency in implementation. The feudal sovereignty system would be streamlined alongside the Empire's expansion.

The lords would be categorized into three categories.

The first category consisted of the eight monarchs who managed the eight portals to the imperial capital of *Lacmhacarh*. Because the Emperor always emerged from these monarchies, one could not simply leave it at calling them "lords and ladies." However, their professional duty to oversee the portals would lose substance as the ages wore on, and the royal thrones became honorary posts.

The second category consisted of the grandees, Abhs with grips over star systems with inhabited planets. In days of yore, they were all called counts,

until such time that creating a hierarchy was felt necessary. Thus were born the ranks of duke, marquess, and archduke. The title of “archduke” was established specifically for the heads of the lines directly descended from the 28 Founding Clans.

Moreover, cases whereby lieges were appointed to uninhabited planets caught the eye more and more. That category of liege was further subdivided into two. Viscounts owned star systems that could be made habitable via terraforming (which they were expected to make happen), while barons owed star systems that could not. Barons were expected to provide mineral resources and antimatter fuel.

Thanks to the existence of viscounts and barons, the Empire could swell to enormous size in peace and harmony. That was not to say the Abh had abandoned the business of conquering. Though they didn’t go out of their way to spring wars, once war was declared for one reason or another, the Empire refused to cease battle until the enemy was totally absorbed.

Naturally, this called for operations to facilitate the incorporation of former enemy nations’ star systems into the body of the Empire. Eventually, those who succeeded in military campaigns were installed as Emperors, but the newly annexed star systems proved to be not-so-submissive, ushering in a raft of thorny problems. Since the governing of the new domain was too burdensome, it was customary for the Emperor to serve as a liege as well. Of course, the Emperors themselves could not rule, so a magistrate would be dispatched. In times of war, however it was often the case that even those formalities were insufficient. In such times, liege agents were appointed instead.

There was no set of qualifications to be a liege agent. Many times, starpilots were appointed, but more out of necessity than because they were thought to be fit for the role of liege agent; after all, it was the very fact that the Abh war machine was still rolling along that allowed that phenomenon to occur. The fact that aristocrats and their heirs came to fill these positions was due to the general sentiment that heading up this tedious and unrewarding duty was a part of their “noblesse oblige.”

The liege agents were said to be temporary stopgap figures, there to tide things over until full-blown imperial rule commenced. It took a great deal of

experience to effectively govern a new domain. As such, what was desired of liege agents was to do as little as possible (save for niceties and etiquette) until accomplished magistrates were appointed in their place.

But there have been exceptions in the Empire's long history — pressing emergencies wherein, before magistrates could arrive, young people without much life experience, let alone experience as lords or ladies, had to cope without any help.

Some of those cases ended in tragedy. The Empire's official stance chalked those unfortunates up as “unlucky,” and its views on the feudal system have not appreciably changed to this day.

Afterword

I don't eat breakfast right after getting up. I warm up with some light stretching and take a shower first.

I brew some coffee and play some chords on the keyboard. It's around two hours before the coffee pot runs empty. And that's the cue for brunch.

After a hearty brunch, I do some shopping at some bookstores while taking a stroll. Exercise is indispensable for people in my profession, so I deliberately go roundabout ways.

I brew myself yet more coffee, and face the display. Then I spend six hours working, with one or more breaks for tea.

Preparing dinner takes a measure of time and effort. I try not to go out to eat.

After mealtime, I watch a video I prerecorded. When I turn off the TV, I put on my nightcap and peruse my freshly purchased new publication.

At the end of the day, I check the cable TV program guide and pick a show to record.

Ah, it's already morning. It's another nice day, too. Laundry time.

.....And that has been the kind of everyday lifestyle that your humble author, Morioka, aspires to.

Speaking of which, when I was kid, I liked writing up plans for what to do during summer break. I always thought it would be sweet to go through summer break with just a grand plan. Alas, I was the type who would never follow through, even when it was my own plan, so the end of August was invariably hell.

How does the expression go? "As the child, so the man." A lazy kid would never grow up into an industrious and diligent adult. Actually, let me amend that statement, as there may just be some of you who'd respond with "I was a lazy kid, but now I'm a fine hard-working grown-up." So, I can't speak in

generalities, but at least in my case, I never shook the laziness.

That is why I say to you, I'm so, so sorry, please forgive me, it took this long to get BANNER OF THE STARS II to you. I must confess, I never thought my pen would ever get this lethargic. To think, I'd been under the impression that I was slightly above average in terms of writing speed. How wrong I was. And I must keep myself from wondering, "Hmm, well, I still can't help but think it strange. How could you be this slow?" Because no answer will come, and it'll draw out the penning of this afterword, too.

A lot has happened since the release of BANNER I. CREST OF THE STARS received the Seiun Award, and I was even thrown a party for it. Even during that joyous occasion, I got asked variations on "when's the next book coming out, though?" but that's just me reaping what I've sown.

Out of all of it, what left a big impression on me was how a reader treated me to *tirec nomr* at an establishment named Nanatei in Nishiogikubo. *Tirec nomr* is Baronh for peach juice, but at Nanatei they warmed the juice and made a lemon wedge float in it.

That's what Lafier said she enjoys in CREST II. I'd written that thinking "if she likes something like that, something must be very amiss with her palate," but it's actually quite tasty. What I'd thought was a weird beverage for Lafier to like turned out all right after all. Goes to show you, you ought to give anything a try.

Now for an announcement: CREST OF THE STARS is going to be made into an anime, airing nationwide via WOWOW. It's scheduled to premiere in January of 1999, but the exact date and time slot aren't clear yet.

I've heard there's speculation going around that I'm now too focused on the anime to write the next novels, but that is false. I'll only be truly busy with things regarding the anime sometime down the road. Up to this current point in time, I've done little of note anime-wise besides attending meetings and voice actor auditions. I don't know how much time I'll need to spend on it, but the fine folks of the production staff will be far busier than me.

Lastly, one other thing: Regarding BANNER OF THE STARS III, the last volume in the Dyaho Trilogy (what, you didn't know the first three Banner books were the Dyaho Trilogy?), I would love to put it out there as soon as possible, but I'm

suffering a lapse of confidence at the moment, so I can't say for sure when it will be ready.

I hope we meet again in the afterword of BANNER III, and that that reunion occurs sooner rather than later.

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Banner of the Stars: Volume 2

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