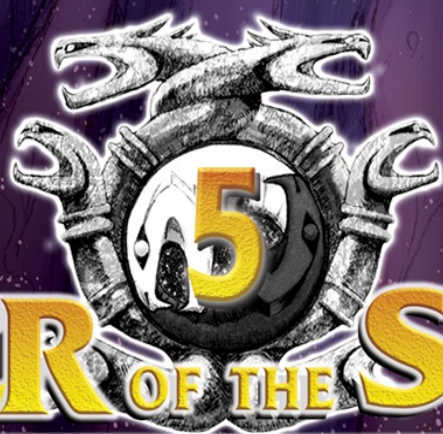


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BANNER OF THE STARS

DESTINY'S REFRAIN

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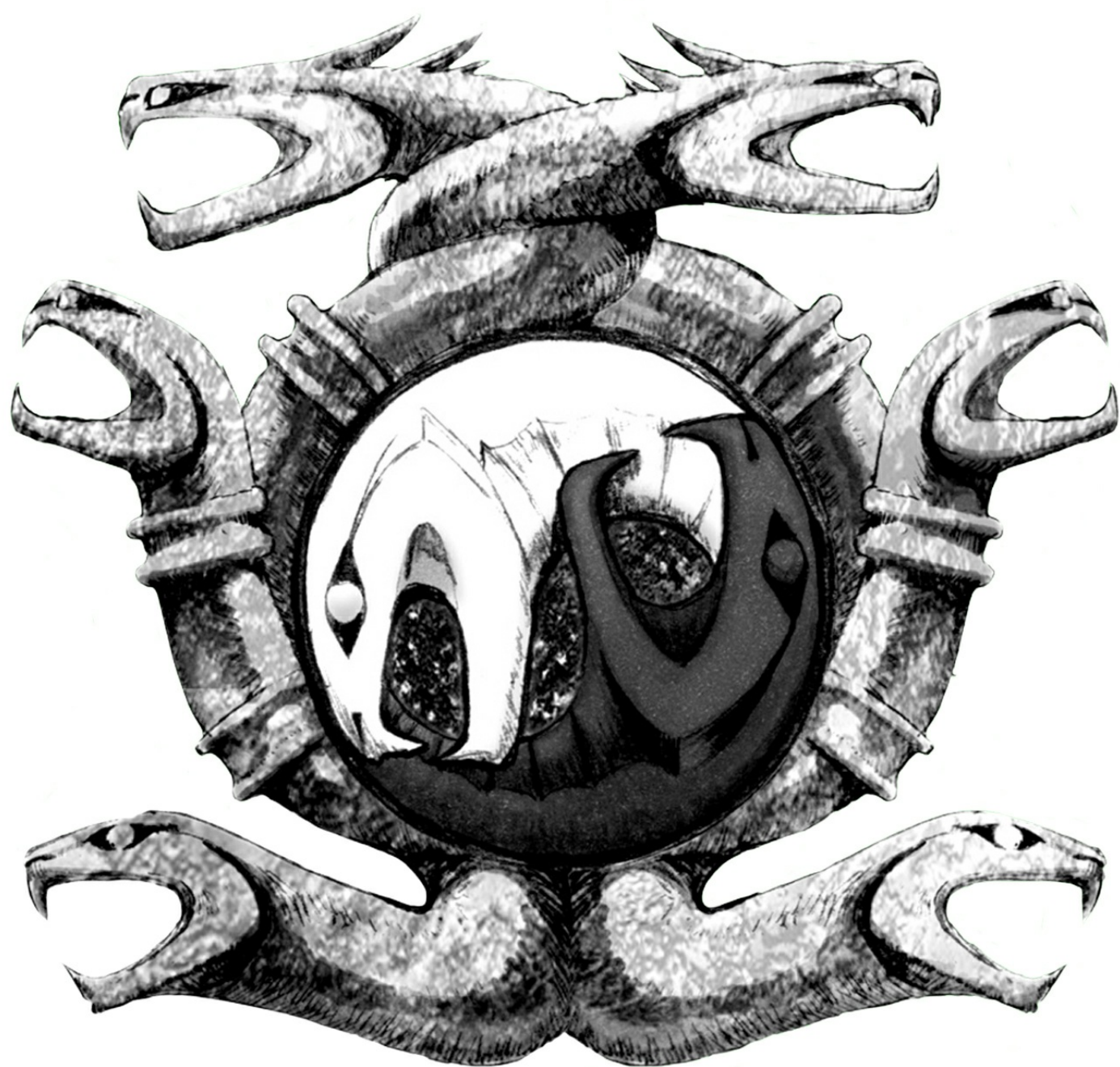


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Welcome Back to the Abh Empire!

Welcome “back”?

Yes - to fully enjoy *BANNER OF THE STARS*, you need to read the three-volume *CREST OF THE STARS* first. (It’s out in print omnibus form!) It explains the ins and outs of the fictional future author MORIOKA Hiroyuki 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 as of the time of this writing (its sixth volume having been released in 2018), and according to MORIOKA, *CREST* was something of an introductory primer to this, the “story proper.” For the most part, 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*, Volumes I-III of *BANNER* are *self-contained stories* in addition to being a part of an overarching saga. Pick up and read this omnibus at your leisure!

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

I was seven years old when I first visited the Hall of Remembrance. My grandfather had taken me. I could not have paid it a visit by myself. It was my first time visiting the Imperial Palace as well, but back then, I wasn't aware I was setting foot in the very heart of the Empire. I was simply excited by how enormous the planetoid was, as I had never seen anything like it before.

At the Imperial Palace, a woman was waiting for us. I had never met her before, but I later learned that she is my gene donor. I don't remember what the three of us talked about on our way to the Hall, though I'm fairly certain it was mostly her and my grandfather that did the talking. Eventually, we entered the Hall, and I was captivated by its sheer size. Soon enough, I found myself before the pillar we had come to see.

The woman picked me up and brought me closer to a specific section of the pillar. I instantly understood my father's name was written there.

"For as long as the Empire exists," said my grandfather, "your father's name will be here, and it will never come to harm."

I'm sure the reason I felt so somber was not because I grasped the true meaning of his words, but rather because I got swept up in the special atmosphere of the place.

—Excerpted from the memoirs of *Beryac Üémh Bairr Geuc*

BANNER OF THE STARS V: Destiny's Refrain

Synopsis of BANNER OF THE STARS IV

The war between the Humankind Empire of Abh and the Three Nations Alliance has reached its seventh year. The overall tide of war had unfolded in the Empire's advantage, with Operation Twin Thorns put into effect to press the attack. Lafier and Jint participated as crew on the raid ship *Flicaubh*, while Duhier joined the battle-line ship *Caïsaumh*.

Meanwhile, the Hania Federation was about to be assimilated into the Empire, and yet another strategy, Operation Snow Crystal, was hatched. Yet suddenly, Hanian fleets began invading the *Clybh* Monarchy, thereby commencing the enemy's march on the imperial capital.

Characters

Lafier

...Ship Commander of the raid ship *Flicaubh*, granddaughter of the Empress of the Abh Empire, and a Vice Hecto-Commander.

Jint

...The *Flicaubh*'s Clerk, the Count of Hyde, and a quartermaster vanguard starpilot.

Ecryua

...The *Flicaubh*'s Vice Commander-cum-Navigator, and a Deca-Commander.

Grinshia

...The *Flicaubh*'s Inspector Supervisor, and a Deca-Commander.

Yatesh

...The *Flicaubh*'s Communications Officer, and a rearguard starpilot Arbohf

...The *Flicaubh*'s Gunner, and a vanguard starpilot.

Gnohmbohsh

...The *Flicaubh*'s Messenger, and a linewing starpilot.

Samson

...Main Retainer of the House of Hyde.

Lecsh

...A linewing starpilot.

Duhier

...A communications officer aboard the battle-line ship *Caïsaumh*, Lafier's younger brother, and a linewing starpilot.

Behrsoht

...The *Caïsaumh*'s Ship Commander, and a Hecto-Commander.

Vohnyuh (*Bhonh*) ...A communications officer aboard the *Caïsaumh*, and a rearguard starpilot.

Atosryua

...Commandant of Trample-Blitz Squadron 1, and a Kilo-Commander.

Sobash

...Trample Blitz Squadron 1's Senior Staff Officer.

Lamazh

...The Empress, and 27th Ruler of the Abh Empire.

Dusanyuh

...Fleet Commander-in-Chief, and the Crown Prince.

Cohtponee

...Fleet Commander-in-Chief, and an admiral.

Brahsh

...Chancellor of the Abh Empire.

Faramunsh

...The Abh Military Command Headquarters Director.

Prologue

The words “operation” or “strategy” stood for many different kinds of battle plans, from those prepared by Central over long stretches, to the ideas that came to on-site troop commanders on the fly.

In the **Empire’s** case, important operations were called *rüé cfazaitec* (imperial missions). And as a rule, when it came to imperial missions, war departure ceremonies were conducted in the **Imperial Palace** for **Fleet Command**. It was on these occasions that, as custom had it, the **Empress** herself bestowed the **fleet banner** to the **Commander-in-Chief**, and communicated the mission verbally.

The first official business of *Abliarsec Néïc Dubreuscr Duhirh*, Viscount of Wemdyse, had been to attend one of these war departure ceremonies. Of course, as Duhier was very young, he had not been charged with any sort of essential duty. He had just stood there in the **Audience Chamber** like some sculpture. Yet he remembered the scene vividly. He had not been the only young **Imperial** present.

Imperial law stipulated twenty years old as the age of maturity, but it was different for **Imperials**, who would not be recognized as adults until they were ordained as **starpilots**, their age notwithstanding. The oldest “minor” in the history of the empire (name withheld to uphold the honor of that particular royal family) had been seventy-two. Said minor had continually refused to enter an **academy**, and ultimately met their demise through a rather dull accident. In addition, **Imperial** minors were categorized into three stages. Needless to say, the stage closest to adulthood was enrollment at an **academy**. The obligation incumbent on the smallest Imperial children was to grow up vigorous and healthy. There were some who said they had a second duty — namely, to be adorable — but that opinion wasn’t terribly popular. After all, if that were the case, what duty would be left for the cats?

The kids occupying the stage between those two were tasked with suffering

through these important ceremonies. As such, all of the youths of the **Eight Royal Families** were in attendance — the point of which Duhier still could not figure out. Upon reflection, perhaps it was a ploy to pressure them into enrolling in an **academy** sooner rather than later — that is, if they wanted to escape this drudgery. One or more of their ancestors assuredly feared the appearance of a descendant who would tarnish the **surname** of Abliar by indulging in indolence and running away from their responsibilities indefinitely. And while there was the aforementioned Abliar that died as a seventy-two-year-old minor, it probably did more or less have the effect they were hoping for. It was just so, so boring. They were forced to stay still for an amount of time that was by no means short. To a seven-year-old, even just a single hour was 1/61,320th of their whole life, and it usually took longer than just an hour. And he was forced to spend a not insignificant fragment of his life without the slightest movement. It was torture, plain and simple.

Duhier ended up looking up at the ceiling, from which hung countless **crest banners**, each representing a star system governed by a **lord or lady**, (also known as a liege). Before he knew it, he was searching to see if there was a banner depicting the **eight-headed dragon** with a handful of five-petaled yellow flowers — Duhier’s own banner. The same **coat of arms** was applied to various articles in his daily life, such as the tableware or his toys. But his search for the *Glac Bærr Üémdaiser* (Banner of the Viscount of Wemdyse) was cut short by a powerful elbow to the side.

His older sister, the **Viscountess of Parhynh Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Lamhirh**, had been standing beside him. She hadn’t said a word, and her jet-black eyes were facing straight ahead, but the intent behind that blow was clear. Duhier corrected his wandering gaze and tried his best not to move. Back then, Duhier couldn’t even fathom defying his sister, for she disdained a rebellious little brother even more than a wimpy cat.

Duhier may have feared her, but that didn’t mean he disliked her. In fact, he rather missed having opportunities to defy her (there hadn’t been many as of late).

The youngest **Imperials** were facing each other in the Hall, lined up in two rows. Those older than them were standing right by the stairs. Eight specially

selected **honor guard NCCs** from all over the **Star Forces** stood on the stairs, looking down on the Imperials. At the top of the stairs was placed the **Jade Throne**, and several **chamberlains** were waiting to either side of it. And on that **throne**, the bearer of the **circlet** featuring the **eight-headed dragon** — **Empress Lamagh** — was seated in total stillness .

Duhier glanced her way. *Even if I become Emperor, I bet the only special privilege I'd get is the ability to stay seated during these boring ceremonies.* Ever since then, he'd never once harbored any desire to obtain the **emperorship**.

Of course, he'd only sneaked the most fleeting of glimpses at his grandmother, and that was because he was unsure his ribs could take another of his sister's elbows.

His line of sight was now occupied by *Lamdaigh*, the *Bærh Spyrr* (Viscountess of *Spyrh*) of the **Royal Family of Wesco**. This was solely due to the fact that she happened to be right in front of him. Behind her, the distinguished persons of the Empire could be seen. They had formed a line with quite some distance between them.

“Crown Prince-cum-Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief, King of Barkeh Abliarsec Néic Lamsarr Fiác Dusanr.”

So said the *Scadoriac* (Ceremony Master), cluing Duhier into who had entered. The moment Duhier sensed *Dusanh's* presence through his *frocragh*, the *Rüé Oll* (National Anthem) commenced. The **Crown Prince's long robe** billowed as he passed in eyeshot of the **Imperials** and proceeded toward the **throne**, taking no notice of his surroundings as he was followed by his staff officers, whose names the **Ceremony Master** called out as well.

At last, Duhier was released from the grinding tedium of staring at *Lamdaigh's* face. Focusing on the ceremony was his next obligation.

At the base of the stairs, *Dusanh* bowed deeply. *Lamagh* stood up straight.

“We hand Our decree down to you, Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief,” said the **Empress**. **“You are to form the *Byrec Roniaürr* (Quicksand Fleet) and serve as its Commander-in-Chief as well.”**

“I accept Your Majesty's decree with reverence,” said *Dusanh*.

The chamberlain carrying the **crest banner** came to the **Empress's** side, and she received it. It was the banner of the **Quicksand Fleet**.

"Come," the **Empress** ordered.

Dusanh ascended the stairs and was granted the **crest banner**.

Following that, the rite whereby he was handed the operational writ by the **Director of Military Command** was conducted. Naturally, this writ was also a formality. Their mission was written in concise terms on a paper made of plant-based materials and stamped with the **Empress's** signature and *gnafass* (handstamp), all in ink. The actual contents of their mission were much more voluminous, and were recorded and transmitted by electronic means.

"**Grand Commodore** Kenesh," called the **Military Command Director, Imperial Admiral Sædac** (Sehda).

A female **starpilot** stepped forward from among *Dusanh's* staff officers. Her countenance was a stern one, but she was wrapped up in something of an aura of uneasiness. She was to become the new fleet's **Chief of Staff**.

A long time later, Duhier would learn this was Sehda's last task as **Command Director**. *So lucky*, he thought. He had been 13 or 14 at the time, and he was forced as always to be an unmoving statue at each ceremony. He'd brooded over how his life hadn't even really started yet. He was bound to his duties as an **Imperial** for what seemed like an eternity, and that thought depressed him with regularity.

Now that some of the rites had concluded, the **Empress** spoke: "The likelihood of a battle breaking out during this operation is exceedingly low. We fully expect from the **Commander-in-Chief** that one will not occur. Incorporate that isolated world as a **territory-nation** without harming the new fief or its people, and of course, without harming Our ships."

"So in other words, if a battle were to break out, that in itself would be a defeat for the **Empire**?" asked *Dusanh*.

"It would be *your* defeat, **King of Barkeh**. There is no such thing as defeat for the **Empire**. All We are saying is that if you should somehow *need* to open hostilities despite Our overwhelming military strength, then Our

disappointment would be something to behold.”

“How *parsimonious* of **Your Majesty**,” he smiled.

“We must all distinguish between when to be ‘parsimonious’ and when to be extravagant. When We determined the fleet’s composition, We were quite extravagant.”

“Now then, Your Majesty, I promise the **Empire** the surest of victories.”

“We knew from the beginning that you haven’t the ears to hear Our justification.”

Dusanh just bowed courteously.

“We hereby declare that *Cfazaitec Ronïaürr* (Operation Quicksand) is underway.” *Lamagh* held up her *Rüé Greuc* (Imperial Command Baton). “*Sathote Frybarari* (victory be the Empire’s)!”

“*Sathote Frybarari!*” said everyone in the Hall in unison.

Duhier had also joined in the hail, but he feared his voice had been a little quiet. He braced for another blow to the ribs, but fortunately his sister refrained from elbowing him.

Afterward, the **Quicksand Fleet** headed for the star system later named the **Countdom of Hyde**, and just as the **Empress** desired, the Empire incorporated a new **territory-nation** without a battle breaking out.

Though it was a wartime operation, the **Operation Snow Crystal** of the present day was thought to be much the same — no plans to engage in battle were included in it. Each of the troops and units of the **Snow Crystal Fleet** would soon learn how wrong they had been. In the case of the **strike sub-fleet** *Gudersec*, they found out at the *Üéch Sauder Dininr* (Portal-Sea of Dineen) in the Hania Federation.

Chapter 1: The *Lomtuchoth Frybarer* (Failure of the Empire)

“A **space-time bubble** has emerged from the *Saudec Dininr* (Dineen Portal),” reported **Senior Communications Officer** and **Rearguard Starpilot** *Bhonh* on the **bridge** of the *Caïsaumh*, a **battle-line ship** belonging to **Squadron 1** of the strike sub-fleet *Gudersec*. “Based on its mass, it is probably the **patrol ship** *Gaimdigh*.”

“Wait, it’s not a **conveyance ship**?” asked the **Ship Commander**, **Hecto-Commander** Behrsoht.

“No, sir,” said *Bhonh*. “Based on its mass, it can’t be.”

“They’ve already come floating back up?” he moaned. “Why don’t they try being enthusiastic about their work, given they’ve only occasionally got things to do?”

“Is that a question for the *Gaimdigh*?”

“It’s not a question. I’m just blasting them.”

As the *Gudersec* was a strike sub-fleet, it comprised mostly battle-line ships. But a corps of only battle-line ships would be less than ideal in a variety of ways. As such, two old-model patrol ships under the direct supervision of *Glagamh İadbyrer* (Sub-Fleet Command) had been inserted. The *Gaimdigh* was one of them, and had rushed into the **Dineen Portal** under orders to scope out the other side. Battle-line ships had inferior maneuverability and weren’t suited for **3-space** recon, which was where patrol ships came in.

“You can criticize them, sir,” said *Bhonh*, “but they’re the ones who have been working the most as of late.”

The *Caïsaumh*’s **Deputy Communications Officer**, Duhier, was suddenly apprehensive. And though he couldn’t pinpoint why he felt anxious, it seemed all the personnel on the **bridge** were feeling the same way. *Bhonh*’s wise-cracking could be thought of as a sign of that tension.

Normally, **strike sub-fleets** did not act independently. They were generally paired up with **assault** or **recon sub-fleets** as part of a larger fleet. This was because battle-line ships were frail **warships**; if a strike sub-fleet hypothetically entered combat against an assault sub-fleet, the former had virtually no chance of prevailing. Even while the **assault ships'** numbers were in the process of diminishing thanks to the initial bomb strike, they would still infiltrate the enemy's **bubbles** and consign the battle-line ships to oblivion. Despite their giant size, battle-line ships had precious little by way of firepower besides their mines.

And yet, the *Gudersec* was currently all alone — evidence that the danger level was thought to be low.

“We’ve received an **inter-bubble communication**. The **bubble** has been confirmed to be the *Gaimdigh*,” said *Bhonh*. “A small-mass bubble, presumably a **conveyance ship**, has split from the *Gaimdigh*. Ah! Several bubbles have emerged from the **Portal!**”

Behrsoht bolted to his feet. “Stage 1 War Preparations! All hands on duty! **Navigator**, shift the **bubble** to **total mobile-state** and set a 180-degree course! Just get us away from the **Portal!**”

“Roger!”

The **alarm** began sounding.

“Prepare to fire!” ordered Behrsoht. “Fill the mines up with **antimatter fuel!**”

“Roger!” said **Deca-Commander Cazzubh** (Cazzuv), the **Senior Gunner**. “Filling the mines.”

“**Deputy Communications Officer**,” whispered *Bhonh*.

“Yes, ma’am?” Duhier looked up at her.

“I’m leaving the **inter-bubble communications** to you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said a grateful Duhier. It would have been unbearable to have nothing to do in a situation like this. “I will monitor **inter-bubble communications**.”

“Our orders from the **flagship?**” asked Behrsoht, wasting no time. He was

looking straight at Duhier.

Duhier strained his *froch*. The inner surfaces of the **bubbles** in the direction of the **flagship** were dead silent. “None yet, sir.”

Behrsoht clicked his tongue. “Whatever. We’re going to torpedo them. I want you firing those mines the second they’re filled up.”

“But we’re not sure if they’re the enemy,” said the **Vice Commander, Deca-Commander Crobosec**.

Once a **mobile space-time mine** was fired out into space, it was practically impossible to retrieve. Consequently, very particular regulations dictated the firing of **mines**, and at the moment, those conditions had yet to be met.

“You think those things are here to welcome us?” said Behrsoht.

“The chances they aren’t the enemy are nonzero,” said Crohbos.

“No, they *are* zero,” said Behrsoht quietly. “And this is coming from the king of indecisiveness, who takes half an hour to agonize over what to order as an apéritif. I am asserting without the tiniest sliver of hesitation that that is the enemy. They want us dead. The malice pointed squarely at us is palpable.”

“Shooting **mines** at them so readily without first confirming their identity...”

“So readily? If those things are **mines**, then this ship will be the first to get hit,” said Behrsoht.

“You’re mistaken, sir,” said *Bhonh*.

“What was that?” He raised a displeased eyebrow.

“The first is the *Gaimdigh*!” The **bubbles** that appeared from the **Dineen Portal** were fusing one after the other with the **patrol ship’s bubble**. “The *Gaimdigh’s bubble* is now gone. It likely exploded, sir,” continued the **Senior Communications Officer**, stating what everyone on the **bridge** already inferred.

Behrsoht snorted. “Hurry up and fire the **mines**!”

This time, Crohbos did not object.

“Mine 1 filled. Firing now,” said Cazzuv.

Just then, Duhier sensed a ripple in the **bubble’s** inner surface through his

frocragh. He'd been waiting for this. "An **inter-bubble** from the **flagship**!"

"What is it?" said Behrsoht.

The chain of **space-time particles** emitted by the **flagship** was more of a code than a straightforward transmission.

"An order to assemble," he reported.

"Tsk. Taking their sweet time, I see. Has the assembly point been designated?"

"Just a second." Duhier focused his *frocragh*. But it was just the same code over and over again. "No, sir, no specification."

"Well, I guess they can't formulate a strategy during a situation like this," said Behrsoht, in consideration of **Command**'s current predicament. "Stay the course."

"Are you ignoring the assembly order, sir?" said Crohbos.

"I'm not ignoring anything. There was no specification as to the time, so I can't be said to have ignored it. I'm issuing commands as the circumstances demand. If we edged up to the **flagship** now, what do you think would happen? This ship would blow, and then we couldn't *ever* assemble. Now *that's* disobeying orders. Use your head a little, **Deca-Commander**. And another thing — being the **Vice Commander** doesn't mean your job is to constantly raise objections."

*Looks like I'm not the only one who isn't getting on with the **Ship Commander**,* thought Duhier.

With the **Portal** at the center and from the *Caïsaumh*'s viewpoint, the **flagship** was at a ninety-degree angle from them. That meant that if they tried to approach the **flagship**, they would have to intersect with the swarm of enemy **mines**.

"I'm making escaping from the enemy **mines**' range our top priority for the time being." Behrsoht shifted his gaze back to Duhier. "**Deputy Communications Officer**, inform **Fleet Command**."

"Roger." Duhier composed a short message and showed it to him. "Will this

be all right, sir?" Behrsoht nodded, so Duhier encrypted it and sent it over to the **flagship**.

Meanwhile, the *Caïsaumh*'s mines were fired one by one, though they remained within the ship's **bubble**. In addition, the distance between them and the enemy **mines** was decreasing by leaps and bounds.

"Will we make it?" Behrsoht asked *Bhonh*.

"If the enemy **mines**' specs are what we think they are, then we should make it."

"What you *think* they are?" he said in disgust. "I want a plain yes or no. Have Hania's **mines** not been looked at?"

"Even if they have, sir, that information isn't on the ship. Besides..."

"What?"

The **Senior Communications Officer** just went ahead and said it: "They might not be Hanian mines, sir."

Silence.

"...You're right. If they're, say, those long-range PSSU **mines**, then are we cooked?"

"They would catch up with us, yes," said *Bhonh*.

"Half of the **mines** ready to fire," said the **Senior Gunner**. "Continuing to eject them."

"Got it. For now, I want us torpedoing them with that half. Set your targets and prioritize the ones coming for us."

"Setting targets." Cazzuv's finger danced in his **control gauntlet**.

A handful of **bubbles** on the **map of planar space** started flickering — they had become targets.

"Our counter-attack's full of holes," groaned Behrsoht.

"This is all this ship can manage alone, sir," said Cazzuv.

"It can't be helped." Behrsoht drew out his **command baton** and reset a few

of the targets. “That’s good like that. Now **split off** all the **mines** on standby.”

“**Splitting** them off,” said Cazzuv.

The *Caïsaumh* was the first to fire its **mines**. The others followed suit a bit later. But nobody on the bridge of the *Caïsaumh* had the time or complacency to be ascertaining their consort ships’ battle achievements.

“One minute until estimated **space-time fusion** sector.”

With naught else to do, Duhier’s eyes were glued to the **planar space map**. The **patrol ship** at the front of the pack turned back. It was the *Pundigh*, the only **patrol ship** in the *Gudersec*.

“**Deputy Communications Officer**,” said Behrsoht. “I’m relieving you of your current duty and appointing you the **conveyance ship**’s **Skipper**. Go prepare it for takeoff, now.”

“The **conveyance ship**, sir?” Duhier was dumbfounded. For a second, he wondered whether Behrsoht meant to let him and only him escape. But then he remembered he hadn’t yet revealed **Commander-in-Chief** Cohtponee’s secret directive. And this **Ship Commander** didn’t seem like the type to prioritize Duhier’s life.

“That’s right,” Behrsoht nodded. “And the **smallcrafts** too. Get them all ready for takeoff. And take command of all of it. But the **conveyance ship** is your first priority.”

I guess it was egotistical of me to think it was for my sake alone, he thought, secretly ashamed of himself. He hoped no one noticed the redness in his cheeks.

The **Ship Commander** wasn’t thinking about just Duhier, but about prepping the evacuation of the entire crew.

Saumh-class **battle-line ships** were loaded with four **smallcrafts**. They had no use in everyday ship life. They were used for the purposes of escape when the ship was facing destruction. There were also a large number of **lifeboats** for when **smallcrafts** alone wouldn’t cut it.

But the **space-time bubble** Duhier was in, an isolated fourth-dimensional

pocket of space-time, was maintained by the *Caïsaumh*'s **bubble generator**. If the *Caïsaumh* was destroyed, then even if they managed to escape, the bubble itself would vanish and the crewmembers' bodily forms would scatter in the form of **space-time particles** along with the **lifeboats** and/or **smallcrafts**.

The only onboard-ship equipped with its own **bubble generator** was the **conveyance ship**. While a **conveyance ship**'s seating capacity was a measly two, that was in order to allow for long navigation times. In addition, there was space for cargo on a **conveyance ship**, so more people could fit in there so long as the passengers didn't mind an uncomfortable ride. Be that as it may, one couldn't ever accommodate the entire crew of a **battle-line ship**. The **bubble** generated by a **conveyance ship** could very well envelop **lifeboats** and **smallcrafts**, though. It would have to support an excess of mass, so the energy could only be sustained for a short time, but it would still be enough time to be worth buying. Their bubble would just have to hold out until they could reach a consort ship's **bubble**.

"Yes, I will prepare the **conveyance ship** and all the **smallcrafts** for takeoff, sir. Should I remain on standby there once I've finished preparing them, sir?"

"No, come back here," Behrsoht replied immediately. "You don't even know that much? I need *all* hands on deck. I could even use a baby bird's beak on deck! Unless you hate being here?"

"That is not the case, sir." Duhier was seething. He hated this **Ship Commander**, sure, but he'd never hated his post.

"That so? Of course, I don't really care what a baby bird loves or hates. Actually, I changed my mind. When you're finished, ask me for your orders. You might not have the time to return."

The way he'd constantly revise his orders was another reason Duhier hated the man. He acted like he was steady-handed and decisive, but in fact he was the opposite. Even when he made decisions, he was second-guessing himself inside his head. Given his wording earlier, it appeared he did have a modicum of self-awareness, but that wasn't an excuse.

On the other hand, the situation *was* extremely fluid. In fact, this might be the only time that that style of giving orders was the most appropriate one.

Duhier saluted. “Roger that, sir.” Then he ran toward the *zocrh paunelacr* (onboard-ship holding deck). He was sorry he couldn’t stay on the **bridge**, but he wasn’t dissatisfied. He knew that this was an important task.

After getting in the elevator, Duhier used his **wristgear**.

“This is the *Üass Paunér* (onboard-ship servicing head).”

“This is the **Deputy Communications Officer**,” said Duhier, also going by his job title. “The **Ship Commander** has appointed me as the **conveyance ship’s Skipper**. I’d like you to prepare it for takeoff at once.”

“Roger that, **Deputy Communications Officer**.”

“I’d also like you to prepare the **smallcrafts** for takeoff; can you do them simultaneously?”

“I can, **Deputy Communications Officer**. I will prepare the **conveyance ship** and the four **smallcrafts** for takeoff.”

“Please.”

He’d been ordered to direct the takeoff preparations, but there was nothing Duhier could really do. Once he issued the order, the actual preparations were done by **NCCs** with the necessary technical expertise.

I hope it’s done by the time I go, he thought. He wanted to go back to the **bridge** if possible. Even if that odious man was at the helm.

The **elevator** door opened. It was the storage deck, and there were several **NCCs** there.

“**Skipper**.” One of the NCCs, a black-haired Lander woman, saluted. He didn’t know her name, but her rank insignia pegged her as the **Senior NCC Leader**. And he could tell by her voice that she was the Servicing Head that he’d talked to moments earlier.

He returned the salute in a rush. “How’s the situation?”

“The **smallcrafts** are ready. As for the **conveyance ship**, its **bubble generator** is still undergoing maintenance checks.”

“I see. Please hurry.”

The **Skipper** usually performed the final inspection. Duhier was not the **Skipper** of the **smallcrafts**. When evacuation was imminent, somebody would probably be appointed to those roles. When that time came, there might not be enough time to bother with final inspections.

That was why Behrsoht ordered Duhier to take command of the **smallcrafts'** launch preparations. Duhier set about the final inspection of the **smallcrafts**. He'd memorized the operational procedure, as he'd had to repeat it so much at the **academy** that he would even dream about it, and he'd done it countless times after assuming his position on the ship. He got the job done quickly.

"Is the **conveyance ship** ready for takeoff now?" he asked the Servicing Head.

"Yes, it is. **All clear**, sir. Its maintenance status is flawless."

"Good work." Duhier dashed up into the Steerer's Seat.

A **conveyance ship** was a much more complex and intricate machine than a **smallcraft**. Though he was used to the procedure, it still took about as long to run the final inspection on a single conveyance ship as it did four different smallcrafts.

"**Ship Commander**," said Duhier through his **wristgear**. "Preparation to take off is complete."

"That was fast," said Behrsoht.

"Thank you very much, sir."

"It wasn't a compliment. You sure you didn't overlook something?"

Duhier was miffed. He took care not to let that bleed over, though. "I didn't, sir."

"I'll choose to believe you, **Your Highness**. Now stand by."

Duhier knitted his brows. It seemed as though he wasn't needed. "Do I not need to return, sir?"

"That's what I said."

"Is the situation bad, sir?"

"I haven't got the time to explain it to you," said Behrsoht bluntly.

And he had a point. A **ship commander** had more important work to be doing than explaining things at length to a novice **starpilot**.

“I apologize. I will stand by, sir.”

“Uh-huh,” he grumbled sullenly. And with that, the transmission cut off.

Duhier pulled up the **planar space map** on the ship’s main screen. The distance between them and the **flagship** was farther now. And they were still getting chased by several **mines**. The ship’s own **mines** had all been used up. Their quandary could scarcely be worse.

A transmission from Crohbos: “**Deputy Communications Officer**. We will eject the **conveyance ship** electromagnetically.”

Isn’t it a bit too soon for that? But Duhier desisted from raising an objection.

The **Vice Commander** must have sensed the young Abliar’s dissatisfaction: “Just to be sure. It’s just to be sure. And *Almüésach Sair* (Senior Engine NCC Leader) *Aïdairh* will be riding with you.”

“Roger.” Duhier opened the **conveyance ship**’s switchgate.

The *sach sair* (engine NCC) was accompanying him because someone needed to take care of the **space-time bubble generator**. Typically, a **Mechanics Branch** worker wouldn’t be ordered aboard a **conveyance ship**. Small-scale **bubble generators** rarely ever broke, and even in the odd event that one did, it would be difficult to do repairs in such a cramped space. It was usually impossible. But this time around, they likely wanted to raise the survival chances of the **conveyance ship**, even if only by a little. That, or perhaps they wanted to make the **bubble** last longer by sending in a **bubble generator** technician.

“Listen. You are the ship’s safety valve,” said Crohbos. “If the **conveyance ship** is lost, we’ll lose any chance to escape. So I don’t care if you’re unhappy with life — don’t explode on us.”

“I won’t, sir.”

Boarding the **conveyance ship** did not guarantee his safety. If the enemy’s **mines** were equipped with decent search functionality, then they wouldn’t be aiming for a conveyance ship, but being stuck inside a **space-time bubble**, there

was never exactly a shortage of danger. For example, if a **battle-line ship's** mobile turrets successfully intercepted an attack, the mines would spray antimatter plasma, which was plenty threatening to a small ship. To avoid eating an antimatter shock wave required careful piloting.

The Servicing Head got in and saluted once again. “**Senior Engine NCC Leader Aïdairh**, reporting in. I’ve been made temporary *Dorodoigac Dora Flasatairr Pairrair* (Conveyance Ship Space-Time Bubble Generator Embarkation Servicer), and I will be riding alongside you. It’s a pleasure to work with you, **Linewing Starpilot**.”

“The pleasure is mine,” he said, without looking at her. “Have a seat, **Senior NCC Leader**.”

Aïdairh sat next to him and put on her **seatbelt**. “The **Skipper** and the *Dorodoigac* (Servicer) are here. Requesting transferral to the **takeoff deck**,” Duhier requested of the **bridge**.

“Roger,” said Crohbos.

The giant **transporter** upon which the **conveyance ship** lay started moving. Duhier linked his **access-cables** up to his seat. When the **conveyance ship** reached the **takeoff deck**, the partition closed behind them.

“Conducting semi-emergency ejection,” said Crohbos.

“Roger.” Duhier equipped the **control gauntlet** to his left hand. “Preparation for takeoff complete. Requesting opening of lock gate.”

“Opening lock gate.”

For an emergency ejection, the lock gate door would get blown away. Semi-emergency ejections weren’t as extreme, but the deck wasn’t decompressed, and the **conveyance ships** were ejected along with the air.

The door opened before their eyes. The water vapor froze and swirled into a white fog before getting sucked out with tremendous force.

“Ten seconds to electromagnetic propulsion.” It seemed Crohbos would provide the countdown. “...Three, two, one, propelling.”

The acceleration pinned Duhier’s back to his seat. The next moment, his

frocragh perceived the inner surface of the **bubble**. It “felt” featureless, as it was not yet foaming. He checked the **planar space map** and stood corrected — it wasn’t quite the “worst possible scenario” from before. Shooting out into *this* was even worse. And even then, this probably wasn’t the worst it would get.

“Enemy ships?” asked *Aïdairh*.

“Probably,” he replied laconically.

A number of **bubbles** too massive to be **mines** had gushed out from the **Dineen Portal**. Going by their mass, they were single-ship **patrol ship** bubbles or multiple-ship **assault ship** bubbles. Of course, in a battlefield this utterly unpredictable, the possibility they *were* gargantuan **mines** couldn’t be denied. No matter what they were, however, there was no way they wouldn’t be able to catch up to a sluggish **battle-line ship**. The *Caïsaumh*’s fate was sealed now. Even if it did manage to stave off the **mine** onslaught, it would then get attacked by the enemy ships, and while they had a shot of winning against **assault ships**, there was only one way it was going to end against a **patrol ship**.

Duhier’s thoughts went to the **Deputy Communications Officer**’s Seat he’d always sat in. He now knew just how peaceful it’d been compared to the Steerer’s Seat of a **conveyance ship**.

Time passed.

Froth on the **bubble**’s inner surface — the lead enemy **mine** was **fusing** with them. For the time being, they had to prioritize dealing with that. Duhier brought the **conveyance ship** closer to the **battle-line ship**, which was to their rear from the perspective of the point of fusion. To put it simply, they were trying to use the mother ship as a shield. Duhier got in position and activated the magnetic shielding.

“**Deputy Communications Officer**,” came a transmission. It was Crohbos. “Got a grasp on the situation?”

“Yes,” said Duhier, nodding with gloom in his heart.

“We’ll intercept the **mines**. Then we’ll abandon ship.”

“Roger.” Though he’d known that was coming, now that that course of action had been definitively decided on, he couldn’t keep calm. Yet he could hardly

afford to raise a fuss while in the Steerer's Seat, either. "Where are you going to flee?"

"I'm glad the **Ship Commander** can't hear us," said Crohbos, chuckling. "He's cranky at the moment. He wouldn't condone using the word 'flee.'"

"So...?"

"Ah. He'll be giving out the order later, but we'll probably be going to the **patrol ship** *Pundigh*. Can't think of where else it could be."

"Understood."

Duhier looked at the **planar space map** once again. The *Pundigh* was quite far. Still, it was the closest **patrol ship**. The next closest was several thousand *cédlairh* away. The other **battle-line ship** would almost certainly make the same decision as the *Caïsaumh*. In fact, **Command** may have ordered them to go there already. The *Pundigh* would be busy indeed.

"Looks far..." murmured *Aïdairh*. "Will we be able to reach it?"

"If we can't, we're dead," said Duhier matter-of-factly.

"It would be nice if there was something I could do."

"I hope for our sakes you *don't* get something to do."

Aïdairh smiled. "True."

The **battle-line ship** began firing its **laser cannons**. The **mine** shattered.

"It exploded!"

"I know that," said Duhier curtly.

Aïdairh was acting flustered, but Duhier had calmed down. *Is she being that noisy in order to make me have to be calmer?* He found the thought disagreeable, somehow. But he couldn't take her to task over a hunch. Maybe he was just being his overly self-conscious self. Here, he wasn't a **prince** or the **Viscount of Wemdyse**. He was a mere **linewing starpilot**.

The antimatter that leaked from the **mine** deflected off the **battle-line ship's** magnetic shield. Almost none of it flew toward the **conveyance ship**, so Duhier was relieved.

Then, a different point entirely began to froth. Needless to say, another **mine** was fusing with their space-time. Duhier swiftly maneuvered the **conveyance ship**. The problem was that staying out of the way meant going to where the antimatter mist had accumulated.

*There's no other way, thought Duhier. I just have to believe in the **conveyance ship's** magnetic shield. Believe in the shield. Believe in the shield. Believe in the shield...*

"Deputy Communications Officer, all have abandoned ship," reported Crohbos.

"Roger," nodded Duhier.

Eventually, the **smallcrafts** took off. Possibly because they'd had time to spare, the **lifeboats** hadn't been used. It appeared as though everyone was aboard the **smallcraft**, and that was something to be thankful for. He didn't know what he'd do if he'd had to pick up all of the scattered **lifeboats**. Were they not at war, it could have been rather fun, but he rated the task very differently in a combat situation.

Duhier allowed the **smallcrafts** to get close to the ship and prepared for **space-time splitting**.

The **battle-line ship** was safe. As far as Duhier could tell, it was totally unscathed.

He bit his lip. *What a disgrace. To have to abandon a ship without a scratch on it!*

"Conveyance ship, now ready to split off," reported Duhier.

"This is your Ship Commander speaking," replied Behrsoht. **"I leave it to you, Deputy Communications Officer. Split off and make for the Pundigh."**

"Roger. Splitting in thirty seconds."

"I told you I'm leaving it to you. I don't need specifics. Forget about the countdown and focus all your efforts on piloting."

Duhier shrugged. **"Roger."** He couldn't tell whether Behrsoht had faith in him or not. Judging by how Behrsoht was entrusting this to him, perhaps he did

have faith in him... but judging by how he'd told him to put all his efforts toward piloting, perhaps he didn't.

He glanced at the **map of planar space**. The **bubble** that appeared to be an enemy **patrol ship** had gotten too close for comfort. He didn't have much time. After making sure the ship's **bubble** was enveloping the **smallcraft**, he **split off**. He then hurried away from the *Caïsaumh*'s **bubble**.

Thankfully, the enemy ship didn't seem to register the **conveyance ship**, **fusing** instead with the **battle-line ship**.

"I forgot to tell you," came a transmission immediately after. "I set it to self-destruct, so be careful."

Nary a moment later, the **bubble** behind him burst violently. It seemed it had successfully taken the enemy out with it.

An onrush of countless **space-time particles** pelted Duhier's **bubble**. He'd been told to "be careful," but just as with the storage deck, there wasn't much he could do. On the other hand, he wasn't in much danger to speak of. The **bubble** was simply shaking from the intense succession of micro-**fusions** that was a **space-time particle** surge. The matter disintegrated in an instant into electromagnetic waves, and the inner surface of the **bubble** sparkled with light of various wavelengths. The **bubble** got heavier, but not enough to have an effect.

The *Pundigh* was headed Duhier's way. He wasn't within hailing distance, but he could probably transfer over faster than he'd initially feared. Moreover, he'd shaken off the enemy. Duhier could finally take a breather.

Aïdairh inspected the **bubble generator**. "How much longer are we slated to **navigate in planar space, Linewing?**"

"Unless something unforeseen pops up, we can **fuse** with them in five hours, twelve minutes."

"It seems as though I really won't have anything to do," she smiled. "The **bubble generator** is in tiptop shape."

"I'm glad." Duhier's head was occupied by what would happen after they transferred over to the *Pundigh*. That being said, it wasn't as though there was

anything he could do on that ship, either. Once again, he was useless. He would be a rescued victim. A survivor.

Lacmhacarh (Lahkfacar) — the city that was both the biggest and had the smallest population density in human history. It was not uncommon for residents to be unable to see neighboring homes with the naked eye.

That being said, the **warships** and large-scale vessels were not so reckless as to be hurtling through the city at high speeds. It wasn't rare for it to take over fifty hours to get from one side to the other. That was why small **intrasystem ships** were utilized for high-speed travel localized within the city. People could save on time and accelerate to their heart's content.

Locrh Difaca Danbaurmatmata (Special Construction Site 7022) was located on the outskirts of Lahkfacar. And The Stylet, the restaurant at which Squadron Commandant **Kilo-Commander** Atosryua was planning to host a banquet out of pocket for her **squadron's soldiers** and military personnel, was exceedingly close by — at least by the standards of the **imperial capital**.

As there was no particular need to rush, they didn't head there riding on separate small-scale **intrasystem ships**. Instead, they booked a large-scale *gheth* shuttle ship, the *Fimh Cefrac*, for everyone to head out as a group.

The *Fimh Cefrac* had an odd shape. It was a flat quadrangle, with one of its sides being the prow and the other stern. The propulsion mechanisms were on its four corners. This shape was only possible because the ship didn't need to hit speeds that required taking into account the drag applied by interstellar matter. It was large for a shuttle ship but small compared to interstellar **passenger ships**. In any event, owing to the ship's peculiar shape, its interior was quite spacious. Moreover, the axis of acceleration/deceleration being perpendicular to the deck reduced the load on the **gravity control system**.

In the **Star Forces**, as with most militaries, there was a strict delineation between **starpilots** and **NCCs**, and that fact was evident inside the *Fimh Cefrac* as well. The NCCs were assigned to the deck meant for normal passengers.

There were rows and rows of comfortable seating, and the seats could be flattened down into beds. There were self-propelled vending machines making

the rounds as well. Thanks to the good offices of **Squadron Command**, the vending machines were configured to provide free food and drink. This was a pleasant place to be, at least compared to riding aboard the **raid ship**.

Yet the premium passenger deck arranged for the **starpilots** was even swankier. Each of the passengers had been given their own private room, and while those rooms were small, they were far from barren or unrefined. The fixtures and furniture were in muted but tasteful colors, and it was clear to see the paintings and pictures had been placed with care as well. Most felt they could sit back and relax with greater ease than at their **starpilot's** quarters back on the **warship**.

Regardless, the number of **starpilots** holing up in their private quarters was very small, only amounting to the people with unavoidable work to do. According to the **starpilots'** shared point of view, to be thought of as saving up energy in preparation for the banquet would besmirch their reputations. As such, the majority of **starpilots** had come to the banquet hall at the center of the premium passenger deck.

To tell the truth, Lafier had work to do, but it wasn't too pressing, and it wasn't the sort of work that demanded much concentration, so she was dealing with it while sitting on a root of the linden tree at a corner of the hall.

"**Ship Commander**, may I offer you a drink?" came a familiar voice.

Lafier looked up to find **Hecto-Commander** Sobash standing there. He'd brought a robo-waiter over with him.

Sobash had been the **Senior Starpilot** under her when she'd been an **assault ship captain**, but now he was the **squadron's Senior Staff Officer**. As he'd spent many years as a **starpilot**, when he returned to active duty and knocked the rust off, he swiftly outpaced her in terms of rank. But he still treated her with respect and courtesy.

"Sure, thank you," she replied. The words came out of her mouth as though she were addressing a subordinate.

"I'm afraid there aren't too many options to choose from," said Sobash. Judging by his tone, he was truly apologetic.

“I’ll have some *soïc rachpanr* (citrus tea).”

“Understood.” He entered the data into the robo-waiter, and a crystal goblet was filled with an amber-colored beverage. “Here you are.”

“Much obliged.” Lafier took her drink. “Though I believe your job does not entail handing out drinks.”

“I’m free at the moment,” Sobash smiled.

“Didn’t you tell me that when you’re free, you write letters?”

Sobash looked surprised. “I’m happy you remember me saying that.”

“Of course I do,” she said, wounded. “Are you of the impression that I have no memory?”

“No, that isn’t the case,” he smiled, taking a seat next to her. “If you’re wondering why I’m not writing a letter right now, it’s because the person to whom I want to send one the most is you, **Ship Commander**.”

“I’m honored.” Lafier sipped her tea and relished its bittersweetness.

“Are you working?”

“I am. I’m cleaning up after my **Clerk**’s mess.”

“Has **Vanguard** Lynn done something?” asked Sobash quizzically.

“He dashed off while leaving us with his work.”

Sobash nodded. “Ah, I see.” Naturally, he was also aware that *Linn Ssynec Raucr Dreuc Haider Ghintec* had been summoned to the **Imperial Palace**. “Am I interrupting?”

“No, in truth I’m just about finished.” She signed the last of the documents. “There. Done.”

“Does that mean you’re free now, **Ship Commander**?”

“I certainly hope so,” she said from the heart.

Not a moment later, her **wristgear** beeped. It was the beep of an emergency order.

“An order specifically for you, I take it? **Ship Commander**,” said Sobash,

puzzled.

“So it seems.”

The wristgear’s display read *bisozairh* (imperial seal), and the only addressee was *Bærh Parhynr*. This told her that this was not an order for her as the soldier, **Vice Hecto-Commander** Abliar, but rather as an **Imperial**.

She glanced at him. Sobash took the hint and averted his eyes. Then she opened the message. Her orders were very concise:

GO TO THE **IMPERIAL PALACE** POSTHASTE.

This was her first time receiving this kind of command. No question something major was underway.

“Sadly, it doesn’t seem as though I’m free just yet.”

Then Sobash’s **wristgear** beeped. After a brief back and forth, he got to his feet. “It appears this little reprieve of mine has come to an end, too.”

“You received a summons as well?”

“No, **Ship Commander**. The **Commandant** has ordered me to prepare to escort you to the **Imperial Palace**.”

They should have called me over alongside Jint, thought Lafier. “All right then, I want you to ready an **intrasystem ship** for me. I shall do the piloting. Unless one or more others must also join us?”

“No, there’s no problem. Only, do you mean to go alone?”

“You would hate to be dragged away from a long-anticipated banquet, wouldn’t you?” she said, scanning the **starpilots** unwinding in the banquet hall. “You’ll resent me for it. Besides, I would like to fly in the **capital** anyway. It’s been too long.”

Once again, the **wristgear** beeped. Another imperial command, but this time it was addressed to **Vice Hecto-Commander** Abliar. As it was an imperial command, it was coming directly from the highest commander in the **Star Forces** — the **Empress** herself.

The more she read of the order, the lower her heart sank.

“Is it bad?” he asked anxiously.

“I may just have to make you resent me,” she said, her tone miserable. “I shall simply have to enjoy a reprieve or fly in the **capital** some other time. Did the **Commandant** specify what type of ship?”

“No, she didn’t. The way I interpreted her command, I’m to respect your directions on the matter.”

“I see.” Perhaps Atosryua didn’t really know the nature of the orders Lafier had received. “Ready a large-model **smallcraft**, if you please. I’ll gather the crew, so that won’t be necessary.”

“Roger.” Sobash was about to salute, but he dropped his hand. “Oh, maybe I should prepare a meal for you, too. It won’t be as amazing as The Stylet, but I hear this ship’s cooks are quite skilled in their own right.”

“I’m fine with the usual food,” replied Lafier. “Eating high-level cuisine alone would feel hollow.”

“As you wish.” Sobash smiled as he saluted. Then he departed to arrange her ship.

Lafier stood up and called her ship’s **starpilots**.

Chapter 2: *Spialerach Sybr Nocher* (Stranglers of the Dragon's Necks)

At the **Chamber of Larkspurs** in the **Imperial Palace**...

“So our prospects look grim,” murmured the **Empress** upon her **throne**.

“Unfortunately,” concurred the **Military Command Director** Faramunsh.

A **planar space map** was situated before them. The **Empire's** combat lines were collapsing as they spoke. The Empire's forces seemed superior overall, but the enemy tore through the places they were spread thin.

Things were especially dire for the **Clybh Monarchy**. The territory surrounded by the Hania Federation was being encroached on from all sides by a fleet whose core was composed of the UH Peacekeepers. Fleets from Greater Alkont had been detected as well. One could only assume the third nation of the Three Nations Alliance, the PSSU, was involved as well. And it was possible that the ostensibly neutral Hania Federation — which had been on the cusp of incorporation into the Empire — had added their own military power to the enemy's cause. After all, there were no signs of Hanian ships resisting the enemy. In fact, it looked as though they were cooperating with them.

Now that it had come to this, they had no choice but to presume that the peaceful assimilation of Hania had been reneged.

In other words, the *Brucabhoth Bis Synr* (Three Nations Alliance) was now the *Brucabhoth Gos Synr*. And while under normal circumstances, the Abh would celebrate the political map of the cosmos becoming so simple, it couldn't have happened at a worse juncture.

“This is difficult to watch,” she remarked.

Lamagh was once the *Larth Clybr* — the Queen of *Clybh*. In the Empire, **monarchs** did not govern **monarchies**. They merely managed the **portals** that linked the **imperial capital** to those monarchies. It was the **Clybh Portal** that the enemy fleets were aiming for. Their ultimate objective could only be what lay

beyond that **portal** — Lahkfacar, the **Capital of Eight Portals** and the **Base of the Dragon's Necks**. And their wish was steadily coming to fruition. Lahkfacar was about to test another of its monikers — the **Unfelled**.

One of the issues with **planar space** was that it took time to relay information. As such, the **planar space map** operated under a time lag. In all likelihood, the situation was now even worse than presently displayed. The **Clybh Monarchy** had next to no war potential and the reserve forces were too scant to send in reinforcements. Holding the enemy attackers at bay in a single area was likely all they could reasonably do. And that was akin to plugging up a single hole in a sieve — a pointless endeavor.

“How many days until they reach the **capital**?” asked *Lamagh*.

There was absolutely no reason to hold out hope. It was an established fact that Lahkfacar had seen the **propulsor flames** of enemy ships only four times before.

“Seven or so days, we believe,” replied Faramunsh.

“How many can we call back here in that time?”

“In addition to the current troops, we would have twenty **sub-fleets** at most.”

Not nearly enough to defend the **capital**. If there were the slightest chance they could win, she would bet it all on that chance. But there was zero chance of victory.

“Understood,” nodded *Lamagh*. She looked at Faramunsh. “We should have followed your counsel.”

If she had followed his advice, they could have mobilized enough forces to at least muster some hope — even if they still wouldn't have realistically sufficed.

“If I could laugh and say, ‘I told you so,’ I'm sure there would be no greater satisfaction, but for obvious reasons, I don't feel so inclined.”

“Can this incompetent **Empress** ask you not to abandon Her?”

“With all due respect, **Your Majesty**,” he replied, “that is the first time these ears have heard such a foolish question. If Your Majesty believes I would cast away the privilege of meeting our defeat alongside you, then you are sorely

mistaken.”

“We see.” The **Empress** smiled faintly.

“My apologies,” said the **Chancellor**, bowing his head. “It’s all the fault of my flawed counsel.”

“We were not blaming you. We do not intend to blame anyone. We were deriding Ourselves,” she consoled him. “Success and defeat both belong to the decider. The destiny of the **Empire** is the **Emperor’s** responsibility. Do not steal from Us what is Ours. You are still the **Chancellor** of the **Empire**, but if you plan to repeat your pointless apology, then you are not worthy.”

“I appreciate Your Majesty’s kind words.”

Brahsh was an accomplished bureaucrat of the Empire, and he had served alongside *Lamagh* for a lengthy stretch. The **Empress** asserted it was her responsibility, so he would not bring it up again, if for no other reason than that there was simply no time.

“We might want to cede the **capital** to the enemy for the time being,” said *Lamagh*. “Have you any thoughts on the matter?”

“I just hope that by experiencing Lahkfacar, the enemy might become more culturally refined, even if only by a little,” said Faramunsh.

Lamagh paid the **Military Command Director’s** banter no heed. “Prepare the **Watchguard Fleet** to sortie.”

“As Your Majesty decrees,” said Faramunsh.

“**Chancellor**, have you any thoughts?”

“At present, I will simply act in accordance with Your Majesty’s will.” Brahsh’s expression was stern and stone-like.

“Is that so.” *Lamagh* stood up and signed her **handseal**. “We invoke the *Bethoth Laica Sosa Bina* (Type 3 Emergency Convocation).”

The **Empress** would now receive a large number of bureaucrat and **soldier** assistants. The convocation was at hand.

Faramunsh and Brahsh were both at the audience with the Empress in hologram form. Both had heaps of work to do; they were humbling themselves before the **Empress** while they were hastily going about their work behind the scenes. The **Military Command Director** in particular was swamped with preparing the **Watchguard Fleet** for departure. The **Commander-in-Chief** of the **Watchguard Fleet** was the **Empress** herself, and its **Chief of Staff** was the **Command Director** himself.

The **Empress** was aware of this but did not rebuke him for it. In fact, she would have been furious if he had wasted valuable time on nothing but a conversation with the **Empress** during such a crisis. All she asked of the other people whom she'd called was for them to attend as holograms.

"Is the *Flimhiciac Arocr* (Capital Relocation Planner) in attendance?" called *Lamagh*.

"Here, Your Majesty." A man with the grim reaper's mien stepped forward and expressed his reverence.

The **Capital Relocation Planner** was a bureaucrat directly under the **Empress**. As he was the man the **Empire** least wanted to do his job, this was his first time coming to the fore. The practical reason was that moving a **portal** was no easy task. But more to the point, the Abh loved Lahkfacar. For the majority of Abhs, the **imperial capital** was their birthplace and home. But there was a time when relocation could not be avoided, and that time was the impending Fall of Lahkfacar.

The Abh had existed alongside their Empire for far too long; they wouldn't let a little thing like the fall of the **imperial capital** cause them to leave the Empire to crumble.

Though the **Relocation Planner** was seldom in the limelight, his everyday work life was a busy one. The first problem to solve was where to relocate to. In times of peace, the Empire's territory was stable, but not so in times of war. The number of **territory-nations** in each **monarchy** and their respective industrial outputs and centers were in flux. Even more changeable was their manpower. Fleet placement shifted at dizzying rates in response to the tides of war, and their human resources moved along with them. Fleet equipment could be set

up relatively quickly thanks to mobile construction sites, but **soldiers** were a different story.

The **monarchy** with the current largest number of **soldiers** was the number one candidate. Of course, they'd need a well-maintained fleet to survive the time of crisis following the **capital's** fall. They would have to first choose which of the *Ga Faicec* (Eight Monarchies) had the best logistics and war potential to continue the struggle, and then eye which star system in that **monarchy** would be most suited to the new **capital**.

There were more than a few facilities that only existed in Lahkfacar, and chief among them were the **warship construction sites**. The hulls of ships could be built outside of the **capital**, but only the Five Great Construction Sites could manufacture **space-time bubble generators**. In the event of a capital relocation, the warship construction sites would be disassembled and fitted with **bubble generators** for evacuation purposes.

This was where they had a difficult choice to make. Should they concentrate all the facilities in the **monarchy** with the new capital, or should they station them in other monarchies, too? Concentrating their war potential would increase their overall chances of prevailing in the end, but it would also mean forsaking the other territories.

Fortunately for whoever occupied the position of relocation planner, it was not for them to make that choice. The **Empress** was there to pick her poison.

The current **Capital Relocation Planner** was named *Suzryac Baurgh Gochurr Sotec*, and he was a **landworlder**. He only appeared before the **Empress** once a year in order to report how the plan stood at that time. Up until now, it was a largely ceremonial gesture meant to demonstrate he was doing his job. But this time it was the real deal, and he was clearly nervous. He never expected the day would come during his tenure in office.

He had many subordinates, the most important of which were the three *Roï Flimhiciac Arocr* (Deputy Capital Relocation Planners). They hadn't reported to the Chamber, not even via hologram, but they were where their superior was physically.

"Tell Us where the interim **capital** shall be," commanded the **Empress**.

“We believe the *Chtymec Sotryrer* (Sohtryoor Astrobase) of the **Barkeh Monarchy** to be the most suitable, Your Majesty,” said Suzryua.

“We see,” nodded *Lamagh*. She looked at Faramunsh’s hologram. “Ideally we would fight to preserve the **capital**, but you say that is impossible.”

“As much as it pains me to admit it.”

“Then will our second-best option come to fruition?” By “second best option,” she of course meant defending the *arocha sela* (temporary capital). “Might it be too close?”

Each of the **Eight Monarchies** possessed an **astrobase**. While there were exceptions, the **portal** to the astrobase was typically quite close to the portal to the **capital**, and that was true for the **Barkeh Monarchy** as well. The *Saudec Sotryrer* (Sohtryoor Portal) was very close indeed to the **Barkeh Portal**, which led to Lahkfacar. That proximity made it that much easier to evacuate, but it also made it easier for the enemy to attack both the **capital** and Barkeh. They might raid the **temporary capital** with the same momentum with which they charged through the original capital. If they lost the **temporary capital** as well, it would spell the end of the **Empire**.

“It will be quite possible for us to mount Sohtryoor’s defense,” said Faramunsh. His tone had a somebody-else’s-problem quality to it, and that was because defending the **temporary capital** wasn’t his job. He just knew that that the decision must have been made on some grounds, so he knew deciding it was capable of being defended wasn’t merely some slapdash stopgap measure.

“Understood.” She nodded again and returned her gaze to Suzryua. “Set about preparing to relocate the capital at once.”

“Shall we concentrate them?” He was of course asking whether they were going to abandon the territories not connected to the **Barkeh Monarchy**.

The **Barkeh** and **Wesco Monarchies** were adjacent to each other via **planar space** since before the war. Though they were divided into two separate monarchies by the vagaries of history, their connection had lasted for a long time, making for the Empire’s most robust sphere of influence.

Since **Operation Twin Thorns** had progressed smoothly, they could also

contact the **Syoorgzedeh Monarchy**. And **Operations Phantom Flame** and **Hunter** successfully brought together the **Syoorgzedeh** and **Raseess Monarchies**. While there were still **landworlds** in the former UH territory stretching between the two monarchies, the relevant **planar space** was in the Empire's hands.

This would, however, end up isolating the Skeer, Ileesh, Bargzedeh, and *Clybh* Monarchies.

Ileesh and *Clybh* were already as good as lost. Going off the war potential left to them, they would certainly be overrun by the enemy before the **crest** of the **eight-headed dragon** could shine in the **capital** once more. When it came to Skeer and Bargzedeh, on the other hand, they might be able to reestablish contact with them at a relatively early stage. If they didn't concentrate their war potential and production capacity, and instead distributed it, it would be a huge boon to the people left behind.

Lamagh closed her eyes, and none could blame her. She ruminated for a few seconds. "Concentrate our force of arms."

Faramunsh had said defending the **temporary capital** was possible. However, that was not a guarantee it was absolutely safe, and as such, it was incumbent on her to improve their chances however she could. Splitting up their forces would lower their odds.

"As Your Majesty decrees."

But *Lamagh* hadn't decided to forsake half of the Empire, either. "Is it possible to send the **space-time bubble generator** manufacturing lines to Skeer and Bargzedeh?"

Setting aside the sad cases of Ileesh and *Clybh*, she wanted to leave their **bubble generator** manufacturing capacity to Skeer and Bargzedeh. That way, they would gain the ability to maintain their own war potential by their own power.

Unfortunately, this was easier said than done.

"If we simply send them over, then yes, we are able. Now if Your Majesty would kindly look at this data concerning that policy's impact."

Numbers and diagrams floated up before the **Jade Throne**. They displayed the difference between two scenarios — one where they concentrated the **bubble generator** manufacturing facilities in the **temporary capital**, and one where they transferred portions of them to the other **monarchies**. Naturally, she knew that splitting up the facilities would cut down on their productivity, but the sheer drop in yields exceeded the **Empress's** expectations.

“Can you display what would happen if we transferred them all over to a single place?”

“Why of course, Your Majesty.” Suzryua looked wounded. “I will display them now.”

Different numbers, different diagrams. Now the gap was within acceptable levels.

“Send them to the **Skeer Monarchy**,” she commanded. “Faramunsh.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said the **Military Command Director**.

“Instruct the troops that cannot reach the **temporary capital** to head for **Skeer**.”

“It shall be done.”

Of course, it would be exceedingly difficult to get in touch with the troops that were left behind thanks to this situation. Many troops were outright impossible to send orders to. But both *Lamagh* and Faramunsh understood that already. They could only hope each commanding officer would select the correct direction to retreat to. Though even if they did, there was no guarantee they would be able to advance along that correct path.

“If you would excuse me, I will head for Sohtryoor right away.” Suzryua bowed.

“Is that part of the arrangements?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I will leave my deputies here in the **capital**.”

One of the deputies appeared via hologram and bowed profoundly to the **Empress**.

“Your Majesty, I am *Almroï Flimhiciac Arocr* (Chief Deputy Capital Relocation

Planner) *Fesmhac* (Fesfa). May I be allowed to lead operations in the **capital**?”

“You may lead them.”

“I am most grateful,” said Fesfa.

“Now then, **Your Majesty**,” said Suzryua, “we must part for a brief while. It is my wish that I return to the **capital** with the luxury of lamenting that all my work was in vain.”

Lamagh was about to reply when **Command Director** Faramunsh’s hologram moved.

“**Your Majesty**.” Before Suzryua’s eyes, Faramunsh bowed his head toward the **throne**.

“That was fast. Have the preparations for the **Watchguard Fleet** sortie already been made?”

“I have unrelated news to report.”

“We will not hear any news unless it’s good news,” she joked.

“Then I have no news that needs reporting,” said the **Director**.

“**Relocation Planner**,” smiled *Lamagh* forlornly. “We were also looking forward to the day you came here to lament, but it seems that day will not come.”

Suzryua bowed silently.

The **Empress** braced for impact. “State your news, **Command Director**.”

“It appears the *Chtymec Sembrybr* (Sembryoov Astrobase) has fallen.”

That astrobase was in the **Clybh Monarchy**, and the *Saudec Sembrybr* (Sembryoov Portal) was close to the entryway to the **capital** even compared to other *Saudec Chytmer* (astrobase portals). The enemy would flood the **Clybh Portal** shortly. They had precious little time left.

“We plan to proclaim the order to prepare for the emergency capital relocation in six hours’ time.” The **Empress** scanned the high-ranking officials packed in the Chamber. “Any objections?”

The relocation would be an enormous undertaking, even if it came in the form

of an emergency evacuation. After all, this was the first time it had happened in the history of the Empire. Preparing for an undertaking of that magnitude could not realistically be done under the veil of secrecy. Hamstringing the people making those preparations by making them act in secrecy would be putting the cart before the horse.

Almost everyone in the **capital** had some sort of mission related to the relocation. The exceptions were infants and the seriously ill or unconscious. In fact, even infants were expected to execute their mission, which was being on their best behavior. Confusion was inevitable, as people were required to abandon whatever they were engaged in until then and take up an entirely new mission. In order to minimize that confusion, there needed to be a preparatory stage for the preparatory stage, and that entailed telling only a select few.

The courtiers bowed their heads. Each was one of those select few.

“We shall name the emergency relocation operation *Cfazaitec Semraunirr* (Operation Phoenix),” decreed the **Empress**.

“A fine name, Your Majesty,” said Faramunsh. “I regret I cannot take charge of the *Byrec Semraunirr* (Phoenix Fleet).”

“We see.” The **Empress** nodded approvingly. “**King of Barkeh**,” she called.

“Here, Your Majesty.” The hologram of the **Crown Prince-cum-Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief-cum-Twin Thorns Fleet Commander-in-Chief, King of Barkeh Abliarsec Néic Lamsarr Dusanh**, appeared.

He was currently on the **Imperial fleet flagship**, the *Sancaü*.

More than two thirds of the **Star Forces**’s force of arms was under his command, but almost all of it was tied up in the front lines, and **carrycrafts** were about all the **Crown Prince** had at hand apart from the troops that just happened to have returned to the **capital**.

“Listening, were you?”

Dusanh had already been there by the time Faramunsh and *Lamagh* entered the Palace. He probably hadn’t appeared holographically because he simply didn’t have anything to say.

“Yes, the *Sancaü* is already on a course for the **Barkeh Portal**.”

“Thoroughly prepared, as usual,” smiled *Lamagh*. “Then We have nothing to tell you. The enemy will spring forth from the **portal** that Our **family** controls, and you must drop subjects from your **family’s portal**. We know that you would love to entertain me by thinking up silly witticisms, but We’re afraid We haven’t the time to lend an ear to them. Now organize the **Phoenix Fleet** and devote your energies to your duties.”

“As Your Majesty decrees,” said *Dusanh*. “I intend to be back as soon as possible to sully your ears with my ‘silly witticisms,’ so until then, I trust Your Majesty will not damage my **throne** or the **Imperial Command Baton**.”

The hologram vanished.

“Always with the unreasonable demands,” murmured *Lamagh*. But she was not dissatisfied. She seemed more amused than anything else. Then she stood from the **throne**: “*Nisoth-Glaharérr Sobrelach Arocr* (Your Eminence the Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Capital Defense Platoon),” she said, bowing her head deferentially to a **servant vassal**. “Please convene the *Sobrelach Arocr* as soon as the preparation decree is handed down.”

She looked up and saw the eight **Abdicant Emperors** there.

“As Your Majesty wishes,” nodded *Dusumec*, the **Abdicant** with light purple hair.

The **Imperial Capital Defense Platoon** was made up mostly of retired **soldiers**, and its commanding officer was chosen from among the **Abdicants**. Its current **Commander-in-Chief** was the oldest of the current **Abdicants**, *Dusumec*.

Under normal circumstances, the **Capital Defense Platoon** was that in name only. Maintaining and inspecting the equipment were essential, and they sometimes even remembered to train. But the young saw it more as an organization for retirees to have friendly get-togethers and hold lots of banquets. But the **Defense Platoon** was formed precisely for times like these. Though “defense” was in the name, that was not necessarily what was expected of it. As a scraped-together corps, the Defense Platoon could not be expected to repel enemies that the actual war fleets failed to keep at bay. At least when it came to combat, the Abh were extremely pragmatic. Their real task was to

delay the **capital's** fall as much as possible and buy them time to evacuate.

Since the members of the Platoon were required to die in the **capital**, only applicants and volunteers were generally registered in its rolls, but retired **abdlicants** and **nobles** were duty-bound to serve. Consequently, all of the **Abdicants** belonged to the **Defense Platoon**, not just *Dusumec*.

The Abh were unageing. When they were near death, they started falling asleep for longer and longer periods of time, but until then they remained as fit and healthy as ever. There was a reason it was said guessing the age of an Abh past forty was an insurmountable task. **Imperials** retired not due to physical fatigue but because society demanded it. When the highest echelon got stagnant, it caused the whole structure to ossify. In this case, that structure was the **Star Forces**, and an overly rigid Star Forces was a cause for alarm in the eyes of the whole Empire.

In other words, the retired **Imperials'** skills were not inferior to those of the soldiers in active duty. What they lacked in recent training, they made up for with their wealth of experience. And the Empire couldn't afford not to make use of the Platoon during a crisis like this.

The convocation of the **Defense Platoon** would clue a great number of souls into the **capital's** imminent abandonment to these old stalwarts.

The race of blue hair and **spatiosensory organs** had what were called "fate genes." These fate genes were designed to force the Abh to prioritize the population over their individual lives, and they were what allowed the Abh to give up their lives without hesitation for the good of the whole race. If something was believed to be indispensable for their race to persist, the Abh would protect it with their lives. And the vast majority of Abhs believed the Empire to be necessary for their race's survival.

Six hours after *Lamagh* secretly ordered the commencement of **Operation Phoenix**, the decree to prepare for emergency capital relocation was issued, just as scheduled. Suddenly, the **capital** was swept in a hectic flurry of activity.

The only facilities that could manufacture **space-time bubble generators** were the Five Great **Construction Sites**, all of which were in Lahkfacar: Lespo,

Behtoor, Syoor, Gohcrohsh, and Vohbinoht. It was these **bubble generators** that made the Empire an interstellar power. Concentrating the manufacturing facilities in the **capital** was an effective tactic to prevent the nightmare of a fractured Empire. The tradeoff was the inherent and extreme strategic danger. If they lost the **capital** and the construction sites with it, they would no longer be able to produce new **interstellar ships** of any kind, and the Empire would lose any power to continue prosecuting this war. Even if by some miracle the enemy stopped fighting at the capital's capture, the Empire would still inevitably dissolve into its constituent star systems. As such, the construction sites were designed to be movable. They could be disassembled, and the portions that could be called their cores came equipped with **bubble generators** and propulsion systems of their own. Put simply, they could instantly become de facto **interstellar ships**.

On the orders of the Director of Imperial Warship Management Headquarters, the construction sites' junctions were detonated, but only after two hours to enable the construction personnel to evacuate.

The construction sites were mini-cities of a stripe. The workers there, including the Site Chiefs, lived with their families in the sites' residential areas. They of course had to evacuate along with the sites' cores. They could even be called the sites' *true* cores themselves. As long as they and the technical information were still around, the sites could eventually be rebuilt whether or not the Empire lost them all. Yet if the personnel died or fell into enemy hands, then even unscathed sites would become useless.

The personnel boarded dozens of **carrycrafts** and swiftly escaped from the **capital**. They were only allowed to take minimal amounts of their personal belongings with them. In addition, if the war was looking neither great nor hopeless, they would have the majority of their household goods sent to them later (if the war was going well, they could simply return to the **capital** in short order, and if it was going poorly, the **capital** would fall before their things could be sent over). Meanwhile, the families of personnel were a higher priority to save, but they would also be evacuating the **capital** sometime later.

Abhs-by-birth were relatively accustomed to their families being scattered, but the same could not be said for many **landworlders**, and pulling landworlder

personnel apart from their families and stuffing them into **carrycrafts** did cause some scenes.

There was one exception to the no-family-rule, and that was small children who didn't have guardians apart from the prioritized evacuees. They were pre-registered and boarded the same ships as the construction site personnel.

Though the citizenry of the UH would scarcely believe it, the Abh did have the concept of humaneness. That being said, this did leave a bitter aftertaste. As Abh society had no system of marriage, a family was classified as a combination of one or more adults and one or more children that could not be left without a guardian. Therefore, the Abhs-by-birth were able to be accompanied by their whole families. In the eyes of the **landworlders**, this came across as discrimination, but that was just a misunderstanding. Whether one would be separated from their family was determined not by one's societal status, but by their personal position.

On that day, there were many separations in Lahkfacar, and all were susceptible depending on their posts, no matter how high their rank or status. Not even **Imperials** were exempt.

The **Imperial Palace** had sundry **bathing rooms**. Thirty-six of them were for the **Empress's** use, and the Empire's sovereign could bathe in whichever she liked every day. Perhaps one of their ancestors thought that if the role of **Emperor** didn't come with privileges like that, nobody would ever willingly serve.

This **bathing room** was one of the ones reserved for the Empress, and it was named *Ryrspech* (White Camellia). Other people could use it if they had the **Empress's** imperial sanction.

Receiving that sanction and bathing here would be the highest of honors to most Abhs, but not to Lafier. Her grandmother was already on the **throne** by the time she was born. The act a **servant vassal** would call "requesting imperial sanction" was, to a young Lafier, called "pestering Grandma." She was so used to receiving imperial sanction that she'd had no opportunity to feel the sheer weight behind it.

To Lafier, the imperial sanction needed to use the **bathing rooms** wasn't even really the result of "pestering." She simply used whichever **bathing room** she wanted to whenever she was at the **Imperial Palace**. Naturally, the **Empress** knew, but Lafier had never been chided for it.

She only started bothering to obtain formal sanction after growing up. This sanction, of course, was nothing more than a formality for **Imperials**. All it really took was a word with a **chamberlain** about which **bathing room** they wished to use. Those requests *were* sometimes declined on rare occasions, but most of the time they were accepted without delay.

This time around, not even that much was needed. A **chamberlain** relayed to her the Empress's will: "Bathe at the **bathing room** of your choice."

Lafier was hit by a certain nostalgia. She hadn't used an **Imperial Palace bathing room** recently, but when she was little, she took a shine to this one, **White Camellia**. She entered with her grandmother, but the **Empress** appeared not to like this one all that much.

Upon Lafier insisting on using **White Camellia**, her grandmother said, in mock consternation: "But you are the **Viscountess** of the **Land of Roses**!"

This was code for wanting to go to the bathing room named *Parh* (Rose) instead.

Rose was a beautiful **bathing room**. Much as the name implied, splendid flowers covered the walls and ceiling, roses of diverse breeds in a continually shifting bouquet of colors. But the real draw to Rose was not the colors but the aroma. The water vapor was loaded with quite the heady fragrance. Sadly, Lafier was not partial to the smells of **Rose**.

In the end, the **Empress** opted for **White Camellia**, just as her granddaughter wanted.

The last time Lafier used **White Camellia** was before she was given the **assault ship** *Basrogrh* to captain. She hadn't been in any of the **Imperial Palace's bathing rooms** since then, and by extension, she had stopped bathing with her grandmother.

The doors to **White Camellia** opened. Beyond those doors, steam rose up

against the surface's silver pattern. In the world according to a young Lafier's eyes, this was the only place it ever snowed. Even now, she knew it snowed on **landworlds** on an intellectual level, but she had never experienced natural snowfall, nor did it seem likely she ever would. But thanks to this **bathing room**, she knew the sensation of snow melting on her skin.

She stepped inside and sank to her ankles in the snow, the cold biting at her bare feet. The water was red and gave off a faintly sweet scent. She steeped herself in the hot water, and warmth started slowly penetrating to her core. Eventually, she felt flushed from the heat.

"Make it snow," ordered Lafier.

Meager white crystals began precipitating heavily. For a brief spell, she watched the white snow melt in the red water. She felt guilty — this was no time to be kicking back. Yet she couldn't be raising a panicked commotion, either. She closed her eyes and faced up, as she enjoyed the contrast between the warmth her body was submerged in and the cold on her head.

"So you went and made it snow, too."

Without her **circlet**, her *frocragh* spatio-sensory perception wasn't online. Lafier opened her eyes.

Lamagh was there, peering.

"It has been too long, **Your Majesty**."

Greeting the **Empress** while submerged in a hot bath was not a privilege afforded to every **Imperial**. In fact, even as her granddaughter, it wouldn't be surprising if she was scolded for being a tad impolite. Yet *Lamagh* did not take her to task.

"But you are the **Viscountess** of the **Land of Roses**," she lamented, before immersing herself. "No matter. This **bathing room**... it's..."

Lafier waited for *Lamagh* to finish that sentence, but her grandmother said no more. Lafier could easily guess what the **Empress** would have said, though.

The capital would fall. Lahkfacar. The "**Unfelled**."

In other words, Lafier would be the last to ever use this **bathing room**. This

might even be the last time she ever indulged in such a bath at all.

The fight to defend the **capital** would be tough, and all the more so now that the **Empress**, the highest commander, was resigned to defeat.

Lafier would participate in the battle as well. The specter of death hung over all battles, but this time the chances were particularly high.

Lafier never steeled herself for death when facing a battle. She didn't need to — she had already made her peace long ago, so she didn't need to muster the resolve before every battle. But this time, she did steel herself anew. And she felt entitled to choose the **bathing room** she would use at what could be the end of her life.

The **Empress** issued the young **Imperial** an order: "We hereby dismiss you from your current post."

"Will you enroll me in the watchguards?" asked Lafier.

She'd had every intention of fighting as a member of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**, but she preferred being assigned to the **Watchguard Fleet**.

"No," said *Lamagh*, shaking her head. "We are relieving you from your post as **Ship Commander**. But you will still belong to your squadron."

Perhaps she would be ushered into the **bridge** of the **Empress's Seatship**. She didn't quite understand this business about staying with **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**, but maybe this meant she would be given a role as a communications **starpilot**. Either way, her corps affiliation didn't matter nearly as much as her position.

"Will the *Flicaubh* be taken away...?" she asked, on a hunch.

The **imperial decree** addressed to **Vice Hecto-Commander** Abliar had instructed her to take the crew of the *Flicaubh* along. After consulting with **Kilo-Commander** Atosryua, the *Flicaubh* would be given to Sobash for the time being. If its crew didn't return, it would need the other ships of the **squadron** to send crewmembers little by little in order to operate it. Otherwise, it would have to be abandoned.

The rationale behind her orders wasn't written in the message, but she could

infer. She would be given a new ship. If they had any plans for the *Flicaubh*, they would issue orders such that it was brought to harbor at the *Bidautec Rüébéir* (Imperial Palace Spaceport).

Lafier had just been getting a feel for the *Flicaubh*. That was why she wanted to continue fighting as a *sopaïc sarérr* (raid ship ship commander). But there were no ifs, ands, or buts when it came to an imperial decree. *Will they give me some important role?* she wondered.

“You will be commanding a different ship,” said the **Empress**, just as Lafier had been expecting.

“Which ship will I be receiving?” Though she still had the crew she was familiar with, she couldn’t say she was confident she would be able to command a whole new ship to perfection.

“Hmm, the *Gaftnochech Dradr* will do.”

It was customary for the **Emperor’s Seatship** to be a state-of-the-art **patrol ship** named the *Gaftnochech*. Whenever a new *Gaftnochech* was born, the old seatship would usually be called the *Gaftnochech Mura* (Former *Gaftnochech*). In order to avoid confusion, a *Gaftnochech Mura* was “disposed” of whenever a new *Gaftnochech Mura* came about. This was disposal in name only. It was rare for it to become decommissioned or scrapped. It was typically lent to a **grandee** and renamed. The *Segnoc* of the *Nimiéc Laitpanr* (Archducal House of *Laitpanh*) and the *Cafeurec* of the *Nimiéc Separerr* (Archducal House of *Separerrh*) were both once named the *Gaftnochech* and were equipped with *Rüé Gahorh* (Throne Bridges).

Still others were preserved in functional condition as memorial ships. The *Gaftnochech Dradr* was one of them, and had been kept around in commemoration of the victory of the Shashyne Campaign.

“But Grandmother,” said Lafier, her voice tinged with protest, “can the *Gaftnochech Dradr* fight?”

A century had passed since the Shashyne Campaign, and that meant that at least that much time had passed since *Gaftnochech Dradr*’s construction. It was an *Aïcch*-class **patrol ship**, but all other *Aïcch*-class ships had been retired long ago. Its armaments were outdated, and more saliently, most of them had been

removed.

“It can fight,” asserted the **Empress**. “Through it, you can wage an important battle you would not be able to were you not an **Imperial**.”

While Lafier’s father had pulled the wool over her eyes many a time, her grandmother had always been someone in whom she could place her trust. And yet the **Royal Princess** couldn’t help but be on guard.

“What must I do?” she asked.

“Deliver the *rüé bésarh* (imperial treasures) of the **Hall of Remembrance** to *Dusanh*.”

There were three **imperial treasures**. Two of them were the **Jade Throne** and the **Imperial Command Baton**, which were with the **Empress**. The third was centuries-old, and stood in the **Hall of Remembrance**, which was also in the **Imperial Palace**, and not too far from Lafier’s current location. The hundreds of pillars there were engraved with the names of the people who had died for the Empire, with no distinction by social status. To the areligious Abh, this Hall was the closest they came to the concept of “sacred.” They were the *Déth Fraitracr* (Pillars of Praises) and they were collectively the third **imperial treasures**.

“That’s...!” Lafier found herself on her feet. “I intended to fight to protect Lahkfacar...”

Lafier understood that hers was an important mission. The names engraved stood as a record. Digital records could easily be duplicated, and there actually were a number of spares and copies. There was no doubt it was possible to engrave all of the names on new stone. But they could never transfer the vast quantity of tears shed over *these* pillars. Wherever the new Hall of Remembrance was to be located, the pillars that stood there ought to be the ones standing in the **Imperial Palace**. Otherwise, why bother with **imperial treasures**?

The **Pillars of Praises** were ultimately just information recorded by primitive means, and all that was recorded was names. But there was enough information in the electronically recorded name register to be able to write a critical biography on each and every one of them.

Regardless, Lafier couldn't bring herself to feel too pleased about receiving this mission.

"Do not be so selfish. We cannot imagine the war hinging on the presence of *your* ship."

"That is true, but... but why am I the one who must carry the **treasures**?"

"You are the most senior *bausnall ghama* (active-duty soldier) among the **Imperials** currently in the **capital**."

"The most senior? I'm to be removed from the **capital**'s defense for *that*?"

"That isn't it," said the **Empress**, nonplussed. "The defense of the **capital** was never your mission to begin with. Apart from those belonging to the **Watchguard Fleet**, all **active-duty soldiers** must be involved in the emergency relocation. Even if you were not the most senior, you would not be allowed to mobilize alongside the **Watchguard Fleet** or to stay in the **capital**. You would have been given the mission to escort the evacuees, or some other appropriate mission."

"Are you telling me to bear it because the only other missions you can give me are even more trifling?"

"Do not disappoint Us any further, Lafier," she said sternly. "There are no trifling missions in the **capital** now. Moreover, you are laboring under a misunderstanding. It is not the **capital** we must protect. Do you not understand even that much?"

Under the **Empress**'s stare, Lafier was dumbfounded. "I apologize; I don't know what you mean."

"It is the **Empire's future** that we must protect. To our people, the Empire is like their favorite toy. If we lost it now, our descendants would resent us. That is why we must maintain what the Empire has accumulated over time for posterity. And we are buying the time we need for your crew to accomplish its duty, which is our primary concern. We are merely playing a supporting role to assist *you*."

"Is such assistance not the mission of us inexperienced young soldiers?" she protested, half reflexively. "**Your Majesty**, you are a presence the **Empire** does

not wish to lose..." But she clammed up when she noticed the look on her grandmother's face.

The **Empress** was smiling her way.

"*Lamhirh cfaina* (Our cute little Lafier)." *Lamagh* combed her granddaughter's bluish-black hair with a hand. "If you know yourself to be inexperienced, then do not try to cajole Us."

"Yes, Grandmother..." Lafier hung her head, somewhat ashamedly.

"The post was decided long ago. It can no longer be changed. The **Watchguard Fleet** and the **Capital Defense Platoon** will buy time and allow that many more people to flee to the interim **capital**. Changing posts now would simply cause unnecessary confusion. We have already made an unforgivable mistake as **Empress**, and We do NOT intend to make another."

"But..."

"We shall brook no rebuttals." But the **Empress's** eyes were calm. "We did not call you here for a debate. And giving you your mission was incidental."

"Then why did you call me here?"

"For personal reasons," said *Lamagh*. "Neither your father nor your aunt nor your brother nor your cousins are in Lahkfacar. You are Our only blood relative within reach."

"You called me here for *that*...?" Lafier was a bit disappointed.

"Are you unhappy with Our calling you here to bid family farewell?"

"No. I am most pleased, Grandmother," she said from the heart.

"We're glad," nodded *Lamagh*. "Now, there isn't much time. Let's talk."

"Yes."

"Shall We recount to you your father's weak point?"

"Yes, please."

"By the way, **Royal Princess**," said the **Empress**, visibly bothered.

"What is it?"

“Do you wish for the snow to continue?”

“No.” Lafier smiled, and stopped the snowfall.

*Man, even during a crisis like this, they’ve got **chamberlains** manning the **Imperial Palace’s transporters**, mused the **Count of Hyde**, Linn Ssynec Raucr Ghintec.*

Transporters were typically operated by their users, and all it amounted to was inputting the destination. Even a child could do it. Beyond that, the user could issue secondary commands, like “nice and easy” or “hurry it up.” Most users were satisfied with the standard speed.

However, sometimes hosts would go through the trouble of assigning operators to the transporters as a show of either hospitality or power. As for the **Imperial Palace**, there was another motive behind it — surveillance.

It wasn’t as though anyone at the **Imperial Palace** was there uninvited, but even for those who had a legitimate reason to visit, they were only allowed to go to an extremely limited number of places.

Though they’d taken pains to make sure it wasn’t readily apparent, Jint didn’t doubt the transporter operator **chamberlains** were armed.

“Where do you wish to go, sir?” asked the **chamberlain**. Judging by her chestnut hair, she hailed from a **landworld** too, yet her Baronh was native-speaker level. Abh genes were not required to be a **chamberlain**, but one did have to be pure Abh in mind and soul.

“Take me to the **spaceport**.”

Jint was the **Clerk** of the **raid ship Flicaubh**, but he’d come to the **Imperial Palace** as the **Count of Hyde**. Now that his business as the **Count of Hyde** was over, he had to return to the *Flicaubh*.

As Jint lacked a genetic Abh’s *froch* spatio-sensory organ, he needed to be sent there by someone. He’d been unsure whether he’d be able to catch a flight during this state of emergency, but as luck would have it, he had reason to believe **Linewing Gnomboch**, who had brought him here to begin with, was still waiting at the **Imperial Palace Spaceport**. And he knew *Gnomboch* would want

to be back on the ship as soon as possible — in fact, he was probably fairly ticked off. Jint had to hurry, not least in order to keep *Gnomboch* from cracking.

The only problem was the man standing beside him.

Samson was no longer enlisted in the **Star Forces**. He was now a **servant vassal** of the **House of Hyde** — and by extension, of Jint himself.

Jint glanced at him.

“There’s no need to worry, good sir,” said Samson, shrugging. “I’m a grown man, so I can choose my own path in life.”

But Jint couldn’t just abandon a **vassal**. Furthermore, he had a feeling that if they parted ways now, he’d never see Samson again.

“Please get on. We can talk on our way over.”

“Your wish is my command,” Samson grinned, before mounting the **transporter**.

“...That’s what you were aiming for from the start, wasn’t it?” said Jint.

“My, but whatever could you mean?” said Samson, playing dumb.

“I know full well that whenever you talk all formal like that, you’re poking fun at me.”

“You’re not necessarily the only person I do that to,” he said, reverting to his normal mode of speech.

“That’s good.”

The **transporter** took off.

“Oh, to know I’ve pleased mine Lord...”

“Please give it a rest already,” said Jint, understandably fed up.

“You should learn to take it in stride. I mean, you are a **noble**. If you can’t let a little butt-kissing slide, you’re gonna have a bad time.”

“You’re not kissing my butt. You’re just having fun.”

“Oh, c’mon, it’s nothing to get upset over.”

“True,” nodded Jint.

There were a myriad of pressing problems that needed to be dealt with. Number one on that list was what to do about Samson. If Jint left him behind, Samson would try to manage on his own, but he felt responsible for him as his Lord.

Just then, Samson's **wristgear** started playing a solemn tune. Samson took a look and nodded to himself. "Huh. I got an invitation from the **Star Forces**."

"What'd you say?"

"They're calling up all the members of the first reserve. Though it seems I'm not obligated to accept. I can take it or leave it."

"I see." It had always been a possibility.

"They even decided on a post for me."

"What would you be doing?"

"It looks as though the *Cemfairh* needs an **inspector supervisor**."

"What kind of ship is that? It doesn't sound like the name of a **warship**."

"Hold on a sec." Samson furrowed his brow. "Well now. Seems like it's a decommissioned **passenger ship**. So both the people and the ship are back on active duty."

"What's its mission?"

"Evacuating the **Imperial Palace**. Damn!"

"Not too happy, huh?" This puzzled Jint.

Jint took pride in the fact he had learned how to comport himself as an **imperial noble**, but he was aware that the foundation of his psyche was constructed on the **landworlds** of Martin and Delktu. From the viewpoint of those ingrained values, assisting evacuees from the **Imperial Palace** seemed a chivalrous and meritorious deed. Of course, he didn't know how much stock Samson put in such chivalry. The man adhered to the values of his own home **landworld**, and even prided himself on how he hadn't given himself over entirely to Abh values. And Jint knew precious little about Samson's homeworld. He knew it was called "Midgrat" in Samson's native tongue and "Dakfort" in Baronh. Samson loved going down memory lane regarding his

homeworld, but as far as Jint could tell, his tall tales were embellished to hell and back, making them less than credible.

“It’s the cats,” Samson muttered in reply.

“Huh?”

“I know those **Empire** people are gonna have me evacuate the *cats*.”

“No way.”

“Yes way,” said Samson, convinced. “Who else would there be to evacuate? It’s not like **Imperials** can skip town.”

“But... the underage **Imperials**, the ones who haven’t even gone to **academy** yet... they’ll have to evacuate, won’t they?”

“Are there any wee **Imperials** at this here **Imperial Palace**?” Samson asked.

Jint cast a glance at the **chamberlain**, whose back was facing them; Samson had been speaking about **Imperials** in quite impolite terms. But she pretended not to have overheard.

“Well, you have a point.” Given that **Imperials** were raised at their respective **Royal Palaces** before enrolling in an **academy**, they weren’t likely to be here.

“Sure do. There won’t be any underage blue-bloods unable to join the fray.”

High-ranking officials lived in the **Imperial Palace**, and some of them headed their households here. There had to be some young children among them. Moreover, even some of the adults had no reason to linger in the **capital** — namely, the ones with no military experience. The Empire wasn’t so irrational as to force such people to stay when there was no point.

“In any case,” said Samson, “I’ve been directed to at least board the *Cemfairh* as a passenger if I don’t intend to return to military service.”

“And what if you refuse to board at all?” asked Jint.

“Beats me. I’m sure the Abh see falling alongside the **Imperial Palace** as a great honor. Which is why I don’t see them letting *me* do so.”

“Then I suppose they’d tie you up and toss you aboard.”

“If I were in charge, I’d just shoot anybody who acted that self-serving. Who

can be bothered tying people up?”

“I see. I guess that way is more Abh-like. Then you have no choice but to pick between those two options.”

“I’d like to beg off giving cats a ride, or getting a ride alongside a bunch of cats, for that matter.”

“Is that not selfishness on your part?”

“Don’t fret; I have no intention of dying just yet. I may be the kind of petty-minded guy that never entertains the twaddle of self-serving lumps, but I definitely want **imperial nobles** to be more magnanimous than me.”

That sounds self-serving to me, thought Jint. “So what are you gonna do?”

“I’m keen to see what it’s like to handle a **raid ship**.”

“...What?”

“Man you’re dense. Just put me on your ship already.”

“It’s not my ship, and you know that.” Jint fully understood that wasn’t the *real* issue, but he said that in order to buy himself some time to think.

“Why sweat the small stuff?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff, he says... And you call yourself a **Mechanics Branch** guy?” said Jint, feigning shock. He wasn’t *actually* shocked, of course — he’d known Samson for some time now. Nothing he said shocked him anymore.

“Laddie, when you spend all your time fussing over machines, you stop caring about being so sensitive around humans.”

“Well, at any rate, it’s not my decision to make. Besides, the *Flicaubh* has an **inspector supervisor** already. You wouldn’t have any work to do.”

“I don’t mind being the **Inspector Supervisor**’s assistant. I’m none too familiar with the systems on a **raid ship**, so in these circumstances, I can’t ask for too much.”

*He doesn’t want to manage a **raid ship** — he just wants to be with me.* It did feel gratifying. “I’ll obtain the **Ship Commander**’s permission.”

“Hurry. If she doesn’t reply in time, they’re gonna force me on some

passenger register.”

“How long do we have?”

“About seven or so minutes.”

“Then I’ve really gotta hurry.” Jint activated his **wristgear** and called Lafier.

He got a response immediately. “Jint, is that you? I’m sorry, but I’m hung up. If you’ve something to say, say it.”

Jint was slightly disappointed. It wasn’t Lafier herself speaking — it was the **compucrystals** in her **wristgear**.

“It’s urgent,” said Jint.

“Yet I still cannot answer,” replied the **compucrystals** imitating her obstinately.

No recourse now. “Okay. I have a request regarding the crew. I’d like you to reply when you have a moment.” With that, he ended the transmission.

“So, what now?” said Samson.

“For the time being, please just hop on with me.” Jint could do at least that much under his own authority. While he would ultimately need his **Ship Commander**’s approval, under time-of-emergency stipulations, he could act first and report later.

“As a passenger?” asked Samson, disgruntled.

“Only for the time being.”

“All right, fine. I’ll turn down the *Cemfairh* thing.”

“You sure about that?” teased Jint. “If you’re going to be a passenger either way, wouldn’t the *Cemfairh* be better? I mean, it *is* a **passenger ship**.”

“But it’s *old*. I like newer ships.”

“I see. In that case, just give me a moment.”

“Can’t wait too long,” said Samson.

“I know, I know.”

Jint contacted *Gnomboch*.

He answered right away. “Yes, **Quartermaster Vanguard**?”

“You’re still at the **spaceport**, right?” The name of the person on the other end was displayed on his **wristgear**, but not their current location. And he needed to ask because, in this time of emergency, it was possible *Gnomboch* had received fresh new orders.

“Yes, I am. Are you unaware, sir?”

“Unaware of what?”

“It isn’t just me here. The crew of the *Flicaubh* is waiting at the **Imperial Palace Spaceport**.”

Jint and Samson looked at each other.

“Why?”

“I’m not sure, **Vanguard**. Only the **Ship Commander** knows.”

“Huh... all right then, what is she up to?”

“Ah, uh, right now, she’s talking to **Deca-Commander** Ecryua.”

“Okay...” Envy spiked inside him — a shameful impulse. He didn’t know the details, but clearly, Lafier and the gang had been given a new mission. And it made all the sense in the world that Lafier would talk to her **Vice Commander** first. There was nothing to be envious over.

“The **Ship Commander** is there?”

“No, sir. She and the **Deca-Commander** are talking via **wristgear**.”

Jint paused to think. The situation was fluid, and at least for now, returning to the *Flicaubh* was no longer an option. There were no other questions to pelt *Gnomboch* with.

“Roger,” said Jint. “I’m dropping the call. Call me when you know more.”

“Understood, **Vanguard**, sir.”

“So, uhh... what’s that mean for me?” said Samson, though his tone was calm and collected.

“Let’s just meet back up with the others for now.”

"It wouldn't be meeting *back* up for me—"

Just then, a call. It was Lafier: "Jint!"

"Hiya." Jint felt like a desert wanderer who'd just found an oasis.

"Head for the **Hall of Remembrance** at once."

"Sure, but... why, though?" he asked, taken aback by the unexpected command.

"I am headed there as well. I'll fill you in in person."

"Okay."

"See you at the Hall."

Jint hastened to reply, lest she drop the call on him: "Hold on a sec."

"What?" she said, her tone less than pleased. She must be busy.

"I've got Mr. Samson with me," he said, as concisely as he could. "You remember him, right? He was with us on the *Basrogrh*..."

"Yes, I remember him. Are you mocking me? Must you be like *him*?"

"Him'?"

"Now your memory's in question. I speak of Sobash."

"I don't know any other Sobash besides the **Squadron Senior Staff Officer**," he said, playing dumb. "Did Mr. Sobash say or do something?"

"Never mind. In any case, I remember Samson."

"Excellent," said Jint, smiling wryly. "Mr. Samson says he wants to come with us—"

"Wait a moment."

The second the transmission cut out, Samson's **wristgear** rang.

"It's a pleasure to hear from you again, **Ship Commander**," said Samson. "Or should I call you **Your Highness**?"

"Call me whatever you like. I am busy, *Samsonn Baurgh Tiruser*."

"I beg your pardon." He hesitated for a moment. "...**Your Highness**."

“Can you manage the systems on an *Aïcch*-class **patrol ship**?”

“An *old* ship, you say,” said Samson, bewildered.

“I know it’s old. Can you do it?”

“I did training drills back when I was a *danagac* (cadet). I think I can do it, but I would have to constantly refer back to the manuals for a brief period, if you would allow it.”

“I’ll allow it. Now prepare the manuals and head for the **spaceport**. There you will find a woman named Grinshia. She will be your direct superior for the time being.”

“Roger that, **Your Highness**, er, **Ship Commander**.”

“Very good.”

The call dropped.

Samson gave Jint a raised eyebrow. “I believe I said I wanted to try handling the systems of a state-of-the-art **raid ship** — not give my **cadet**-era training a run-through.”

“Then you’ll be going to the *Cemfairh*, I’m guessing? It would certainly be a more comfortable ride, and it could even be a newer model. I’ll tell the **Ship Commander**.” Jint knew Samson wasn’t seriously protesting.

Samson shrugged before going about the necessary procedures to decline embarkation on the *Cemfairh*. Once that was done, he opened a file that seemed to be the aforementioned manuals through his **wristgear** and began brushing up.

Jint wondered whether Lafier would call him again, but his **wristgear** wasn’t ringing. He knew what they needed to do, but he felt a touch desolate all the same.

“Excuse me,” Jint addressed the **chamberlain**. “Our destination has changed. Also, could you arrange for another **transporter**?”

The **Hall of Remembrance** was both the most sacred and the most publicly accessible place in the **Imperial Palace**. The descendants of the people whose

names were inscribed in the pillars came to visit on a routine basis. And ever since the war broke out, mourners came in continuous droves to remember the dead. It would be untoward to deny access to the bereaved.

For security reasons, many had floated the idea of moving the Hall outside of the **Imperial Palace**. Some even opined that not only was there no need for the Hall to be in the Palace, but also that should it be placed in some remote area, the Hall's esteem would only increase. Yet as of that moment in time, the Hall was still inside the Imperial Palace.

The Hall had an attached garden park so visitors could take a rest. When the **transporter** rolled into that garden, they were met with the fragrance of grass and soil. The blanket of green sported gentle slopes and gazebos here and there. **Landworlders** might not realize it, but up in space, a park like this was the height of luxury; it was proof that the **Empire** had the utmost respect for those who had given their lives for its sake, as well as for the mourners they'd left behind.

The park's paths were paved in stone, just wide enough for **transporters** to be able to pass each other by. It was down one of those paths that their transporter traveled. As one might expect, there were no mourners to be seen, but there were a few figures at one of the gazebos, and none of them were seated. Jint spotted Lafier in her **military uniform** at the center of the group.

"Could you take me there?" asked Jint, pointing.

"Understood," said the **chamberlain** operating the **transporter**.

The gazebo was on a small hill. The stone paved road didn't go there; it was instead accessible via a log staircase. The **transporter** came to a stop at the bottom of the staircase.

"May I stop us here?" asked the **chamberlain**.

"Yes, of course. Thank you very much." Jint stepped off.

The people around Lafier were not **soldiers**, or at least, not active-duty ones. He didn't recognize any of them. Once he climbed the stairs, Lafier noticed him there.

"Jint! You're here."

“Yes, ma’am.” Jint saluted.

“I see you don’t have your **uniform** on,” she said, eyes reproving.

It was then he realized he still had on his **grandee** clothing. Plus, he had on not his simple military-issue **circlet**, but the splendidous circlet fit for a **count**.

“I didn’t have time to change,” said Jint.

“Well, whatever. We have work to do.”

“Yep. Which is?”

“We’ve been assigned to a new ship. You are to take command over the **Budget Branch** officers.”

“Roger that.”

Managing the food, daily necessities, medical supplies, and air and water purification equipment was the job of the **Budget Branch**, which Jint, the ship’s **Clerk**, was the head of. Normally, his work tasks were relatively uncomplicated. It basically involved restocking whatever was in short supply whenever they entered a harbor. But now that they were on a new ship, he had his work cut out for him. First, he had to figure out how many crewmembers they had. Then he had to calculate the loading capacity for each item based on the contents of their mission and the number of days they’d be voyaging — all, needless to say, while keeping those shackles known as the budget in mind. He also needed to know the current status of all of the life support apparatuses.

Boy am I gonna be busy. Jint got a little dizzy at the thought. Though he’d gotten plenty of experience aboard the *Basrogrh* and the *Flicaubh*, he had extremely little time to spare.

“We also have some cargo to carry,” said Lafier.

“Huh? How much?”

“That is currently being looked into.”

Cargo was also the province of the **Budget Branch**. Yet whether it be an **assault ship** or a **raid ship**, it was rare to load *just* cargo. **Raid ships** carried large amounts of **nuclear fusion shells**, though those were under the **Gunner’s** jurisdiction and not for the **Clerk** to worry about.

“What the heck is goi—” started Jint.

“I’m busy.” She indicated a man, one of the people standing nearby. “Ask this man what you need to ask.”

Though the man was wearing civilian clothes, he bore the **circlet** of a **noble**. The crest carved in said **circlet** was adorned with a mythical lion-headed carp.

“Roger that.”

Lafier conversed about something or other with the other **chamberlains**. Jint tried to formally introduce himself to the **noble**.

“That won’t be necessary,” said the **noble**. “I know you are the **Count of Hyde**. I am **Noble Prince Aimh Üémh Gacrorr Gacrach**, the *Arociac* (Administrator) of the **Hall of Remembrance**. Now then, shall we get to business?”

“No objections here.” Jint was relieved they weren’t going through all the pleasantries. He may have acquired the proper comportment of a **noble** — which was to say he was better than he used to be — but he still wasn’t accustomed to being in that position. He got especially nervous anytime cordiality was required of him.

“I don’t mind if we call a **transporter**, but would you care for a walk?” suggested Ehf.

“I was just thinking I don’t get enough exercise,” agreed Jint. “But do we have enough time?”

“We don’t have the time to dawdle and relax, but I do need to take time out to explain things. Besides, it will take time for the machines to be prepared.”

“The machines?”

“I intend to tell you about them as well.”

They walked down the slope opposite the staircase, Ehf explaining to Jint about their cargo in simple terms. “Our cargo is **imperial treasures**.”

Jint was about to ask what the **imperial treasures** were, but stopped himself in the nick of time. Ehf didn’t doubt that Jint knew what they were. If Jint asked now, Ehf would be more than disappointed in him. Jint was sure Ehf would

demand Jint be removed from his post. If he found himself tossed in the cabin of the *Cemfairh*, he would be quite a sorry sight to see.

“Forgive me. There’s something I’d like to double-check; would that be okay?” said Jint, checking his **wristgear** for the info he needed under that pretext. He inferred with some relief that the **imperial treasures** Ehf was referring to were the **Pillars of Praises** that populated the Hall of Remembrance. The **Jade Throne** and the **Imperial Command Baton** were also **imperial treasures**, but they’d hardly need to be brought here first if it had been their mission to carry them away. Then, he realized this was no time to be relieved. Because there were *a lot* of pillars, and they were all an order of magnitude bigger than either the **throne** or the baton.

Furthermore, he was perplexed. On an intellectual level, he understood that the Abh held the **Pillars of Praises** as sacred, but as he had studied Abh culture later in life, he didn’t quite know how they were supposed to be handled.

“Is some kind of special ceremony needed to move them?” asked Jint. He figured he’d be forgiven for not knowing that — after all, there was no way all that many Abhs-by-birth had experienced moving the **Pillars of Praises** themselves.

“No. You just need to carry them without damaging them.”

“And are we the ones who will have to carry them onto the ship?”

“You don’t need to worry about that, **Count**,” said Ehf. “We will do that for you. Please decide how to store them in the *Gaftnochec Dradr*’s **mine deck**.”

“‘*Gaftnochec Dradr*’?” So that was the name of the ship he’d be on. “I hear it’s an old-style **patrol ship**?”

“That is correct.”

“Do we have to make space for **mines**, too?”

“No. While I’m not in charge of armaments, it appears **Her Majesty** wishes for the **imperial treasures** to be loaded in the **mine deck**,” he replied calmly.

“Naturally, however, if you think of a more fitting place to put them, I defer to your expertise.”

Other concerns aside, at least he knew he would have space to work with. But that, he realized, was obvious — a decommissioned **patrol ship** must have been selected for the task precisely because of its loading capacity.

Needless to say, he couldn't be *too* relieved. Not under this deluge of causes for concern.

Cylindrical stone blocks weren't usually required for combat navigation. Accounting for them was an extra task, so to speak. And no matter how easy an extra task proved, it was another straw on his back. He was eager to get the arrangements for this side task over with so he could set about his base tasks.

A sakaki tree grove was located at the base of the hill. It looked like a dense patch of forest, but that was just an optical illusion, and the path sandwiched by trees terminated quickly. Beyond that path lay the Hall of Remembrance, which, in an abrupt shift in scenery, was blanketed by white sand. The **Pillars of Praises** stood in their hundreds, a crystal-clear creek flowing between them. Jint stopped in front of the creek, which was very shallow. If one didn't mind getting their shoes wet, they could cross it without issue. It wasn't very wide either, so one could leap over it if they did a run-up. But Jint searched for a bridge, which would definitely be the more graceful way to cross.

Then he realized Ehf was kneeling. *Is he praying?* he wondered. He'd never seen an Abh make such a religious gesture. But as he stared, he saw Ehf scoop the creek's water into his mouth. *Do I do likewise?* If Ehf was doing so out of some religious drive, then imitating him would be poor form. Thankfully, Ehf soon got back on his feet.

"It's just as I thought — cool and refreshing."

"Uhh, if I may ask..." said Jint, after mustering the courage.

"By all means," Ehf smiled. "Ever since I first visited this place when I was young, I've wanted to try tasting this water. But until now, I couldn't without being noticed."

"Oh." *Guess he doesn't mind if I notice.*

"Forgive me my rudeness for doing it in front of you, *Lonh*," he said, having picked up on Jint's sentiment. "Today is my last chance, you see. I just couldn't

resist any longer.”

“I see.” Jint flashed him a smile.

“Would you like a sip, *Lonh*?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“If you say so,” said Ehf, cocking his head slightly as though wondering why. “By the way, *Lonh*, is this your first time visiting the **Hall of Remembrance**?”

Indeed it was. “Yes,” he nodded, red in the face.

Upon one of the pillars before his eyes were inscribed the names of the first Abh crew he had ever met. The crew of the **patrol ship** *Gothelauth*. In addition, some of the graduates in his year at the **quartermaster academy** had already been killed in action, too. He felt he should have visited at least once before now, but maybe because he still wasn’t quite steeped down to the bone in Abh culture, it hadn’t even occurred to him. More accurately, he’d forgotten the Hall of Remembrance even existed.

“Then I envy you,” nodded Ehf, expression vacant.

“Envy me? For what?”

“You’re looking upon this scenery with fresh eyes.”

“I’m so embarrassed.”

“How come?” said Ehf, puzzled.

“Oh, uh, it’s nothing...” Jint had thought Ehf was joking, but now he realized Ehf legitimately envied him from the bottom of his heart. And it seemed the fact he’d never visited the Hall of Remembrance was not considered a mark of shame, even for an Abh **noble**. Jint was relieved.

“Now then, if you’d come this way.” Ehf indicated to their left. There lay something akin to a bridge; exactly what Jint had been searching for earlier. More specifically, there were stepping stones placed in the creek. It was hard to make out the white stones against the white sand. Had he really put his mind to it, he might have noticed the ripples the stones were making, though.

Ehf called Jint over by a pillar. This was of course Jint’s first time seeing one of

the **Pillars of Praises** up close and in person.

“Go on, touch it,” said Ehf.

“I can?”

“Please, go right ahead.”

Jint touched the surface of the **imperial treasures** with his palm. He could feel the chiseled names of the people who died long ago. As one might expect, it was a sobering sensation. He just didn’t get why Ehf had asked him to do it. Or, for that matter, why he’d brought him here to begin with. All Jint needed to do his job was numbers — the pillars’ measurements, physical mass, quantity, and so on. Then he’d just check them against the volume of the **mine deck** and work out how to load the cargo. He glanced at Ehf, uncertainty in his heart.

“Remember this feeling,” said Ehf.

“Huh?”

“Etch this scenery into your soul.”

Jint was surprised; he never thought he’d hear such an unscientific sentence come out of an Abh’s mouth. He also became worried they’d expect *him* to reconstruct the Hall of Remembrance. If that was just a personal misunderstanding, then that was no big deal, but there was a possibility that, unbeknownst to him, that had indeed been set as his mission. Jint was not a lazy person. He believed himself a man who’d completed the tasks laid out for him without once seriously complaining. But reconstructing a space the Abh held sacred was beyond his capacities. He hadn’t even been an **imperial citizen** from birth, let alone an Abh. In fact, he’d only learned of the Abh’s existence when he was ten years old.

Ehf must have read Jint’s wary expression. “There’s no grand purpose behind it, or anything like that. I just want at least one more person to remember the purity of this place. If it were possible, I’d have liked to bring every single person who has never seen this place, but that’s far from feasible. I am glad I’m able to at least show you, *Lonh*.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is about.” Jint slid his hand over the pillar’s surface. “I’ll never forget.”

Abhs were usually pragmatists, but Jint had noticed long ago that there were times they turned awfully maudlin. And it seemed that in this place, that tendency was heightened. As an “Abh” himself, Jint was being asked to share that sappy sentimentality, which was something he could at least feign.

“Ahh. It appears they’ve finally arrived,” said Ehf, voice dripping with sorrow.

Jint turned to where Ehf was looking. The heavy machinery had arrived, kicking up the white sand as it approached. A number of workers were walking all around the machines.

“Are those the carriers?” asked Jint.

“No,” said Ehf, his eyes full of pity regarding Jint’s ignorance. “They will *package* the pillars.”

“Oh. I see.”

The names engraved in the **Pillars of Praises** were prone to wear, and would disappear if not carefully preserved. The pillars needed packaging.

“Now then, shall we take our leave? They’ll soon be taking the air out.”

“Taking the air out?”

“Yes. It’s in order to make their work easier. The gravity will also be turned off.”

Upon closer inspection, while the workers’ heads were uncovered, they were still wearing **pressure suits**.

“All right, let’s hurry out of here,” said Jint. “For some reason or other, I’m not too fond of getting stuck in vacuums.”

Chapter 3: The *Rimhoth Béifatrotr Læca* (Emergency Capital Relocation Order)

The *Glagac Glagaracr* (Star Forces Flagship), the *Gaftnochec*, was a *Caü*-class **patrol ship**. As a combat-capable warship, it hadn't been altered or modded much. In that respect, it differed from the **Imperial Fleet Flagship**, the *Sancaü*, which, as the seatship of **Crown Prince-cum-Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief Dusanh**, was specialized to serve as a **flagship**. It had **EM cannons**, but the space that normally housed **mobile space-time mines** was used instead for the residences and offices of **Command** personnel. It took a plethora of staff officers to direct such a huge fleet. So long as it remained the custom for the **Imperial Fleet Flagship** to serve as the flagship of a large and important operation, those modifications would remain necessary.

Operation Twin Thorns was a special case in that it had been a two-front campaign, so the *Sancaü* had been in the **capital**, but that was an exception to the rule. During **Operations Phantom Flame** and **Hunter**, it flew far afield from Lahkfacar, emerging near the front lines. In cases such as **Operation Quicksand** where the fleet was small-scale but the **Imperial Flagship** was nevertheless present, it came to the front lines alongside the rest of the fleet. (That being said, **Operation Quicksand** involved no combat, so whether they could be called the "front lines" at all was questionable.)

By comparison, there were not many ships under the command of the **Star Forces Flagship** *Gaftnochec*. Though the **Empress** of the **Humankind Empire of Abh** was of course the highest commander, the Commander-in-Chief of Commanders-in-Chief, her duties in that capacity were usually conducted at the **Imperial Palace**. Switching from that **throne** to the one on the *Gaftnochec* was typically only done during training or ceremonies.

Ultimately, the **Star Forces Flagship** just needed to have whatever functionality was required for the **flagship** of the **Watchguard Fleet**. A **patrol ship** had space to spare, so the living quarters were widely used for passengers

hitching a ride as well.

Some patrol ships were built to serve as **flagships** to begin with; those ships could install **command centers** without any modifications. The *Gaftnochech* too was constructed as a flagship. The command center of the Watchguard Fleet was around the same size as the command center of a standard fleet. It was enough to simply decorate the hatch used as the command center somewhat extravagantly, leaving the rest of the available space as it was. For that reason, the *Gaftnochech* carried a fixed number of **mobile space-time mines**. And of course, its other weaponry was no different from other *Caü*-class **patrol ships**.

Though it was “extravagantly” decorated, even **emperors** tended to value plainness while in the field of battle, so the **Empress’s Seatship** actually had a rather dry vibe to it.

Lamagh gazed at the **Jade Throne** on the bridge before her eyes fell on the **Imperial Command Baton**. She wanted to give it to the **King of Barkeh**, but that didn’t seem to be in the cards.

The **Jade Throne** and the **Imperial Command Baton** were treasured heirlooms of the **Humankind Empire of Abh**, **imperial treasures** on par with the pillars standing in the Hall of Remembrance. They were handed down by successive generations of **emperors**. She would have liked to hand it down to her heir, *Dusanh*, and to his heirs by extension, if at all possible. However, what was important to both her and *Dusanh* was less that it be inherited down the generations so much as that it went to whoever was the **Emperor or Empress** at that time. If the **Empress** fell in battle, the **throne** and the **Imperial Command Baton** ought by all rights to crumble away as well.

But the pillars were a different matter altogether.

“All **Watchguard Fleets** are ready and waiting for **Your Majesty**,” reported Faramunsh.

“Very good.” *Lamagh* nodded and seated herself on the **throne**. Then she looked at the **Ship Commander** of the *Gaftnochech* standing next to Faramunsh, **Hecto-Commander Repeth**.

“The **Star Forces Flagship** has made all the necessary preparations,” said Repeth.

“I see. Join with the **Watchguard Fleet** posthaste.”

“As Your Majesty wishes.”

“Unmoor the ship and engage maximum battle acceleration.”

The **Jade Throne** was by no means just an art piece carved out of precious stone. Any Abh-by-birth could also use it as a *frocragh* booster. *Lamagh* extended the **access-cables** of her **circlet**, which was patterned after the eight-headed *Gaftnohec*, and connected them to the armrest, allowing the information of the outside world as crunched by the **Star Forces Flagship** *Gaftnohec* to flow into her brain. *Lamagh* could feel the **capital** all around her, a sensation she had enjoyed since she was a little girl. The first time she was allowed to fly an **intrasystem ship**, she had dialed back the acceleration just so she could get absorbed in sensing the city. Since her enthronement, she no longer had that kind of time, but even afterward, she would set **intrasystem ships** on inertial trajectories so as to have her fill of Lahkfacar’s embrace as often as not.

The ship had already begun to move; she could feel the Imperial Palace behind her now. An **academy** was floating right by it, but it looked different from normal. It seemed small.

Many **trainees** studied and lived in **academies**. Of course, *Lamagh* was once one of those trainees. Now that she recalled, she also nursed her first crush at an academy.

Several **passenger ships** had pulled alongside the **academy** to serve as the **trainees’** residential quarters. In normal times, she probably wouldn’t have noticed they were even separate ships, but they had been serviced regularly and were fully stocked on supplies, so they could function as **interstellar ships** when the need arose.

If one was of the opinion that **trainees** were of no use in the battlefield, then it made sense to send their living quarters away from the **capital** the second news came that there was a chance that the horrors of war might reach it. But those trainees were also the **Empire’s** future, and as such, they needed to be taken to the interim **capital**. Consequently, they departed only when the **temporary capital’s** location was decided.

The **Capital Relocation Planner** had named Sohtryoor as that location, and right after the **Empress** made the decision, the residential quarters became **passenger ships** carrying the trainees to the **Barkeh Portal**. She knew that as of now, the trainees — her underclassmen, as it were — hadn't been informed what was going on. In fact, some would be taken through the **Portal** while still asleep.

Before long, she sensed the *Garich Aroc Dreur Bomr* (**Capital Manor of the Count of Bohf**) in front and to the side. That **comital house** held a lavish banquet once every three years. It was known for entertaining guests with striking and eccentric diversions and performances. It was as though the head of that household staked his life and soul on planning that sort of entertainment. One did not need a written invitation to participate. The only people barred from entering were the few who had cut *too* loose in the past. Apart from them, anybody could come and delight in the feast.

When *Lamagh* was a **starpilot**, she had participated in several banquets. On one occasion, she had been entreated by the *Dreuc Bomr* (Count of Bohf) to be the one to provide some entertainment. She was already the **Queen of Clybh**, and had plenty of time to kill, so she found herself agreeing to his request. Playing the role of the Goddess of Hell, she rode a vehicle drawn by three large dogs, charging any and all banquet-goers with chucklesome “crimes” and handing down delightful “punishments.” At first, she had been very shy and embarrassed about it, regretting ever agreeing to do it, but by the end she had been having a ball. So much so, in fact, that she felt a bit sad taking off that getup. Looking back on it now, she regarded it as a decently amusing experience.

Lamagh turned her attention to one of the spheres. *Ahh, if that isn't the Chtuch Sezarr.*

The *Chtuch Sezarr* (Wind Drops) was something of a giant balloon floating in space. Naturally, its walls weren't as poppable as a balloon, and it was sturdy enough to repel space refuse, but it didn't boast gravity control or the like. Inside it blew winds of various speeds, with countless pieces of playground-like equipment flying to and fro. Of course, the play equipment was furnished with safety measures such as collision avoidance functionality. The facility was

essentially an amusement park for children, but some believed it was also well suited for lovers to foster their feelings for each other. One of *Lamagh's* past *raic* (lovers) was not just a holder of that opinion — he *loved* the place. He would invite her at the drop of a hat.

That man was the **gene donor** of *Lamagh's* firstborn, the current **King of Clybh**, Dubeus. Her relationship with him lasted until a few years after Dubeus's birth. When Dubeus was very young, they'd even visited Wind Drops as a trio. But Dubeus didn't take quite the shine to it that his **gene donor** (or as the majority of Landers would call him, "father") did. He had inherited his mother's tastes; *Lamagh* didn't particularly like the place herself. She was just humoring her **lover**.

Dubeus had had a better time visiting the *Garich Arocr Dreur Rancr* (Capital Manor of the Count of Rahnsh), which housed a combined zoo and botanical garden exhibiting genetically engineered life. It was a huge hit with children. To *Lamagh*, the whole idea of it was rather distasteful, so she found this predilection of her son's disconcerting.

In any case, she hadn't visited Wind Drops since she split up with Dubeus's **gene donor**, and at some point, she forgot it existed. The **Empress's** job description was wide-ranging, but it didn't include managing amusement parks. That being said, the memories were rushing back one after another.

Dubeus's younger sister *Lamlynec*, the **Countess of Gemfahdth**, hated going to the **Count of Rahnsh's Capital Manor**. In fact, she hated going out in general.

I wonder where her gene donor's gone to. She tried to remember, but couldn't. They had met on a **patrol ship**, and once she'd returned to the **Imperial Palace**, they would merely pay each other visits at their respective homes. She had no recollection of going out somewhere with that gene donor.

Where is his estate again? She strained her *froch* and tried searching for the manor she had visited all those times. Sadly, it was hidden among the countless artificial planetoids Lahkfacar was made up of.

The man loved to dance, and moreover, he loved to dance under the sway of gravity, like a Lander. The two never got tired of treading on the floor with refined gaits, pacing halls suffused with ancient melodies. *Lamagh* did grow

tired of it, however, when *Lamlynec* came out of her artificial womb, and their affair ended there.

Lamagh heaved a slight sigh and gave up the search. The *Gaftnochech* was about to leave Lahkfacar. She realized it was about time for her to quit indulging in reminiscence. Eventually, they caught up to the **Watchguard Fleet**.

The **Watchguard Fleet** consisted of eight **sub-fleets**. They were named the *Bhoc Sétuch*, *Conn Sétuch*, *Surh Sétuch*, *Laucec Sétuch*, *Feccec Sétuch*, *Lytec Sétuch*, *Dorh Sétuch*, and *Meuth Sétuch*. *Sétuch* was Baronh for lightning, so another moniker for the **Watchguard Fleet** was *Sétuclach* (Lightnings). Each of the sub-fleets was centered around a **patrol ship**, and the *dihosmh* stock ships were the kind that could accompany **patrol ships**. This made them more or less the same as **recon sub-fleets**. The ships that made up the **Watchguard Fleet** were already spouting their **propulsor flames** and had begun to slowly accelerate. As soon as the **Star Forces Flagship** *Gaftnochech* joined them, those **propulsor flames** intensified, and they commenced maximum acceleration.

“All ships of the **Watchguard Fleet**, all clear,” reported Faramunsh.

Lamagh nodded. “Then head for the **Clybh Portal**.” But her command was a formality. The fleet had already formulated a navigation plan under the assumption they would be rushing through the **Clybh Portal**.

Though they didn’t form part of the fleet, a swarm of **orbital strongholds** were flying the same route. Some were constructed as strongholds, and some were decommissioned **warships**. But none of them had **planar space navigation functionality**.

Unlike the convoluted tangle that was Lahkfacar’s interior, there were very few manmade objects in the sector leading up to the **Clybh Portal**. The one that stood out the most was the **Clybh Royal Palace**. It was where *Lamagh*, Dubeus, and *Lamlynec* were all born, though of course it was **artificial wombs** that gestated them. Needless to say, the **Royal Palace** was the place with the most indelibly ingrained memories for her.

After the **Watchguard Fleet** passed through the **Clybh Portal**, the **Royal Palace** would become a **fort** tasked with defending the **capital**. The ships delivering the **Capital Defense Platoon** to the **Royal Palace** mixed in with the

orbital strongholds on the same route as the **Watchguard Fleet**.

The swarm of supply ships were standing by near the **Clybh Portal**. They formed the corps dubbed the *Saubh Raihirair Rüaborair* (Deterrent Watchguard Squadrons). The **squadrons** were not always formed and ready to go. They were temporary squadrons formed when the **capital** needed defending, made up of merchant ships that happened to be in the **capital** and didn't have any other suitable mission, and staffed by **starpilots** who happened to be in the **capital** awaiting new orders. As such, the numbers of ships and personnel depended on the situation. At present, there were six **Deterrent Watchguard Squadrons**. Their main cargo consisted of **mobile space-time mines**, and their role was to loose that cargo upon the enemy. That made their mission the same as **battle-line ships**, but unlike **warships** proper, they could not defend themselves.

In addition to the **mines**, the ships each had one **conveyance ship** loaded aboard, and it was those conveyance ships the crew were on — they were functioning as makeshift **bridges**. There were no **Mechanics Branch** personnel, so if the machinery and systems ever malfunctioned, that was it. The crew would simply escape the doomed supply ship using the **conveyance ship**.

The *saubh raihirair* (deterrent squadrons) had started passing through the **Clybh Portal** slightly early. Supply ships were slow, so it only made sense for them to go ahead of the main forces.

“We have received a call from the **Clybh Royal Palace**,” reported Faramunsh. “It’s from *Fanigac Nisothe Lamaim* (Her Eminence, Abdicant Empress Lamehm).”

Lamehm was *Lamagh*’s mother. As a former empress from the **Royal House of Clybh**, she had taken on the responsibility of command over the **Clybh Royal Palace**. *Lamagh* was a mite jealous of her mother — she could meet her end while surrounded by memories.

“Put her on the main screen,” ordered *Lamagh*.

“On the main screen, Your Majesty?” Faramunsh raised an eyebrow.

Lamagh understood where the **Military Command Director**’s discomfort was coming from. Transmitting the call through the main screen would let everyone on the **bridge** overhear. He was indirectly asking whether she was okay with it

not being a private mother-daughter call.

“Correct,” she said regardless, getting to her feet. “May all who are free listen in.”

It wasn’t necessarily the case that the people to whom these gathered **starpilots** wanted to send their last goodbyes were in the **capital**. In fact, more than a few of their loved ones were in another dimension entirely — **planar space**.

If *Lamagh* wanted to, she could take her time conversing with Lamehm. But the thought of making use of her privileges as **Empress** overly freely was shameful to her. If she indulged in a private conversation with her mother here and now, it would set a bad example, and she knew Lamehm would understand. In fact, if *Lamagh* had taken this call to be a private one, Lamehm would be disappointed in her.

“Hark, **Watchguard Fleet**.” Just as she imagined, her mother addressed the entire fleet. “On behalf of the **Council of the Abdicant Emperors**, I, **Abdicant Empress** Lamehm, do honor your service. Under normal circumstances, we would wish for your triumphant return, but no one in your fleet is daft enough to think such a remark anything other than empty words. Allow me, then, to make a wish as the *Sobrelach Arocr Glaharérr Lartbéir Clybr Heca* (Imperial Capital Defense Platoon *Clybh* Royal Palace Fortress Commander-in-Chief). As you are aware, if the enemy fleets face no resistance, they will reach the **Clybh Portal** within seventy-two hours. While my *Lartbéic Heca* (Royal Palace Fortress) is already possessed of combat power, we shall make for a yet stronger shield for the **capital** if we make further preparations. It is estimated that they will take ninety hours at the fastest. If you could hold them off for the difference — the eighteen hours we need — we would be most grateful.”

Even as she was talking business, Lamehm was staring into *Lamagh*’s eyes. Of course, anyone facing the **Abdicant** through the monitor would feel that way, but *Lamagh* was certain that whatever screen her mother was looking at featured her face.

Lamehm smiled, and *Lamagh* smiled back. That sufficed for their “conversation.” They had known each other for a century, after all.

“Now then, I bid you farewell. I wish to reunite with as many of you as possible.”

The brief call ended there.

Both the **Watchguard Fleet** and the **Clybh Royal Palace Fortress** had more than enough on their plates.

“We will soon be passing through the **Clybh Portal**,” said Faramunsh.

The **Deterrent Squadrons** all passed through to **planar space**. The *Gaftnochec* went ahead of the main forces of the **Watchguard Fleet** through the **Portal**.

“**Planar space map** coming up,” said an **exploration staff officer**.

The second it was pulled up, groans overtook the *Rüégahorh* (Imperial Seatship bridge). The way to the *Saudec Sembrybr* (Sembryoov Portal) was half filled up by enemy fleets. There had to be more than two hundred **sub-fleets** in **planar space** alone. And that wasn’t counting the corps lurking in the **Portal**.

Of course, they had the information about the enemy’s force of arms in advance. Even so, when they advanced into the same stretch of **planar space**, the pressure was overwhelming.

In **3-space**, **portals** looked like spheres. In **planar space**, they looked like distorted spiral lines. There was no way to know beforehand where on the portal-line one would enter through; it was a matter of pure probability.

The supply ships of the **Deterrent Squadrons** at the fore had not yet assembled. Though each **squadron’s flagship** had been decided, a *glagamh iadbryrer raihirair* (deterrent squadron command center) to manage the six **squadrons** didn’t exist. They were each under the direct supervision of *Glagamh Rüaborair* (Watchguard Fleet Command).

The staff immediately set about gathering together the scattered supply ships. They were all steered by experienced **starpilots**, but they were still a cobbled-together corps, so their cohesion was lacking. Moreover, they were almost all retired **starpilots**, and it had been a while since they’d last run a ship. Without the direction of a **flagship**, their reassembly was not terribly efficient.

They must feel all the more disheartened for it to have happened before

enemy eyes, thought Lamagh.

Around when the **Deterrent Squadrons** were beginning to reassemble, the **Watchguard Fleet** emerged **sub-fleet** by sub-fleet. Just like the **Deterrent Squadrons**, they were disconnected when they came through, but the way they reassembled was something to see. Each managed to fully reassemble before the next **sub-fleet** came through.

Eighteen hours... she mused inwardly. She wanted to give her mother this final present, but it would be extremely difficult. That said, she had no other choice.

She gazed at the **planar space map**. The gap in power was vast. If they strayed too far from the **Clybh Portal**, they would be circumvented by the bulk of the enemy.

“Faramunsh, are you able to pinpoint the optimal place to intercept them?”

“With all due respect, that is precisely what I understand to be my primary mission.” No sooner had the **Military Command Director** said that, that dotted lines appeared on the **planar space map**. “It’s here.”

“How long would it take to bring the fleet there?”

“An estimated thirty-four hours, thirty minutes.”

“Where would the enemy vanguard be at that time?”

“Assuming they don’t make any detours, that would be here.”

A blip appeared on the **planar space map**.

“Hmm.” *Lamagh* nodded gently to reassure the staff officers. “Present our plan of advance.”

“I shall have the **Navigation Officer** explain.”

With that, the Navigation Staff Officer stepped before the **throne** with a nervous expression. She brought up a number of diagrams as she suggested the routes and formations the fleet ought to take, *Lamagh* asking questions all the while.

“Very well.”

At those words, the Navigation Officer was visibly relieved. Yet the Empress had another question for her:

“Are we ready to march?”

The Navigation Officer was flustered; the **Empress**’s question was related to the woman’s field, but she’d been so focused on explaining the plan that she hadn’t taken full stock of the present moment.

“Currently,” replied Faramunsh in her stead, “the rearmost Lightning, the *Dorh Sétuch*, is just passing through the **Portal**. I am told it shall take twelve or so more minutes.”

“Then we shall march as soon as our preparations are complete,” said *Lamagh*.

“As Your Majesty decrees, so it shall be done.”

“Now tell Us the plan of operations.”

“Certainly.”

Eventually, the whole of the **Watchguard Fleet** had begun to advance.

Ehf had said they would be taking the air out, but that didn’t truly mean *all* of the air.

The **Hall of Remembrance**’s atmospheric pressure was now an eighth of what it used to be — harsh conditions without a **pressure suit**. To top it all off, the gravity had been reduced to around a tenth of the usual levels, though relatively speaking, the standard Abh gravity-level was low to begin with. It was set at around half of the surface gravity of the planet that gave rise to humankind. As Jint happened to have been raised at the bottom of a gravity well, he actually found it harder to walk within this extremely reduced gravity.

The pressure and gravity were reduced in order to facilitate the toil of packaging the **Pillars of Praises**, which was done mostly by hand. On occasion, the Abh were almost weirdly well-prepared, but given what a corner case transferring the Hall of Remembrance was, it was no surprise there was no specific mechanism in the **Imperial Palace** for it.

The workers in quasi-**pressure suits** enclosed the **Pillars of Praises** in long and narrow slabs, six to each pillar. Thus, they were being made into hexagonal prisms. At first, Jint figured them for ordinary slabs, but upon closer inspection, he realized they had rotating handles, which the workers cranked when they were done enclosing a pillar. According to Ehf, the slabs were filled on the inside with a compressed foaming agent, and by cranking the handles, that foaming agent was released so as to fill up the space between the enclosing prism and the pillar. Apparently, the agent tenderly embraced the pillar while in foam form before hardening and becoming a packing material with some elasticity to it.

“The exterior surface of the **imperial treasures** are sensitive,” Ehf continued. “I’m worried that even these measures aren’t enough to properly preserve them. As such, I ask that you exercise the utmost caution transporting them.”

I mean, there’s only so much I can do, thought Jint. His responsibility went as far as getting them loaded aboard. There was little he could do after that. He could keep a close eye on the gravity in the **mine deck** and take especial care not to damage the cargo. That was about it. Not that there was any real need to check the gravity outside of combat. If the gravity took a hit, that meant they’d found themselves in battle, which would mean Jint, as the **Clerk**, would be preoccupied with the important task of safeguarding the crew’s lives.

If the *Gaftnochee Dradr* were forced to enter the fray, then they’d already more or less failed their mission. With that in mind, then as a **quartermaster starpilot**, Jint’s hands were even more tied.

“Understood,” Jint replied, despite all that. That was the grown-up response. Besides, if something did happen, it was future-Jint that would be held accountable.

“How do you plan to go about it, specifically?” asked Ehf.

To tell the truth, Jint had been warming up to a particular idea for some time, but he still hadn’t told anyone just yet. It was an idea he didn’t want to put into practice if at all possible. But under Ehf’s clinging gaze, he screwed up his resolve.

“What would you say to filling the **mine deck** holding the **imperial treasures**

with the foaming agent?”

“A splendid idea,” said Ehf, his face lighting up. “Please, go right ahead.”

“I don’t know how feasible it would be, but I will expend every effort.”

He thought he might not have to put it into effect because he figured it would be hard to procure foaming agent. Even if it wasn’t, there were a massive amount of things Jint had to procure. A **clerk** on a **warship** about to sortie had plenty of work to do even without **Pillars of Praises** to worry about. And it took less than a day from when the **Watchguard Fleet** made a sally for Jint to learn that the **Clerk** of a ship returning to duty was incomparably busier than his colleagues on **warships** about to sortie.

With hindsight, he realized how easy his first job, back when he’d been the **Clerk** of an **assault ship**, had been. He’d been nervous due to inexperience, but every time he accomplished something, he would realize what an easy job it was. It felt anticlimactic. *Rogrh*-class **assault ships** were mass-produced, so there was no wiggle room when it came to what or how much to load. In point of fact, the supplies had been stocked in the ship as part of the final stage of its construction process, before Jint had proceeded to his new appointment. All he’d done was check to see whether there was too much or too little. Then he just needed to resupply whatever was in short supply whenever returning to a port.

The **raid ship** was a new class of ship, so it wasn’t quite as easy, but it was the job of a highly experienced *üigtec saubr* (squadron clerk) to fret over things. All Jint had to do was keep on top of whatever his **Ship Commander** ordered him to do.

This time was different.

Needless to say, the *Gafnochec Dradr* was not a cutting-edge ship. While it was an *Aïcch*-class **patrol ship**, which were once mass produced as capital ships, the last time an *Aïcch*-class ship made sortie was around a century ago. That made it even harder to deal with than a cutting-edge ship.

Rather carelessly of Jint, he hadn’t known that the **Star Forces** had a small corps called the *Byrec Refesr* (Extolment Fleet), which preserved the *Gafnochec Dradr* and ten-odd other memorial ships in working order. That meant all he

had to resupply was the **antimatter fuel** and the **propellant**, and it would work for the time being. However, that didn't mean it could withstand long voyages. The ship's outer hull was no different from that of newer ships', but the internal equipment had aged. Even just inspecting it was a tall order. The **Mechanics Branch** personnel (led by Samson) were having a devil of a time.

The **Budget Branch** personnel weren't struggling quite as hard as Samson's group, but they couldn't exactly afford to be twiddling their thumbs waiting for departure, either. They had to check whether the life support system (which was under their jurisdiction) was capable of withstanding long-term continuous operation. Normally they could just run an inspection, but unfortunately the equipment on old **patrol ships** was riddled with problems. And try as they might to replace some components, there were more than a few cases where they were no longer in production. Naturally, they hadn't the time to manufacture them. They ultimately had no choice but to replace the entire apparatuses. Furthermore, no matter whether the equipment was under the control of the **Budget Branch**, the **Mechanics Branch**, the **Flight Branch**, or some other, it was Jint's job as the **Clerk** to procure it. Yet another cause for distress for Jint was the fact that *Gaftnochee Dradr* was not the only ship rushing to leave the **capital**. Until now, he had but to request the necessary supplies and equipment through the **compucrystal network**, and it'd arrive at the designated place by the scheduled date. He had heard of incidents where the delivery of the goods came delayed due to some slipup, but those were just nasty rumors to him. It had never happened to Jint or the ships he'd been the **Clerk** of. But it was a different story now that the **capital** was evacuating.

He had ordered various goods via the **capital compucrystal network**, but he hadn't been given an estimated time of arrival. If it was out of stock, there was nothing for it. Fortunately, it wasn't Jint's job to scrutinize the replacement goods.

There were also times when he received a message back that the location of what he was looking for was known, but it couldn't be delivered. This meant they had no choice but to go retrieve it. Jint didn't have enough subordinates for the job. Luckily, other departments were there to lend a hand. Without the necessary machine parts, they wouldn't be able to fulfill their responsibilities

either. Due to their numbers and closely related work duties, it was chiefly **Mechanics Branch** personnel that went to collect the machine parts.

Jint got his hands on the foaming agent two days after he told Ehf his plan. Around that time, Jint was on duty on *Gaftnochec Dradr's* **bridge**.

"Sorry," said Samson, "but could you wake up?"

Reluctantly, Jint opened his right eye. If it was only a dream, he planned to close it and go back to sleep. Alas, Samson was standing there, in the flesh. Jint stretched in his Clerk's Seat. He checked the time on his **wristgear**. Fifty-five hours and thirty-seven minutes had elapsed since the **Watchguard Fleet** was dispatched. In the meantime, Jint had slept for nary three hours. No, it may have been about two hours. The numbers were blending together in his mind.

Jint switched the wristgear to another setting. 16 hours, 22 minutes, 27 seconds — the estimated shortest time for enemy ships to enter the **Countdom of Abliar**. The **Watchguard Fleet** was currently fighting the good fight to extend that time frame and buy what little time they could.

"What is it?"

"I want to dispatch three people," said Samson. "To the warehouse of *Sochrirh* Ltd."

"That's... where is that?" asked Jint blearily.

"I don't know. It's definitely in Lahkfacar, though," said Samson through a yawn. "It's got a Traffic Bureau registration number."

Lahkfacar was essentially a collection of innumerable artificial planetoids whose positions relative to each other were in constant flux. It didn't make sense to have addresses, so tracking numbers managed by the **Capital Traffic Bureau** were used instead. If one established an information link with the Bureau, it would guide their way.

The problem was that most of the **Mechanics Branch** people, including Samson, were **landworlders** and could not steer **smallcrafts**. They were forced to ask **Flight Branch starpilots** for assistance.

Jint scanned the **bridge**, but there were no **Flight Branch starpilots** around. In fact, there was no one besides him and Samson. He placed a call through his **wristgear**: “**Linewing Gnomboch**, are you busy at the moment?”

“Yes, sir,” came his exhausted voice.

“I’m asking you again.” That was all Jint had to say.

“Roger that,” replied *Gnomboch* promptly. As there was no visual, Jint couldn’t tell from *Gnomboch*’s appearance, but judging by his voice, he didn’t sound fatigued anymore. Jint was impressed.

“Where are you now?”

“The **steering room** of the *Gaftnochec Dradr*’s **smallcraft**, sir. The **smallcraft** is currently parked in the **takeoff deck**.”

Jint turned to Samson. “You’re grabbing some cargo, right?”

“Yep.”

“Is it the kind that can go in a **smallcraft**?”

He didn’t know what the cargo was specifically, nor did he really want to know. He’d probably authorized ordering the stuff before he took his nap. It was the **Ship Commander**’s job to approve ordering materials, but it appeared Lafier was busy with her duties as an **Imperial**, so the going policy was to entrust as much as possible to her subordinates. And Jint had been delegated to deal with the placement of orders. There was no need to run everything by her.

Honestly, though, they don’t need to run it by me, either.

It wasn’t as though Jint was carefully examining the contents of the orders. If Samson said they needed it, then he figured they needed it.

“It can’t be loaded inside, so I plan to have them tow it. It’s the people I’m sending and the company that’ll make the arrangements, so all the **Skipper** needs to do is pilot.” Samson knew not to talk about the cargo in detail, saying only what Jint needed to hear.

“Never change, Mr. Samson.” And Jint meant that in both ways it could be interpreted. Then he addressed *Gnomboch* again: “Could you ready the ship for takeoff and wait there? I’d like you to send three of our people to this *Sochrirh*

Ltd. place.”

“Roger that. Please give me their names and military registration numbers.”

Jint looked at Samson, who worked his **wristgear**, and nodded in reply.

“Sent,” said Samson.

“They were sent. Check to see if you got them,” Jint told *Gnomboch*.

“I have, sir,” said *Gnomboch*.

“Please, and thank you,” said Jint.

“Understood.”

The **Flight Branch starpilots** had their own work to do, though what that was, Jint wasn’t sure. In any case, *Gnomboch* was not a subordinate of his. He had no authority to order him around; this was simply a request as a comrade on the same ship. Their lives were in each other’s hands.

“It’s a go,” said Samson through his **wristgear**. He could only be speaking to the three he was dispatching. “Head to the **takeoff deck**. There should be a **smallcraft** there. I’m guessing there’s an Abh lad sleeping in the **steering room** or something. What was that? You wanna shake him awake? Don’t forget he’s your superior. You need to wake him up *respectfully*, all right?” With that, Samson dropped the call and faced Jint. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy that *Gnomboch* lad’s helping us out, but doesn’t he have his own work to do?”

“He isn’t in charge of the navigation equipment,” said Jint. That was the job of the **Extolment Fleet**.

“I know that. It’s the same for the **main engine system**. But is he good for Gunner stuff?”

In truth, not all of the *Flicaubh*’s crew had been assigned to the *Gaftnochec Dradr*. That had been the idea at first, and leaving the *Flicaubh* to cruise virtually unmanned was seriously considered. As a side note, they’d understood it would be impossible to leave it to a new crew. The **Star Forces** in the **capital** were terribly short on manpower at the moment. They had to make do with a limited workforce. Jint didn’t know what kind of discussion had taken place, or where, but in the end, it was decided that the *Flicaubh* would participate in

Trample-Blitz Squadron 1's sortie. That said, it was set to turn its back on the battlefield, but it would have to fight when the situation called for it. Given the possibility of engaging in combat, it was out of the question to leave it unmanned.

Consequently, the *Flicaubh* was preparing to leave port under the **Vice Commander** and *Sarérh Cfara* (Acting Ship Commander), **Deca-Commander** Ecryua. Jint heard that his replacement was dispatched from **Squadron Command**. Jint had never met the replacement, but apparently, they were a young **starpilot** fresh out of **quartermaster academy**. Moreover, it seemed they were this close to enlisting a *bénaic lodairr sazoir* (trainee quartermaster starpilot) for the job, too.

Yet Jint wasn't worried about the *Flicaubh*, or at least, not when it came to **Clerk** duties. *Caubh*-class **raid ships** had already proven themselves, and sortie preparation procedures had been standardized. Most saliently, they had a **squadron clerk**. Even an inexperienced **quartermaster starpilot** was fit for the job with that kind of help. In fact, Jint was jealous of his substitute.

All of which was to say, there were only a handful of **Flight Branch starpilots** assigned to the *Gaftnochec Dradr*. Put bluntly, as far as Jint knew, it was only *Gnomboch* and **Ship Commander** Lafier. The discussion resulted in the rest of the **Flight Branch starpilots** remaining aboard the *Flicaubh*, where they were busy readying the ship for the sortie. In less than an hour, Grinshia, Samson's ostensible superior, had returned to the *Flicaubh*, leaving him to deal with what was supposed to be her job.

Though it was a giant ship, it didn't take that many **Flight Branch starpilots** just to get it moving. Most of them boarded **warships** to operate the fire-control systems. And the *Gaftnochec Dradr* had next to no arms to speak of. All it had been left with were two **EM cannons** and a meager amount of mobile cannons. Jint didn't know whether those cannons were usable. If it was on someone to look into that, it would be the one **Flight Branch starpilot** apart from the **Ship Commander**, *Gnomboch*.

"Normally I *would* ask him, but I'd rather he didn't come at us with any ideas about actually double-checking the weapons," said Jint.

“We can’t have that. If we end up in combat, we’ll be done for.”

“I’m joking, I’m joking,” said Jint, though he’d been half-serious. He didn’t have much confidence in the *Gaftnochec Dradr*’s self-defense capabilities. While it used to be the glorious **Star Forces Flagship**, he figured it was basically akin to a supply ship at the moment.

“Besides...”

“Besides?”

“If you want to make it combat-ready, that’s for the **Ship Commander** to manage.”

Indeed, it wasn’t up to the **Clerk** to decide whether the *Gaftnochec Dradr* should be made combat ready or not.

“Well, you’ve got a point there. Guess you’re not the only one who’s worked to exhaustion. I haven’t been gone from the military that long, and look at me, forgetting what every **soldier** knows from Day One.”

“What every soldier knows?”

“Yeah — just focus on your own job. That way it’s easier on the workers, and in the end, it’s a good thing for the organization as a whole. If, of course, that organization is the **Star Forces**.”

“When would that *not* be the case?”

“Oh, I dunno, maybe a **grandee’s house** that just got off the ground.”

“Ah, right.” Jint smiled wryly. “Must have developed a bad habit for that sort of thing.”

“Not really. My dream is to manage a farm. My experience as a **servant vassal** will serve me more than my experience as a **soldier**.”

“I’m relieved to hear that.”

“I’m grateful to **mine Lord**.”

“I might not be your Lord for much longer, Mr. Samson.”

“Oh how those words sadden me. Have you some grievances with my performance, mine Lord?”

“You know what I’m saying — there’s a good chance contact with the **Countdom of Hyde** will be closed off again.”

“If it gets closed off again, then we’ll just have to pry it back open,” said Samson. “Not that it’s for us to think about, either.”

“We don’t even know if we’ll survive for that long.”

“Oh, prithee, mine Lord, I implore you not to be so weak-kneed as to say something of the like despite being so much younger than me.”

“You can say that, but...” Jint was about to protest, but he kept his mouth shut.

Samson had passed out in his chair.

Chapter 4: *Slachoth Rüaborair* (Battle of the Watchguards)

Lamagh woke up, checked the time, and got out of bed.

The distance between the **Watchguard Fleets** and the enemy fleets was steadily shrinking. That no one had disturbed the **Empress's** sleep meant there had been no noteworthy shifts in either fleet. They would likely collide in a few hours' time.

Of course, this was not *Lamagh's* first ever battle. During her time as **Crown Princess**, she boarded the **patrol ship** *Agbirugh* as the **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief** and led the Empire's forces in the battles against the Camintale Republic. However, the vanguard units routed Camintale's main fleets, so the battle was already over by the time *Lamagh* arrived. Although the central formations to which the *Agbirugh* belonged were distant from the vanguard units, they had been just barely close enough to be able to see through the **planar space map**, while still too far for her to issue any order. *Lamagh* had had no choice but to watch the battle unfold from beginning to end. The ratio of strength between their vanguard and the enemy fleet was about three-to-two, but that figure only took ship numbers into account. The gulf in ship quality seemed to be even greater, and the Camintale Fleet was annihilated.

Lamagh had watched the enemy troop numbers decline. It was a curious sensation. Even if they had defeated the Empire's vanguard, they'd have to then fight the core units, which were more than three times mightier than the vanguard. Moreover, if things didn't look good for the Empire, the vanguard was supposed to hold out until the core units arrived. No matter how hard they struggled, the Camintale Republic had had no chance of winning.

Lamagh smiled at the memory. Upon seeing the **Watchguard Fleet**, would the enemy feel that same odd sensation she'd felt all those years ago?

She hadn't been able to participate in the Battle Against Camintale, but the

overall war was a different story. Decimating the enemy's war potential didn't automatically end the war. *Lamagh* had had to serve as the chief architect of the Camintale Republic's liquidation.

It was through that process that she came to realize why they'd fought an impossible fight. There were four star systems at Camintale's core, and their economies were closely linked. If they were torn apart, each system's economy would collapse, leading to inevitable starvation and death. In addition, their military was not very trusted and wasn't authorized to surrender. Therefore, they, in their patriotism, had no choice but to continue fighting no matter how hopeless the war was.

Currently, the capital faced a similar fate. However, there was one big difference between the bygone Camintale military and the current **Watchguard Fleet** — even if the Watchguard Fleet was defeated, it didn't spell the end of the Empire.

Would the **Empire** bearing the **crest** of the **eight-headed dragon** be erased, or would it spread to cover the known universe? Sadly, *Lamagh* would not live to see her Empire's destiny.

She dressed herself for the first time since she had been the **Ship Commander** of a **patrol ship**. The usual armed *nacébriac* (chamberlain guards) were aboard the *Gaftnohec* and were in charge of escorting her and taking care of her personal effects. However, this was not really necessary. Though she was the **Empress**, she was more than capable of doing all this herself, and even the armed escort was very much a formality. They were just there as a show of the **Empress's** stateliness.

But now, all the **chamberlains** had returned to military service. A small fraction of them had boarded the *Gaftnohec* as staff officers of the **Watchguard Fleet**, but most of them were assigned elsewhere.

Upon entering the **Throne Bridge**, the staff members stood to attention.

"At ease."

Normally, the **ceremony master** was the one to, in so many words, allow them to sit down, but this time, the **Empress** herself did.

Despite the **Empress's** command, the staff remained standing.

Ah, of course. She smiled wryly and sat down on the **Jade Throne**.

At that, the staff officers also sat down. They were perhaps a little nervous.

Lamagh regarded the **planar space map**. The enemy fleet had assumed a wedge-shaped formation and were making a beeline for the **Clybh Portal**. Meanwhile, the **Watchguard Fleets** had arrived at their positions on the route.

"It doesn't appear as though they are straying from the course," said Faramunsh.

"They must think they can overrun them," said *Lamagh*.

Getting evaded altogether was what **Watchguard Command** feared most.

A half-baked detour within ten hours of collision was meaningless. It would just expose their flanks. Therefore, if the enemy did swerve around them, that would buy them ten hours at least, which would have been a huge help, but the Empire had no reason to expect that to happen. Maybe the fact the enemy chose to come at them head-on was a blessing in disguise.

The enemy must have decided it would be faster to invade the **capital** through them than altering course. That was the humiliating reality. Of course, *Lamagh* was not about to take that slight sitting down. She would delay them for longer than altering course would have, and she aimed to score some damage, too. Moreover, she didn't doubt that everyone in the **Watchguard Fleet** shared that sentiment.

"The enemy will soon be within range of **mobile space-time mines**," reported the Exploration Officer.

"**Deterrent Squadrons**, prepare to launch **mines**," ordered *Lamagh*.

The **Deterrent Watchguard Squadrons** were lined up in rows where the **Watchguard Fleets** had formed single line formations squadron by squadron.

On the **planar space map**, dotted lines were drawn ahead of them, marking the **Deterrent Squadrons'** range of fire. The Deterrent Squadrons had already fired their **mines**, but those mines were still inside the **space-time bubbles** generated by the **supply ships**, waiting for *Lamagh's* orders to be launched.

The rate of information exchange between **space-time bubbles** was always glacial. The most efficient means of communication was to rely on small-mass ships with **planar space navigation functionality** such as **conveyance ships**.

Since entering **planar space**, *Lamagh* had sent **conveyance ships** dozens of times to the **space-time bubbles** enclosing the **sub-fleet flagships** under her command. As soon as they fused **space-times** with their destinations, hectic intercommunication ensued. The information exchange itself was carried out automatically, so it wasn't some big job. Traditionally, the task was usually given to the lowest-ranked **starpilot** on any given **warship**, which was why novice **starpilots** without a fixed post were said to be in the position of "Messenger." Aboard a **warship**, "Messenger" was a euphemism for a glorified chore boy. It was exhausting work, but that was because their superiors kept them busy running errands, not because the conveyance itself was time intensive.

However, it was a different story for **Fleet Command**, which had a much higher communication volume. The Messengers with Fleet Command were plenty busy carrying out just their namesake duties — though they were still thought of as staff officer trainees.

In the **Watchguard Fleet's** case, during peacetime, the ships only mobilized for ceremonial events, so there was little need for its headquarters to employ messengers. Therefore, messengers were not permanent fixtures there; instead, retired **starpilots** were summoned to serve in that role if and when the ships were called to actual battle. In the **Watchguard Fleet**, there were no novice **starpilots** to begin with. Nobody with a future ahead of them ought to be assigned to the fleet whose purpose was to fight when defeat was imminent. Furthermore, the young could not so much as volunteer for the high honor of being defeated alongside the **Empress**.

At times, staff officers themselves piloted **conveyance ships** in place of messengers in order to attend meetings with subordinate squads.

"I've returned," reported a staff officer, voice exhausted, as they stepped back into the **Throne Bridge**. Soon, they would come within the range of the enemy's **mines**, after which there would be no time to send out **conveyance ships**. They had finished their last meeting.

Of course, the enemy fleet was maintaining contact using small-size ships as well, and a great many of them were darting between ships. However, not all of them were involved in information conveyance — there were doubtless many decoys, since otherwise it would be too easy to tell which ship was the **flagship**. As might be expected, the enemy did not look down on the **Star Forces** to the extent of exposing the location of their **flagship**.

“Were you able to pinpoint the enemy **flagship**?” asked *Lamagh*.

“I have narrowed the possibilities down to three places,” said Faramunsh.

Three red blips appeared on the enemy fleet projected on the **planar space map**, each accompanied by a percentage indicating the probability it was the **flagship**.

“Are you confident?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Very well. Have the **Deterrent Squadrons** set targets for their **mines**,” she said, setting her eyes on the **Military Command Director**. “All mines are to be aimed in accordance with Directive 3.”

“It might behoove us to launch a mine counterstrike,” said Faramunsh. “At least one third should be directed at enemy **mines**.”

A mine counterstrike involved sending one’s **mines** after incoming enemy **mines** and destroying them. It was the mission of the **Deterrent Squadrons** to launch mine counterstrikes and obstruct the flow of enemy **mines** toward the **Watchguard Fleet**.

“Unnecessary,” she replied immediately.

“As Your Majesty wills.” Faramunsh had served the **throne** for many years, and so he knew it was pointless to try to persuade her when *Lamagh* spoke in that tone.

A short **interbubble communication** was released from the *Gaftnochec*. Directive 3 ordered them to aim for the enemy **flagship**. The mines were distributed according to the likelihood a given target was the **flagship**. While it would be great if they did manage to sink the enemy **flagship**, they weren’t

holding out for that. Rather, their main objective was to uncover which was the **flagship** through how the enemy responded. Of course, no one was daring to dream that by losing its command center, the enemy would make fatal miscalculations and end up routed. Vanquishing the **flagship** would do nothing more than sow some confusion amongst enemy ranks. Yet that was the best battle result they could hope for.

“The enemy fleet has fired what are thought to be **mines**.”

That report was something of a formality. Everyone on the **Throne Bridge** was staring at the **planar space map**, and none had failed to notice the emergence of swarms of **space-time bubbles** that could be described as torrents of malice.

Regardless, the **throne**’s current occupant did not flinch or falter, and her loyal **Command Director** did not entreat her for orders. That was only natural, as she had already issued her orders — all of the **Deterrent Squadrons**’ mines were aimed at the **bubbles** with a high chance of being the enemy **flagship**. The **bubbles** that perhaps surrounded the enemy’s core lay deep within the enemy fleet and were not yet within range. But it beat just waiting for the **Deterrent Squadrons** to be blown to smithereens.

The **planar space map** displayed the data they needed to ascertain that period in time. To trained eyes, it was clear they’d just make it. However, it would be difficult for **soldiers** belonging to the **Deterrent Squadrons** to escape. Of course, they’d steeled themselves for that.

*I’m presuming upon my **soldiers**’ heroic resolve*, thought *Lamagh* ashamedly.

“Target 2 within range.”

Needless to say, “Target 2” referred to one of the enemy **flagship** candidates. Soon after, Target 1 also came in range, followed soon by Target 3.

Faramunsh looked up at the **throne**.

“Let us commence the feast,” she ordered.

The **interbubble communication** was sent out. After a short interval, the **bubbles** making up the **Deterrent Squadrons** exploded.

Each **bubble**’s mass was taken up chiefly by mines. Because the mines split off

all at once, it would have looked to an observer as though they just exploded wholesale. Almost all of the **bubbles** that had explosively split off this way were aimed at the enemy fleet.

However, there were also still **bubbles** around the supply ships. Through space-time splitting, from each of those **bubbles** flew another, rearward-bound **bubble**. They were **conveyance ships** carrying the supply ships' crews.

The crews of the supply ships were to leave via the **conveyance ships** once their **mine** cargo was fired. If they'd had enough fuel, the **conveyance ships** would simply return to the **capital**, but they were too far now. As such, they would be picked up by the **supply ships** of the **Watchguard Fleet**. The **soldiers** belonging to the **Deterrent Squadrons** were going to return to the **capital** before the battle proper commenced. Naturally, their mission would not end there. Upon returning, they would be given missions as members of the **Imperial Capital Defense Platoon**. Most likely, they would be deployed to the **Clybh Royal Palace Fortress**.

"Enemy **mines** detonating."

At nearly the same time as the **conveyance ship bubbles** split off, the enemy **mines' bubbles** fused with the **Deterrent Squadrons'**.

The **Star Forces** were ravenously greedy. Even supply ships that had lost their weapons were expected to play a role, as they soaked up enemy **mines**.

"All **Deterrent Squadron** ships have been downed."

Of course, not all of the enemy **mines** had been absorbed. Some of them tried to destroy the **mines** fired by the **Star Forces** while the rest passed over the **Deterrent Squadrons** and attacked the main forces of the **Watchguard Fleet**.

Most of the **bubbles** persisted even after fusion with the **mine bubbles**. Unlike supply ships, **patrol ships** could defend themselves. **Laser cannons** and **antiproton cannons**, configured like the quills of a hedgehog, could easily dispel one or two **mines**. Unfortunately, however, there were cases where there were more than one or two mines. The **bubbles** at the head of the **Watchguard Fleet Conn Sétuch** attracted more than twenty mines and promptly burst, leaving concentric ripples of **space-time particles** in their wake.

A second wave of **mines** was launched from the enemy fleet. It was a mine counterstrike.

In the meantime, the rearward **bubbles** that split off from the **Deterrent Squadrons** passed between the lines of the **Watchguard Fleet**'s main forces, to be absorbed by the **supply ship bubbles** at the very back.

"All Deterrent Squadron personnel safely retrieved," came the report.

"Have them retreat immediately," ordered *Lamagh*. "Wish them fortune in battle."

When the supply ships began to put distance between themselves and the fleet, countless **bubbles** were dancing across the battlefield. Enemy **mines** endeavored to fuse with **Star Forces mines** and explode. Meanwhile, allied **mines** hurtled toward the innermost depths of the enemy fleet. Waves of **space-time particles** roiled the cosmic fabric.

Even after clearing this utter turbulence, **Star Forces mines** had yet more obstacles to face. The front row of the enemy fleet was taken up by defensive destroyers, the rough equivalent of **Star Forces** "defense ships." They specialized solely in destroying **mobile space-time mines**. The **bubbles** of the defensive destroyers hotly pursued the **bubbles** of the **mines**. Only a few were able to shake off those pursuers. However, after surmounting that hurdle, there was little else to stop them. Behind the defensive destroyers were the offensive destroyers, with **antiproton cannons** as their main arms — the rough equivalent of the **Star Forces' assault ships**. The offensive destroyers were largely indifferent to the **mines**. The large caliber **antiproton cannons** on their bows were meant to destroy large ships, and were somewhat ill suited to blasting **mines**, which were too agile and quick. As such, the surviving **mines** slipped through the lines of destroyer **bubbles** without impediment.

At the **patrol ship** *Gaftnochech*'s **Throne Bridge**, everyone was watching the **planar space map**. Eventually, the **mine** swarm reached Target 2. The number of **mines** that made it there was a fraction of the number of mines launched, but there were still enough to kill one **patrol ship**.

"Enemy Target 2 down!" reported the **Exploration Officer**.

Targets 1 and 3 were also being rushed by **mines**. However, the enemy fleet

moved quickly. Other **bubbles** swooped in to absorb the **mines** before they could reach their targets.

There was a slight gap in their motion. The staff officers started deliberating.

On the **planar space map**, various symbols appeared, shifted, and disappeared in a storm of activity, only for the **map** to eventually settle down. The staff officers looked up at the **throne**.

“Did you find it?” asked *Lamagh*.

“Yes, we did,” said Faramunsh. “It is believed Target 3 is the true enemy core.”

“Good,” nodded the **Empress**. “Now then, trusted hands of Ours, what say we gracelessly thrash and flail together?”

“Please rise, *Loüass Sazoïr* (Quartermaster Deca-Commander) Lynn,” said *Gnomboch*.

“I’m a **vanguard starpilot**,” said Jint. “When did I become a **Deca-Commander**?”

“About five minutes ago,” came Lafier’s voice.

Jint hurriedly opened his eyes and straightened up in his chair.

In addition to Lafier and *Gnomboch*, Samson and another female **starpilot** were on the **bridge** of the *Gaftnochec Dradr*. At first Jint thought this must be his first time meeting her, but he also thought she looked somewhat familiar. Maybe they’d passed each other by at some point.

“So then, everyone is here,” said Lafier from the **Ship Commander’s Seat**.

What do you mean, “everyone”!? Jint was confused. He wondered what had happened during his short nap. He wanted to ask Samson, but their seats were too far away. *Gnomboch* was the closest to him, but he was about to return to his seat after confirming Jint was awake. Jint hesitated to stop him.

Oh well, whatever. I’m sure I’ll find out soon enough. Jint checked the time through his **wristgear**. About sixty-nine hours had passed since the **Watchguard Fleet** set sail into **planar space**.

“We are coming under the command of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**, and will work alongside them,” said Lafier. “**Inspector Supervisor**, how is the ship?”

“I can guarantee smooth sailing to Sohtryoor,” said Samson. “But from that point on, it’s a different story.”

“Do we not have the energy to last?”

“The machinery will endure.” Samson glanced at Jint.

Lafier also looked at Jint. “**Clerk**, how are our fuel and supplies?”

“There are no issues until after we reach the **temporary capital**,” said Jint. “If we go beyond that, we will have to resupply. I think we have more than enough daily goods, but our **propellant** and **antimatter fuel** won’t take us farther than Sohtryoor.”

“You *think* we do? What do you mean, you *think* we do?” said Lafier.

“I haven’t been told how many people will be aboard the *Gaftnochec Dradr* yet, so I can’t say for sure,” said Jint, couching his talking-back as a clarification.

“Is that true?” Lafier looked incredulous.

“Yes. I kept asking, but they kept putting off answering.”

And Lafier was one of the people who put off answering. Perhaps she hadn’t known the exact number when he’d asked her.

“Okay, then how much did you load?”

“I assumed we’d be stopping at Sohtryoor, so I loaded the daily necessities for 400 people.” Though to Jint, he hadn’t just loaded the stuff so much as scraped it together before finally loading the stuff, but he didn’t bring that up. Lafier must have been plenty busy in her own right, after all.

“That’s almost too much,” said Lafier, relieved. “What about the **imperial treasures**?”

Jint nearly groaned at the word **imperial treasures**. They were his biggest bane these last few days.

“We’re almost ready to load them in. All we have to do is place the workers on the **mine deck**, which can be done in as little as five minutes. We can take

them in anytime.”

“Are preparations to carry them out complete?”

Administrator Ehf was in charge of the task of packing the **Hall of Remembrance**’s stone pillars and carrying them out of the **Imperial Palace**. That didn’t mean Jint had nothing to do with it, but given how he hadn’t heard from them, the preparations were probably going well.

“They’re slated to be completed in around half an hour.”

“I see,” nodded Lafier. “In that case, we have no issues.”

“**Ship Commander**,” said the female **starpilot**, standing up. According to her rank insignia, she was a **linewing starpilot** like *Gnomboch*. “When you transfer the **imperial treasures**, please leave the piloting to me.”

“No,” said *Gnomboch* without a moment’s delay. “Please, leave it to me.”

“Certainly not,” said Lafier immediately. “I shall do the piloting.”

“But...” The female **starpilot** wasn’t backing down.

“Never mind that, **Linewing**,” said Lafier. “The **Clerk** has just awakened and doesn’t know your name. Why don’t you introduce yourself?”

The **starpilot** glared at Jint and saluted.

“I’m **Linewing Starpilot** *Laicch Üémh Lobér Placiäc Grairiäc*.”

Lecsh? thought Jint. She bore the same family name as the unforgettable **Ship Commander** of the **patrol ship** *Gothelauth*. A coincidence?

“I’m **Vanguard Starpilot** Lynn.” Jint stood up and returned the salute. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, **Linewing** *Lecsh*.”

“No, you are a **quartermaster Deca-Commander** now. Congratulations on your promotion, **Quartermaster Deca-Commander** Lynn. “

So he was. When exactly had he been made a **Deca-Commander**?

Jint shot Lafier a glance.

“**Linewing** *Lecsh* is the niece of the **Ship Commander** you knew,” explained Lafier. “Until very recently, she was a **trainee starpilot** working for the

Watchguard Fleet. However, all **trainee starpilots** were dismissed from the **Watchguard Fleet.** She came crying to me that she didn't have a post, so I took her in. We needed more hands, so it worked out."

Through the prism of Jint's Lander sensibilities, he couldn't help but think of her as Lafier's cousin. Through the prism of Abh society, they were total strangers. Yet they must have had some kind of prior connection. After all, she had secured a place here on the *Gaftnochec Dradr* through a personal connection.

That cleared up one question, but that wasn't what Jint really wanted to know. "So what is behind my being a **Deca-Commander** now?"

"You're the same as me," said Lecsh.

With that, neither she nor Lafier said anything more, as though that explained everything. *Like cousin, like cousin*, Jint supposed.

Upon closer inspection, Jint noticed the resemblance between Lecsh and Lafier. Lecsh lacked the **Abliar ears** permitted only to **Imperials**, and her eyes were gold, so he'd never have any trouble telling them apart, but they shared the same features and bluish-black hair. Also, she looked a lot like the **Ship Commander** of the *Gothelauth*. Little wonder, then, that Jint would find her face familiar.

From what he understood, Lecsh had been a **trainee starpilot** until very recently. And he figured he'd been made a **Deca-Commander** for the same reason she'd been made a **linewing starpilot**. Yet so long as he didn't know why Lecsh had been promoted, he had no way of figuring out the reason behind his own promotion. The only other thing that had made itself clear to him was how he was the last among those assembled to learn of his own promotion.

It wasn't exactly as though Jint had the time to be solving this mystery, however. Jint looked at the chest of his **uniform**; it still bore the rank insignia of a **quartermaster vanguard starpilot**. He didn't have the time to change it, not least because he hadn't received the notice of personnel change.

Lecsh clearly wasn't shy; she had on her **linewing starpilot** insignia. He noticed *Gnomboch* was wearing the insignia of a **rearguard starpilot** now.

“For now,” said Lafier, “we decide our posts. That’s not an issue for the **Clerk** and **Inspector Supervisor. Rearguard Gnomboch**, you assume the post of **Gunner. Linewing Lecsh**, you be the **Communications Officer**.”

It appeared Lafier herself intended to serve as both **Ship Commander** and **Navigator**. She had been promoted, too — to **Hecto-Commander**.

“Ah, I get it,” whispered Jint.

“Get what?” asked Lafier.

“Everyone on this ship has been promoted, right?”

“No,” said Lafier. “All **active-duty soldiers** have been field-promoted.”

“Though of course, the news hasn’t reached outlying sectors yet,” said Lecsh. “As such, I believe more than half of the **soldiers** out there don’t know they’ve been promoted.”

“Putting that aside,” said *Gnomboch*, “may I suggest we designate the voyage as ‘currently engaged in combat’ until we complete the transfer of the **imperial treasures**?”

Normally, piloting a **patrol ship** was the **Navigator**’s job, but during combat, it was commonplace to entrust it to the **Gunner** instead.

“No can do.” Lafier smiled, delighted for some reason.

Then it dawned on Jint — it was because the whole gang had assembled. All the **starpilots** of the *Gaftnochec Dradr* were here now. The ship would be operated by a very small contingent, but this setup was enough for an unarmed supply ship. As expected, it seemed they hadn’t taken into account the possibility of battle.

I really didn’t need to load 400 people’s worth of daily supplies, did I!?

“**Ship Commander**,” said Lecsh. “A message from the **Imperial Palace**. It seems Her Majesty will join us in preparing the **imperial treasures** for transferring.”

“What?” Jint was surprised. This was happening faster than scheduled.

For Lafier, on the other hand, it apparently wasn’t anything to be taken aback

by.

“It has begun,” said Lecsh.

Lafier took up the **Ship Commander’s Seat** and extended her **access-cables**. “So it has,” she nodded. “Run the video footage through the main screen, for the **Clerk** and **Inspector Supervisor’s** sakes.”

The **Imperial Palace** loomed large on screen. But something was amiss.

Jint didn’t catch a word of whatever it was Samson then said; it was probably in Samson’s mother tongue.

“What was that?” asked a similarly uncomprehending Lafier, who furrowed her brow in Samson’s direction.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing. I’m just surprised,” said Samson.

Lafier did not pursue the matter any further.

As far as Jint could tell, the Imperial Palace seemed to have crumbled to pieces. “What’s going on?” Jint was confused.

Judging by Lafier and the others’ reactions, it looked as though this was not some calamity or disaster. And even though not just Lafier but also Lecsh and *Gnomboch* seemed to know what had “begun,” the fact no explanation was provided for Jint and Samson, who weren’t exactly military greenhorns, didn’t sit right with them.

Jint had heard that **Flight Branch starpilots** called themselves “true **starpilots**” amongst themselves. Maybe they considered **starpilots** from the **Budget** or **Mechanics Branch** fake **starpilots**. Or maybe it was because Jint and Samson were land-born. Jint sensed a wall between himself and the Abhs-by-birth; he looked at Samson, who merely shrugged. Samson didn’t seem to know what was going on, either.

So Jint asked him a question he knew Samson definitely could answer. “What did you say just now?”

“Ah, it’s just, there’s a traditional dance in my hometown. I blurted out how it looks just like it,” Samson responded, under his breath for some reason.

“What sort of dance?” Jint whispered back.

“Well...” Samson lowered his voice yet more. “A sexy lady disrobes as she dances, until eventually, she’s dancing in the nude. They say it’s an art form that’s existed since the Earth Age.”

“Okay then.” Jint thought the traditional dance genuinely fascinating, but he very much hesitated to make his interest in it too obvious, so he opted to just nod along and leave the conversation at that.

The **Imperial Palace** was not collapsing; it was *disassembling*. This was happening by design, as evidenced by how the detached structures were getting transported by tow ships.

Though the three **Flight Branch starpilots** had to have been perceiving the scene through their *frocragh*, they were nevertheless staring intently at the main screen. Eventually, Jint realized that though Samson’s metaphor was somewhat unrefined, it was on the money.

The **Imperial Palace** was not being disassembled as such. It had something akin to a core, from which the various structures were being stripped. That core was characterized by innumerable, dazzlingly beautiful lights, so even the *frocragh*-less Jint could tell it was not an assemblage of multiple parts, but rather one big mass. The core looked like a huge ship.

“She was wearing lots and lots of layers, but the dancer has bared herself,” Samson muttered.

“It’s not a dancer,” said Lecsh.

Samson pulled an “uh-oh” face. Evidently, Lecsh had overheard.

“It’s the *Saïriac Frybarer* (Empire Egg),” said Lafier. “Otherwise known as the *Abliar*.”

Jint was momentarily confused, but then he understood.

“Abliar” was both the **surname** of the **Imperials** and the name of the star that Lakfakar revolved around. But above all, it was the name of the city-ship that ferried the ancestors of today’s Abhs across the stars. Back then, the *Abliar* was Abhkind’s whole world. Jint knew that it wasn’t that the city-ship of old was incorporated into the **Imperial Palace**. Rather, the **Palace** itself was the result of continual additions, expansions, and extensions to the city-ship. With that in

mind, it was easy to see why Lafier and the others who possessed *frocragh* were visibly awe-struck.

The *Abliar* once housed eight so-called “closed portals,” harnessing the power they emitted to dart across all corners of the universe as they knew it — and providing for the Abh in the process. And it was from the city-ship that the vastest empire in human history was hatched.

Needless to say, Lafier was from the clan that had served as the “Ship’s Crown” on the city-ship *Abliar* for generations. Jint had heard that the Lecsh line belonged to the *Lomh* clan, one of the 29 Founding Families. Jint didn’t know *Gnomboch*’s ancestry, but he wouldn’t be surprised if *Gnomboch* was a descendant of the Riders of the Dawn.

Their ancestors had entrusted their lives to the *Abliar*, and it was on that ship that they turned up at this star system.

“If they were going to do that,” blurted Jint, “they should’ve just disassembled the **Hall of Remembrance**, too.”

“What are you saying?” Lafier looked at him scornfully. “The Hall is too big for any ship to carry. You’re a quartermaster. How do you not know that?”

“I know that, but if you split it into pieces...” Jint argued.

“Split the Hall into pieces? The **Hall of Remembrance**?” Lafier looked at Jint like he was some alien life-form.

“Forget I said anything,” said Jint weakly.

He was sure the Hall of Remembrance was sacred to Abhs-by-birth.

“Besides,” said Lafier, “the Hall is an indivisible part of the city ship *Abliar*. It would take time to disconnect it...”

Yeah, that might very well be the case, thought Jint.

“...I think,” she added.

“I see.” Jint could only smile wryly.

This late in the game, it was pointless to analyze what method would end up taking less time. It might have proven interesting to mull it over as a thought

experiment, but he'd rather be asleep than indulging in such lofty brain exercises.

Around the time when the full particulars of the city-ship came to light, the scheduled period of transferal preparation was at hand. Jint's **wristgear** rang.

"Count Hyde." It was a communication from **Administrator** Ehf. "We are ready on our end."

Jint relayed that information to Lafier without delay.

Lafier nodded and sat in the Ship Commander's Seat. "Prepare to set sail."

"All systems clear," said Samson. "We can depart at any time. Your orders, **Ship Commander.**"

For his part, Jint gazed at the **console** before him. "Onboard environment all clear."

"Excellent." Lafier equipped her **control gauntlet**. "Setting sail. Ignite the **main engines.**"

"Igniting **main engines**," said Samson, and at that very moment, a slight tremor shook the hull of the *Gaftnochec Dradr*.

The structures that made up the **Imperial Palace** (including the city-ship *Abliar*) were pulling away from each other like some sort of slow-motion explosion. Lafier piloted the *Gaftnochec Dradr*'s giant frame through the languid blow-up, lining up with the city-ship right away.

Normally, as the **Clerk**, Jint would be heeding the onboard environmental indicators, but he didn't have the chance to.

"Ship Commander," called Jint. "May I be allowed to leave the bridge shortly? I would like to prepare the **mine deck** to receive the pillars — er, the **imperial treasures.**"

"Go," said Lafier. "Will you leave **Clerk** duties to **Rearguard Gnomboch**?"

Clerks were busy before departure and during battle, but they didn't have too much to do when the ship was just cruising. Maintenance of the onboard environment was automated, and only rarely did mishaps occur. The **Clerk's** duties lay in preparing meals and providing first aid, but those tasks were

carried out by **NCCs** with technical training.

As such, it was typically the **Flight Branch starpilots** on duty who monitored the onboard environment (in addition to their actual missions), with the **Clerk** devoting their energies to the menu of meals. Since they weren't engaged in battle for the time being, and the menu had been decided a good week ahead of time, entrusting things to *Gnomboch* wouldn't be an issue.

"All right, **Rearguard Gnomboch**, I leave it to you," said Jint, who saluted Lafier and left his seat.

When it came time to receive the **Pillars of Praises**, the **mine deck** would become a vacuum. Naturally, he'd need to outfit himself in equipment designed for vacuum exposure, but Jint was still not all that great at donning **pressure suits**. He wanted to do it as soon as possible.

He arrived at the **mine deck** in his **pressure suit** with eight minutes to spare before the transfer was scheduled to start. The **Mechanics Branch NCCs** slated to help on deck had also assembled. They were Samson's subordinates, but temporarily under Jint's command. The meeting had already taken place about seven hours prior. The situation hadn't changed since then; there'd been nothing to add.

I hope nothing happens after we start, either, Jint prayed, as he posted his **NCCs** in accordance with what had been decided earlier. Once he was done, he reported to the **bridge**: "Preparations for loading totally complete."

Lafier's voice reverberated in his **pressure helmet**: "Roger. We shall soon be ready, too."

"Depressurizing **mine deck**," said *Gnomboch*, cutting into the line. That was the **Clerk's** job.

"Roger," said Jint.

Depressurizing the **mine deck** before opening it was a safety measure. In the unlikely event that the equipment was faulty and couldn't withstand vacuum exposure, if the pressure was reduced gradually, those defects would be noticed before it became too late. The practice had saved the lives of countless absent-minded fools, though there seemed to be no such fools on this **mine**

deck. The atmospheric pressure was lowered to about a fiftieth of the normal levels, but no one appeared to be suffering from any adverse effects.

“Synchronized with the *Abliar*,” said Lafier.

“Opening **mine deck**,” said *Gnomboch*.

Reflexively, Jint looked up at the ceiling. A shaft of light was widening, the illumination that the *Abliar* was clad in trickling through the gaps in the door.

As it was a near-vacuum, there was next to no sound. However, Jint did pick up on a faint vibration. The structures that made up the **Imperial Palace** slid through space, revealing a square-shaped hole. The ceiling of the Hall of Remembrance was not made to open, so it had to be melted down. The structure that had been covering the large hole had been removed, allowing them to see the Hall of Remembrance, and the rows of pillars packed inside hexagonal prisms, with their own eyes.

“Cut off the **mine deck**’s gravity,” Jint told *Gnomboch*.

“Roger that.”

When his body grew lighter, Jint was attacked by a wave of drowsiness. After all, in microgravity, it felt no different whether one was standing or lying down.

Let’s get this over with so I can sleep in bed, he thought, peppering himself up as he opened a line between himself and **Administrator** Ehf.

“Preparations to load them are complete,” said Jint.

“Understood. Commencing delivery,” responded Ehf. “Delivery of first pillar in ten seconds,” came a machine voice almost immediately. “...Six, five, four, three, two, one, delivering.”

Slowly propelled by the type of small **attitude control engine** individuals used when working outside a ship, the first **Pillar of Praises** was ejected in the direction of the *Gaftnochec Dradr*’s **mine deck**. The **pillar** passed the midpoint in about thirty seconds’ time, after which it started to slow down.

“Pillar 1 arriving in ten seconds... six, five, four, three, two, one, received.”

It came to a stop floating about ten *dagh* above the **mine deck**’s floor. Three **NCCs** rushed in to remove the attitude control engine, which promptly returned

to the Hall of Remembrance. The **Pillar of Praises** was moved to its predetermined section by the elbow grease of the **NCCs** themselves, which was possible thanks to the microgravity. Meanwhile, at that moment, Pillar 2 had already begun to slow down. The method was primitive, but it worked. At this late stage, they wanted to avoid any unnecessary dangers.

The **Watchguard Fleet** had closed ranks into a single group and was squaring off against the enemy fleet. Since each **sub-fleet** formed a single-line formation, the **Watchguard Fleet** as a whole formed a rectangle made up of eight columns.

The enemy fleet fired innumerable **mobile space-time mines**; the swarm of mines became a torrent and surged toward the **Watchguard Fleet**.

Though they were technically single-line formations, each **space-time bubble** contained three **patrol ships**. The heavier the **bubbles**, the lower the mobility. It was impossible for three **patrol ship bubbles** to avoid the nimble **bubbles** of **mines**. What they lacked in mobility, however, they made up for in defense. They didn't even need to be protected by **defense ships**, unperturbed by the likes of space-time **mines**.

Consequently, the Watchguard **bubbles** took on all the enemy **mine bubbles**. The surplus mass generated as a result of **space-time fusion** with the **enemy mines** was released in the form of **space-time particles**. That was why a flow of **space-time particles** swelled and swirled near the **Watchguard Fleet**.

Through the storm, the **Watchguard Fleet** slowly made progress toward the enemy. The **Star Forces Flagship Gaftnochec** was located slightly behind the center of the rectangular formation, between the **sub-fleets** *Surh Sétuch* and *Laucec Sétuch*. The *Gaftnochec* shared a **bubble** with two **patrol ships** under the **Empress's** direct control, the *Baïcaü* and the *Autcaü*. The enemy mines were rushing toward that **bubble** deep inside their lines, too. In fact, they were aiming for it precisely because it was deep inside their lines, a fact of at least some obvious significance. However, the three ships, including the *Gaftnochec*, were able to repel the enemy **mines** without issue.

The **bubble's** interior was brightly lit. The **laser-pierced mines** kept detonating.

The blasts subsided for a moment, but the reactions caused by the leaking **antimatter fuel** annihilating against the debris persisted for a long time, and the sparkling lights would not abate.

The *Gaftnochech*'s Throne Bridge was quiet. *Lamagh* was seated on the **Jade Throne**, straining her *frocragh* to perceive the **mines** emerging endlessly from the **bubble**'s frothing interior surface.

The **Exploration Officer** broke the silence: "Distance to enemy: 100."

"Switch to Formation 11," *Lamagh* decreed.

A short **interbubble communication** ran through the raging streams of **space-time particles**. All at once, the **Watchguard Fleet** switched to single-ship **bubbles**, after which they began assuming their new formation; the process ended spellbindingly quickly. Eight **sub-fleets** each formed a diagonal line, the sub-fleets connecting in pairs to form rough upside-down Vs, or mountain-shaped arches. There were four such mountain-shapes, and taken as a whole, the formation was akin to a row of arrow feathers. Like a volley of strung arrows, their points were pointed at the enemy.

Many of the enemy **mines' bubbles** were left behind due to the sudden increase in the speed of the **Watchguard Fleet**. Owing to their artificial intelligence, the **mines** changed course in order to give chase, but more than half exploded in vain due to a lack of fuel. Of course, the enemy immediately corrected their aim, but this had created a window whereby the flow of mines attacking the **Watchguard Fleet** took a slight hit.

"All ships commence **mine** battle," ordered *Lamagh*. "Give the enemy **assault ship** swarms a drubbing."

The **patrol ships** of the **Watchguard Fleet** fired their **mines** all at once. At first, the **mines** stayed inside the **patrol ships' bubbles**. As one might expect, unleashing a mine while intercepting enemy mines increased the chances of an unfortunate incident. This was the only time they could safely eject their **mines**.

The allied **mines split off** from the **Watchguard Fleet**'s space-times before the course-corrected enemy shells could arrive.

The enemy fleet was in a wedge-shaped formation, but its tip started opening

up like a pair of scissors. They weren't trying to swerve around them. They were trying to swallow the **Star Forces**, to encircle and exterminate. The defensive destroyers that had been deployed at the front row in preparation against the **mines** had already retreated. Next to attack the **Watchguard Fleet**, after the enemy **mines**, was an offensive destroyer corps. Allied **mines** flew straight toward the corps.

"**Space-time bubble** groups now in contact," said the **Exploration Officer**, but that report was unnecessary, because said contact was over before the sentence was over.

The number of **Star Forces** mines was relatively small. It wasn't enough to affect the overall battle, but all the same, more than a hundred enemy warships were rendered no more in an instant. The enemy exercised caution and pulled back the destroyers, opting to increase the number of **mines**.

If the **Watchguard Fleet** was the arrow feathers, the **Star Forces Flagship** *Gaftnochec* was located where the arrow's nock would be. This exposed the *Gaftnochec* to danger.

There were also **mines** that, after shooting past their rear, turned right around and hurtled toward the **Watchguard Fleet** from behind. Though they'd switched to single-ship **bubbles**, **patrol ships** were still leagues slower than **mines**.

Behind the *Gaftnochec's* **bubble**, the *Baïcaü* and *Autcaü* were lying in wait to absorb enemy **mines** and protect the **Star Forces Flagship**. The fight was far from over, and it was still too soon for the **Empress** to die in battle.

"Distance from enemy: 50," the **Exploration Officer** informed the **Throne Bridge**.

Once again, the **assault ship** corps of the **Four Nations Alliance** reared its head.

"Distance: 30." And that distance was shrinking with tremendous speed.
"Distance: 20."

The **mines'** momentum had not diminished, and the Watchguards were bombarded. **Assault ship** corps drew closer, hidden within the rapid stream of

mines.

“Distance: 10.”

As usual, the **Throne Bridge** was quiet save for the **Exploration Officer**, but the air was rife with tension.

“Distance: five, four, three, two, one, contact.”

The vanguard mountain-shaped **sub-fleets** were the *Bhoc Sétuch* and *Meuth Sétuch*. Both sub-fleets began cutting through the enemy fleet. The **Throne Bridge** was suddenly overcome by noise and activity.

“The *Srumcaü* down.”

“The *İaudcaü* seriously damaged. They are abandoning ship.”

“*Saubh Rüaborair Ceutebina* (Watchguard Squadron 13) at half power.”

“*Saubh Rüaborair Gamata* (Watchguard Squadron 82), only one ship remaining.”

But it wasn't solely news of their own ships' casualties. Info regarding the enemy was also coming in.

“It appears the enemy before us is none other than the United Humankind,” said Faramunsh.

“All of them?” asked *Lamagh*.

“That much is unknown,” replied the **Military Command Director** just as laconically.

“The Hania Federation must have been captured without our even realizing.”

“I wager not even the leaders of Hania knew of this. In fact, there's a distinct possibility they have yet to notice. With the exception of space military personnel, that nation's people are only interested in its **landworlds**. If the Hanian military colluded with the **Three Nations Alliance**, nothing was stopping them from doing as they pleased in **planar space**.”

“Send the information we've gathered to the rear. *Dusanh* may find it helpful.”

“As Your Majesty decrees.”

While the two were conversing, bad news kept piling up.

“Communication from the **sub-fleet** *Meuth Sétuch*,” said the **Communications Officer** in an urgent tone. “They’re requesting permission to separate.”

“The **sub-fleet** *Bhoc Sétuch* requests the same,” reported a subordinate of the **Communications Officer**, skipping over their superior in so doing.

Lamagh regarded Faramunsh.

“The time has come,” said the **Military Command Director**.

“We see,” *Lamagh* nodded.

She considered pulling back the two **sub-fleets** momentarily, but concluded it didn’t make much sense in this situation. At the very least, both sub-fleets’ **Commandants** and the **Military Command Director** had come to that conclusion, too.

“Send a transmission,” said *Lamagh*.

“Its contents, Your Majesty,” said the **Communications Officer**.

“We hereby permit splitting off. We thank you for your work up until now. Be brave to the very end. The **Empire** shall not forget you.”

“Transmission sent.”

The rate of transfer for **interbubble communications** was glacial, so abbreviations corresponding to fixed phrases had been devised. The **Empress’s** address had been sent as a three-letter code.

Then, abbreviation-codes came from both **sub-fleet command centers** in response. The **Communication Officer** deciphered it: “From **sub-fleet** *Bhoc Sétuch* **command**: It is now that we fulfill the duty of the **watchguards**. *Sathote Frybarari*.”

The **Empress** nodded silently.

“From **sub-fleet** *Meuth Sétuch* **command**: We believe in the **Empire’s** victory, and follow the destiny of the **Watchguards**. Farewell.”

The vanguard mountain-shape formation split into left and right divisions, forcing back the enemy fleet as it veered away. Of course, the enemy wasn’t

content to be pushed back, and they attacked both **sub-fleets** relentlessly and without restraint.

The battle formation of the two **sub-fleets**, now separated from the **Watchguard Fleet** and divided into left and right, withered rapidly away. The **Watchguard Fleet**'s vanguard now consisted of the *Conn Sétuch* and *Dorh Sétuch*.

"*Saubh Rüaborair Masmata* (Watchguard Fleet 22) left with little ammo."

"The *Üencaü* seriously damaged. Unable to fight."

"*Saubh Rüaborair Danbina* (Watchguard Fleet 73), only one ship left."

"The *Conncaü* down." The *Conncaü* was the **flagship** of the **sub-fleet** *Conn Sétuch*. In other words, the **sub-fleet** had lost its **command center**.

"The Commandant of Watchguard Squadron 22 is set to take over command of the **sub-fleet**... Ah, 22's **command center** has also disappeared. The next in line to command is..."

"Have the remaining ships of the *Conn Sétuch* fall back for now," ordered *Lamagh*. "We shall take command of them."

"Roger that." Faramunsh issued detailed orders so as to realize the **Empress's** will.

"The **sub-fleet** *Dorh Sétuch* is seeking permission to separate," said the **Communications Officer**.

"Permission granted," said *Lamagh*.

Uttering those two words pained her acutely. She never imagined the **eight-headed dragon**-shaped **circlet** would ever get this heavy.

The **Communication Staff Officer** changed the **Empress's** words into a three-letter code and sent the transmission.

"From the **sub-fleet** *Dorh Sétuch*: we shoulder the honor of charging ahead of the **Empress**. *Sathote Frybarari!*"

The *Dorh Sétuch* assumed a square formation and raided the zone where the enemy was flocking together. It disappeared like a lump of snow floating in hot

water. The vanguard to follow was the **sub-fleets** *Surh Sétuch* and *Lytec Sétuch*. The enemy corps that was actively shooting **mines** split into left and right flanks. They were **mine** motherships, the equivalent of the **Star Forces' battle-line ships**. They had little close quarters combat capability to speak of, so it was only natural they evacuated.

The enemy center now lay exposed. Of course, that only meant the counterattacks got that much more intense.

A wave of **mines**, twice as thick as before, broke onto the **Watchguard Fleet**.

"Such hospitality," remarked *Lamagh*, half amazed.

"Is it really wise of them to be using all the mines they would have used at the **capital**?" said Faramunsh.

It was not mere wishful thinking. According to their calculations, this could only mean the enemy was using *all* of their **mines** to obstruct the **Watchguard Fleet**.

"Can we count that as a victory?" asked *Lamagh*.

"Yes. In my estimation, we have bought 24 hours," said the **Military Command Director**.

The **Watchguard Fleet** was now completely surrounded, making retreat impossible. Not that retreat was ever considered an option from the outset. In any event, the fact that the enemy had shot all the mines for the time being was to be exalted, cherished. It would take time for them to replenish the **mines**, and that was time the **capital** could use to fortify its defenses. If that wasn't a triumph, what was? Though the **Watchguard Fleet** would cease to be, tightly besieged by the enemy, they had obtained an unanticipated victory regardless.

"Overrun the enemy's nucleus!" *Lamagh* ordered, delighted.

However, it was not just the enemy that was nearly out of **mines**. Allied ships had fired all of theirs some time ago, and the **fusion shells** were in scarce supply. **EM cannons** firing **nuclear fusion shells** were the main weapons of **patrol ships**. And the enemy nucleus was made up of large battle cruisers, the counterparts of the **Star Forces' patrol ships**.

If they could no longer use **EM cannons**, they'd use the only weapons left on the **patrol ship** — **antiproton** and **laser cannons** mounted on mobile batteries. These cannons were meant to drive away **mines**; they might manage to destroy an **assault ship**-class vessel, but they were utterly futile against **patrol ship**-class vessels. It was like throwing an empty-handed punch at an armored, sword-wielding opponent.

"No. 34 running low."

"No. 62 out of ammo."

"No. 32 down."

"This just in from the *Lytec Sétuch* — 'battle formation untenable.'"

"Have the *Lytec Sétuch* fall back," ordered *Lamagh*. "The *Surh Sétuch* as well."

The last mountain-shaped corps, the *Laucec Sétuch* and the *Feccec Sétuch*, stood out in front. However, it was not solely from in front that enemy ships were advancing. They were also coming in from behind the **Star Forces Flagship**. After one engagement, the remaining ships of the three **sub-fleets** that fell back rallied to face them, but after they fired the rest of what little remained of their **fusion shells**, they were summarily annihilated.

"The **patrol ship** *Baïcaü* is down."

With that, the ship commanded directly by the **Empress** was lost.

Having run out of **fusion shells**, the two **sub-fleets** in front were getting rapidly hemmed in. It no longer mattered whether they were **sub-fleets** or **squadrons**. The **Watchguard Fleet** had become a swarm centered around the *Gaftnochec*, launching a final assault against Target 3.

Two **patrol ship**-class enemy ships forcibly **fused space-times** with the *Gaftnochec*. **Ship Commander** Repeth was probably wielding a **command baton** at the piloting **bridge**. However, the **Throne Bridge**, which commanded the entire fleet, was quiet.

In time, the *Gaftnochec* rocked. *Lamagh* didn't even bother confirming the damage. She simply regarded the **planar space map**. It seemed they were about to reach Target 3.

A green light blinked in the space before *Lamagh*. It appeared as though **Ship Commander** Repeth wished to say something. She signed her **handstamp** with her finger and allowed the transmission. A hologram of Captain Repeth appeared, saluting.

“**Your Majesty**, my ship has also run out of ammo.”

“Understood.”

“My sincerest apologies I failed to reach the enemy’s throat.”

“No, We’re happy with your division’s work. You admirably accompanied your feckless **Empress**.”

“I am honored beyond words. Now then, if I may be dismissed.” The hologram disappeared.

She looked at the **planar space map** once more. “And we came so close, too.” *Lamagh* looked up. *But this is fine. We were able to buy the **capital** at least twenty-four hours. The **Watchguard Fleet**’s offensive was by no means in vain.*

Lamagh smiled. Faramunsh and a number of the other staff members noticed it, and returned the smile.

Just then, the **fusion shells** shot by the enemy ship finally hit the belly of the *Gaftnochec*.

The **Star Forces Flagship** split in two, the leaking **antimatter fuel** forming into a mist that covered the hull, reacting with the matter and turning it to flames that spared not the **Throne Bridge**. At that instant, the refrain of joy composed by her fate genes filled *Lamagh*’s body from top to bottom.

The **Watchguard Fleet**’s final charge fell apart just over thirty *cédlairh* away from the enemy flagship.

Chapter 5: *Berinaibh Fazétlagr* (Destiny's Refrain)

There were those who were watching the battle of the **Watchguard Fleet** from behind. One **patrol ship** was there to keep tabs on the tide of war. The **planar space map** was disrupted by the violently undulating flow of **space-time particles**, but the skilled analysts aboard the **patrol ship** read the battle situation fairly accurately. They level-headedly assessed the routing of the **Watchguard Fleet** and sent a **conveyance ship** to the **capital** to report back.

Of course, the enemy also took note of them. But in the enemy's estimation, dispatching their grand and impressive fleet at a single, detached **patrol ship** was like using a butcher's knife to cleave a baby chick. Instead, they dispatched an offensive destroyer corps on the side while they positioned themselves.

Enemy troops of superior speed attacked the **patrol ship**, which exploded immediately. Of course, it wasn't just that **patrol ship** that was risking its neck to collect information. Several **patrol ships** and **carrycrafts** were located between the **Clybh Portal** and the enemy fleet. These surveillance ships also grasped that the main force of the enemy fleet had finished replenishing their **mine** stocks and resumed the advance.

A **conveyance ship** zoomed to the **capital** to bring news of how much time they had left. Two hours and twenty-seven minutes later by that ship's time, it entered the **Abliar Countdom** from the **Clybh Portal**, transmitting a wealth of information. The **conveyance ship** and Lahkfacar were drawing closer to each other. Of course, the **conveyance ship** was approaching the **capital** — but the **capital** itself was approaching the **Clybh Portal**.

The **capital** revolved around the sun named Abliar. The eight **portals** revolved in the opposite direction in orbit slightly farther out from the rest of the city. The distance between Lahkfacar and the **Clybh Portal** was currently shrinking. Furthermore, a particular portion of the **capital** was leading the pack in the march toward the **Clybh Portal**.

The **capital** was divided. Of course, the **capital** was not a single structure to

begin with. It was a collection of artificial planetoids in such numbers that it was tempting to call them innumerable.

All the artificial planetoids had their own means of propulsion, but that was mostly to evade collisions, and few buildings could maintain high acceleration for long stretches. Such structures — which was to say, most of the **capital** — remained in their original orbits. Most had been simply abandoned, but a small fraction were armed and awaiting the enemy's arrival. The buildings granted enhanced mobility were accelerating away from the sun.

The eight **portals** were revolving further out than the **capital** proper. Part of the **capital** was expanding its orbital course in an attempt to wedge itself in between the *Clybh* and **Barkeh Portals**.

At its center flew the city-ship *Abliar*, itself the heart of the **Imperial Palace**. It was accelerating slowly thanks to the **attitude control engines** and the thrust of towing ships. It seemed a sad shell of its former self, considering it had housed eight “closed portals” and raced across the galaxy up until the founding of the Empire. Yet all the same, the Egg of the Empire headed bravely into its final battlefield. The structures that surrounded the *Abliar* and made up the **Imperial Palace** were included in this group. In addition, the **capital** manors of the **grandeess** and the apartment complexes of the **gentry** were also participating. These structures were equipped with **laser cannons** and mobile mines; they had become emergency **orbital strongholds**. Another group pulling away from the **capital** contained ships in possession of not only 3-space maneuverability but also interstellar navigation functionality.

Many of the structures of the **capital** were using what were once **interstellar ships**. The **space-time bubble generators** were removed without exception, but it was not uncommon for structures to still have regular propulsion engines. The **construction sites** that manufactured **space-time bubble generators** were evacuated first, but their stockpiles remained in the **capital**. By inserting the leftover generators, they could essentially revive abandoned ships. After all, if they were simply left alone, there was a chance they would fall in enemy hands. What couldn't be used headed for the **Barkeh Portal**, fleeing to the **temporary capital**. More than a few ships pressed forward with the work of reviving **planar space navigation functionality** mid-voyage. Vast amounts of data were

exchanged between the groups that made up the **capital** via signals and telecommunications. Many of those transmissions were farewells.

“The **Former Baron**, ma’am?” Jint blinked.

“That’s right.” **Associate Commodore** Atosryua’s hologram’s eyes were downcast. “He says he wants to say goodbye.”

“You’re saying the **Former Baron** is still in the **capital**?” Jint was surprised.

“Of course he is,” said Atosryua incredulously. “My father is a member of the **Capital Defense Platoon**.”

“I didn’t know,” said Jint.

“But you should have guessed. All **nobles** who have retired from military service are on the **Defense Platoon** register of names without exception. They’re only removed from this list when they die or return to service.”

Isn’t he too old to participate in the battle? I guess the system is tailored toward Abhs. They don’t grow weaker with age.

“Understood, ma’am. I would very much like to speak to him as well.”

“Thank you. I’ll switch the line.”

The *Gaftnochec Dradr*, the ship Jint was on, was still in the **Countdom of Abliar**, sailing through **3-space** toward the **Barkeh Portal**. There was no guarantee they’d be able to enter **planar space** right after arriving near the **Portal**. They’d probably have to wait a while. The area around the **Barkeh Portal** was crowded, and not all of those ships were evacuating. In order to fortify the *Lartbéic Barcær* (Barkeh Royal Palace), which was next to the **Portal**, ships carrying personnel and materials were also rushing in. Jint was deeply sympathetic to the **space traffic controllers** who had to deal with it all. He himself was resting in his private room, where he was receiving Atosryua’s call. According to regulations, Jint had to be at the **bridge** thirty minutes before passing through the **Portal**, but he decided that he could take a breather for now. He waited about two minutes for the hologram to switch to the **Former Baron**.

Sroof raised a hand in greeting. “Hey there, **boy**.”

Jint owed his life to *Atausryac Ssynec Atausr Srumh*, the **Former Baron of Febdash** and the father of the **Commandant of Trample-Blitz Squadron 1, Associate Commodore** Atosryua. He had helped Jint escape from captivity. Of course, considering that the **Former Baron** himself was also imprisoned, and that it was the **Former Baron's** son who imprisoned them to begin with, the picture was a little bit murkier than that, but in Jint's eyes, the **Former Baron** had undoubtedly saved his life.

"I apologize that it's been so long," said Jint. While he was no longer a "boy," Jint didn't object.

Jint glanced at the "72" in the hologram's upper right corner. The communication time lag was seventy-two seconds, meaning he was thirty-six light-seconds away from wherever the **Former Baron** was.

"Don't worry about it, it's my fault too."

Jint waited for Sroof to continue, but apparently that was it.

Jint didn't know what to say, so he ended up asking something stupid and obvious. "You're joining the **Capital Defense Platoon**, right, sir?"

"Yep," nodded Sroof. "Another **lordly** duty to add to the pile. Though I did get to pick my post..."

"What post?" Jint asked, but this time that wasn't necessary, as the **Former Baron** continued speaking.

"...I requested to be posted in the **Former Baron of Febdash's capital manor**. The manor's currently mobilized in tandem with the **Imperial Palace**. It's relatively new for a manor. It's only been given a single **antiproton cannon**, so I guess you could call it a slow **assault ship**, but if I'm real patient waiting for the enemy to draw close, I can put up a fight."

"Do you have any subordinates?"

"Well, they're not 'subordinates' as such, but a couple of old friends are here with me. A Lander friend — we used to lick each other's wounds — and one odd duck who, despite being born with a *froch*, became a technician because he hates piloting. I made the **vassals** evacuate, of course. Us three intend to attend to the **capital** on its deathbed."

“Is that so...” Jint was relieved, if only a little.

“Enough of this dull stuff. Isn’t it time ya told me something *fun*?”

“What sort of thing should I talk about?” Jint smiled.

“Hmm. When ya get to be my age, love talk gets hard to listen to. Ya got anything else for me?”

“I had nothing ‘fun’ to recount to you about my love life to begin with.”

“You’re being humble. There ain’t many in the **Empire** who can claim to be the *raic* (lover) of a **royal princess**.”

“Well, that’s a precarious situation, too.”

“Is it now?” said the old man, his face displaying great interest. “Why don’t ya talk about that, then?”

“No, that’s...” Jint tried laughing it off: “A lot has happened.”

“Giving me the cold shoulder, eh, **boy**,” pouted the **Former Baron** jokingly. “You could stand to tell a guy who’s about to march to his death at least that much.”

“Again with that.” Jint tried, and failed, to smile. He felt he’d witnessed an abnormal number of deaths for his age, but he hadn’t gotten used to it, nor did he want to get used to it.

“Ah, forgive my slip of the tongue,” said Sroof. “But you’ve got to understand, my young friend — this is the most glorious moment in my whole life. Even if I’m just one of the great number of people who can say the same. So I’d like some congratulations, even if they’re not from the heart.”

“Congratulations,” said Jint, with some effort.

Upon reflection, Jint realized his own prospects weren’t necessarily brighter than the **Former Baron**’s. He’d survive for a bit longer, but beyond that, there were no assurances.

“Thanks. You do your best out there, too. Wherever life takes you.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you very much.”

“Now that the pleasantries are outta the way...” The **Former Baron** smiled

impishly. "It's time we got to the main topic! What do ya mean, 'precarious'?"

"Oh, that's, I..." Jint stammered.

"It seems my old friends're keen to know, too. I'll introduce ya to 'em, so give us the skinny."

"Uhh, aren't there people you'd be better served talking to apart from little old me?" said Jint.

"Never mind that, I've already talked to all my friends who aren't here." Sroof tilted his head. "You're not telling me to talk to my daughter, are ya, **boy**? Cuz if you are, I think you're being a little thoughtless. I had to ask her for permission to speak to ya to begin with. Of course I've already talked to her!"

"I understand that, but mightn't you have more to say?"

"You're not wrong. There's always more to say," said the **Former Baron**. "We may be somewhat lacking in familial sentiment, but we're talking final goodbyes here. There's tons of stuff I want to tell her, to ask her. So I left her my last will and testament. Right now, she's got so much responsibility on her shoulders that my troubles are trifling by comparison. And as a member of the **Baronic House of Febdash**, I can't be inconveniencing its current Liege. Now then, I'm gonna introduce my buddies, so let 'em in on your little secret."

Jint screwed his resolve and engaged in small talk for the next fifteen or so minutes with the three old men (though one of those men looked young on the outside). In actuality, Jint did the lion's share of the talking.

Eventually, the **Former Baron** spoke: "That was fun, **boy**. Give **Her Highness** my regards."

"I don't mind doing so, but wouldn't you like to speak to her directly?" said Jint.

"Don't mind if I abstain. Now then, goodbye."

The line cut off.

While Jint conversed with the **Former Baron**, Lafier was paying her last goodbyes as well, though they were very low-key.

"If you would allow me to take my leave, **Your Eminence**." Lafier bowed.

The eldest of the **Royal House of Clybh**, the **Empress Lamagh**'s mother and Lafier's great-grandmother, Nisothe-Laimaier, inclined her head. "Go now, and see to the **Empire**'s future."

Lamehm's great-granddaughter's hologram vanished, but Lamehm's gaze remained there for a moment. Her mind returned to her daughter, who had died in **planar space**. She was currently at the *Üabaiss Rihonr* (Chamber of Globe Amaranth) within the **Clybh Royal Palace**. It was actually one of the offices of the Lord of the **Royal Palace**, the **King of Clybh**. Miscellaneous tasks and odds and ends were often processed in more compact rooms, with this chamber being used for audiences with the monarch.

However, the current **King of Clybh**, Lamehm's grandson Dubeus, was on the warfront as a **soldier**. Last she heard, he was puttering near the **Skeer Monarchy**. So Lamehm was using the place as a combat command post. Her title was now *Glaharérr Lartbéir Clybr Heca* (*Clybh Royal Palace Fortress Commander-in-Chief*).

The members of the **Royal House of Clybh** were fighting far away from each other, but that wasn't a phenomenon exclusive to **Imperials**. It wasn't rare for Abhs to be far removed from their family. It wasn't even uncommon for a parent and child that got on famously, with no bad blood to speak of, to go decades without seeing each other. In the eyes of the blue-haired race that took interstellar commerce as their lifework, that was just one of the sad facts of life.

So long as they give their duties their all, no matter what far-flung battlefield they find themselves in... Lamehm murmured inwardly.

The staff officers stationed at the Chamber were also, of course, convened *Sobriac Arocr* (Capital Defense Platoon Troops), which was to say they were retired **soldiers**, and there were more than a few **nobles** among them.

"A communication from a **carrycraft**," reported a **communications staff officer** with the **noble rank** of **baron**. "The enemy fleet has launched **mobile space-time mines**. ETA twelve minutes, fifty-one seconds. It also says this will be the last report from **planar space**."

*"Lartbéir Clybr Heca (Clybh Royal Palace Fortress), shift to **Stage 1 War***

Preparations,” ordered Lamehm.

The **soldiers** of the **stronghold** truncated their goodbyes and assumed their posts.

The **Portal**’s surroundings routinely took on the appearance of an orbital city; sundry artificial planetoids revolved around the sun of Abliar, with the **Royal Palace** at the center of the “city.” The **Royal Palace** was assigned the functions and role of a **stronghold** to begin with, while the structures around it were conferred with combat power. Unfortunately, the city-ship *Abliar* didn’t make it in time, but hundreds of additional **orbital strongholds** were there all the same. Those strongholds were considered to belong to the Royal Palace Stronghold, and were organized into three *symh borair* (garrison units). In order to receive their uninvited visitors, thousands of **laser cannons**, **EM cannons**, and more were pointed at the **Clybh Portal**.

Near the surface of the **Clybh Portal**, tens of thousands of *buseuriac* (self-flying shells) were deployed. Unlike **mobile space-time mines**, they had no **planar space navigation functionality**, but they could fly unmanned through **3-space**. They had awakened, having received their directives from the **Clybh Royal Palace**.

“ETA thirty seconds,” reported the **Communications Staff Officer**. “Twenty seconds... ten seconds. Ah! The enemy has appeared!”

Eight seconds sooner than expected, the surface of the **Clybh Portal** began frothing.

“Commence battle,” ordered Lamehm unenthusiastically.

The UH’s **space-time mines** emerged from the **Portal**. When transitioning from **3-space** to **planar space**, there was no way to know where on the **Portal** an object would appear, and the same was true of the reverse. As such, where on a **portal** ships coming from **planar space** would appear was dictated purely probabilistically. Fresh out of the Portal and into **3-space**, the enemy fleet had to regain its bearings and formations.

Throughout the Empire’s history, the **imperial capital** had been attacked by enemy fleets three times. Each time, the Abh succeeded in defending the **capital** by striking the enemy as soon as they emerged from a given **portal**.

Unfortunately for the **Empire**, this time around the gap in strength was overwhelming. They could not hope to mount an effective defense. Yet the **Star Forces** concentrated as much war power as possible near the **Clybh Portal**.

Innumerable **lasers** and **fusion shells** came flying toward the **Portal**. The **self-flying shells** drifting near the **Portal** spouted their **propulsor flames**, picking a fight with the enemy **mines**.

Though the **Clybh Portal** typically glowed dimly, now it was clad in a scorching hot mist, asserting its existence with a dazzle that rivaled the sun of Abliar.

Lamehm simply soaked in all the destruction. Taking command was both impossible and unnecessary. The enemy emerged in disarray, so there was no information to base any commands off of. All she could do was watch on as they unleashed their primal war instincts against the crowning head of the enemy.

No damage to allied troops as of yet, but in their fervor, they'd consumed their energy and **fusion shells**. The onslaught cost an eye-watering sum, but war was waged through the purse.

Of course, the same was true for the enemy. It was only their **mines** that were bursting, and not only were they unmanned, they were constructed to explode to begin with. At present, all that was getting spent for either side was energy and lifeless machinery. However, that did not mean both sides were equivalent. All the self-flying shells that the **Star Forces** had installed near the **Portal** disappeared within the first three minutes. The defenders of the **Clybh Portal** had no choice but to suppress the crest of the enemy **mines** using **laser**, **antiproton**, and **EM cannons**. The back-and-forth segment of the battle was now behind them; the equilibrium was collapsing. A mine passed through the scorching mist and stabbed into one of the fortresses.

"Ryrh Gomasbuna (Stronghold 426) down!"

"I see." Lamehm cast her eyes down. The battle in the **capital** had finally seen its first casualties.

"Enemy fleet approaching."

Enemy ships followed the enemy **mines** through the **Portal**. The **strongholds**

of the **Capital Defense Platoon** concentrated fire on the enemy ships roving in search of their consort ships, neglecting their guard against the **mines**. Some of the **strongholds** turned to flame.

“*Ryrh Ceutesocnna* (Stronghold 19) out of ammo. Seeking permission for final defensive action.”

“Permission granted,” said Lamehm.

Stronghold 19 was originally one of the storehouses attached to the **Clybh Royal Palace**. An **EM cannon** had been installed onto it, but without ammo to fire, it was nothing more than a useless ornament. Were this an ordinary engagement, they would retreat and wait for resupply, but the battle was nothing if not out of the ordinary. The small group of personnel escaped to the **Royal Palace** via **smallcraft**. The **Stronghold**, now unmanned, made a course for an enemy ship near the **Clybh Portal** and accelerated for the last time. The enemy ship noticed **Stronghold 19’s** approach and showered it with fire even as it kept away. While the two drew closer and closer, enemy ships rushed from the **Clybh Portal** one after another. **Stronghold 19** was attacked from the side, fruitlessly crumbling to ruin.

The provisional strongholds that surrounded the **Clybh Portal** kept disappearing, leaving gaps like the teeth of a comb as the enemy onslaught either dispersed them or rammed into them.

On the side of the **Portal** opposite the **Clybh Royal Palace**, a sector where the **Star Forces** no longer had any presence whatsoever had come to be. The enemy fleet gathered there and began to prepare.

“I’ve always hated waiting.” Lamehm got to her feet. “Amass the **strongholds** that are mobile. The **Royal Palace** will take the lead and assault the enemy fleet.”

“Roger that.”

The staff members worked in a hectic flurry of activity. The **strongholds** under their command that still had combat power and mobility had to be extracted and organized.

“Send a communication to Nisothe-Glaharérr Sobrelacr Arocr,” Lamehm told

the **Communications Staff Officer**.

Right away, a hologram of **the Capital Defense Platoon Commander-in-Chief**, Nisoth-*Dusumer* appeared.

“You’ve a word for me, *Nisoth*?” asked Dusoom.

“I’m requesting a bombardment,” said Lamehm.

Dusoom raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure, *Nisoth*?”

“Yes. If you would be so kind.”

“Understood. We’re also rather in the red, but we’ll do what we can,” said Dusoom. “In thirty seconds, we’ll commence an ultra-long-range bombardment.”

“*Nisoth*, we have finished organizing the troops,” reported the **Chief of Staff** nearly as soon as the call with the *Glagamh Sobrelacr* (Defense Platoon Command Center) cut off.

“Very good,” nodded Lamehm. “All **strongholds**, follow us. And hurry, unless you fancy getting shelled by allied ships.”

The **Clybh Royal Palace Fortress** and its associated **garrison units** had begun to advance. **Lasers**, fired by **laser cannons** too massive to fit inside a **space-time bubble** and therefore unusable for **planar space**, seared through the space they departed. Seventeen light-seconds separated the main corps of the **Capital Defense Platoon** (led by Dusoom) and the **Clybh Portal**. In other words, the lasers would take seventeen seconds to arrive, rendering it impractical to aim. It was a probability-based bombardment, and all they could reasonably do was predict the course of allied ships and aim away from them. Lamehm’s staff showed the strongholds a very predictable course, so the friendly fire was minimized. The damage was, of course, greater for the enemy. The enemy ships just emerging from the **Portal** were swallowed by the light. Those ships that realized what was befalling them switched to inertial navigation and deployed a defensive smokescreen. The **lasers** scattered against the screen, but they still struck hulls with power enough to rend.

That was not all, either. Approximately three minutes after the **lasers** began to reach the enemy came a wave of **mass-shells**, which were accelerated by

super-heavy **EM cannons** which were also massive, too big even to be incorporated into **battle-line ships**. They gained speed each time they passed through the EM rings installed on the **cannons'** fronts, reaching final velocities of 0.6-times light speed. It was impossible for an enemy ship that had just left the **Portal** and wasn't moving all that fast yet to dodge.

However, the **mass-shells** also had a probability range for hitting their marks. In order to raise their chances as much as possible, they split into tens of thousands at about fifty *saidagh* before the **Portal**.

The enemy ships intercepted using defense-oriented mobile turrets, but it was not easy to destroy **mass-shells**, which, as the name implied, were masses of heavy metals. Though they were flying inertially, they were hurtling through space at relativistic speeds all the same. The hit rate was less than one in ten thousand, but the rare **mass-shells** that did by some miracle hit an enemy ship, contributed to the Empire's future with absolutely savage, devastating blows.

Meanwhile, the grouping of **strongholds** under Lamehm had entered a war of attrition with the enemy fleet that was at the ready.

The outer walls of the **Clybh Royal Palace**, which had been magnificently decorated to please both the eyes and the *frocragh* of the Abh, had ceased to be. The **Palace** was now a whole size smaller, and had been hit by uninterrupted explosions, each of which would kill a military vessel with a single blow. Most of the firearms in the **Royal Palace** were also non-functional. It had become nothing more than a shield for the **strongholds** that still had some fighting strength left, taking advantage of the **Royal Palace's** preeminent defensive power. However, highly agile enemy ships zoomed around, ignoring the sluggish **Clybh Palace** and thrusting spears of light into the **strongholds** behind it. The **Palace** no longer possessed the wherewithal to prevent enemy ships from passing through.

In the **Chamber of Globe Amaranth**, a **chamberlain** spoke to Lamehm. "*Nisoth*, we can no longer maintain atmospheric pressure. Humbly, I ask that Your Eminence wear a **pressure suit**."

Lamehm simply smiled at this show of concern. If the air seal could not be maintained, the end of the **Royal Palace** was at hand. Even if she did wear a

pressure suit, what would that gain her? Minutes? Seconds?

The Abh feared the tinnitus caused by the sudden drop in air pressure, calling it the “death whistle.” The **chamberlain** was still shouting, but the death whistle drowned it out.

The *rihonn* (globe amaranths) in the Chamber were wasting rapidly away, too. Then, at last, the floor fissured and cracked.

Thus did **Her Eminence** Lamehm meet her end, and the **Clybh Portal** fall.

The UH Peacekeepers made up eighty percent of the **FNA** armada that invaded Lahkfacar. The PSSU and Greater Alkont contributed the remaining twenty percent, at roughly ten percent each. The Hania Federation sent all of two warships. This was not out of some reluctance — this was all they could manage. Although the Federation had ostensibly adopted a policy of neutrality, behind the scenes, the land faction and the space faction had been engaged in a fierce power struggle over the nation’s future.

The land faction insisted on assimilation into the Empire. The Hania Federation was derived from the Sumei System, the earliest to put **planar space navigation** into practical use, and yet it was surprisingly uninterested in outer space. For them, interstellar navigation was just a means to gain vaster landworlds to inhabit. This was in contrast to the Abh, who had no interest in **landworlds**, caring only to dominate outer space. The people of the Hania Federation were only interested in living on landworlds, and its politicians were content to wield their power beneath the stars. Most of the Federation’s star systems were self-sufficient. As a result, the economic disparity between the systems was tremendous, but that did not matter much. The citizens of Hania spared little thought toward what lay beyond the atmospheres of their respective planets.

The thinking went that they ought to surrender outer space to the Abh and invest the human and physical resources that had gone to maintaining interstellar traffic back into the management of their landworlds. In addition, it would grant them access to the Empire’s star systems, dramatically increasing the number of star systems that might accept surplus populations. All they had

to lose was a little self-esteem. It was the land faction's assertion that Federation citizens would be happier overall.

However, some had a problem with that slight hit to their self-esteem, and they were the space faction. The land faction regarded the Abh empire as traders or forwarding agents, but the space faction criticized that assessment as being too easy and carefree. After all, these "forwarding agents" had enough military power to destroy a planet as a side task. And they would be stuck with these "traders," even if they soured on them. Therefore, the space faction argued that they should retain interstellar transportation rights, and that a military presence in space was indispensable as well.

Both sides had some persuasive power, but there was another point of contention — the question of how the war would conclude. The land faction thought the Empire would win. A war dividing the galaxy into the **Empire** and the rest of humanity was too heavy a load for them.

Meanwhile, the space faction had placed their bets on the Empire's defeat. The Abh generally left landworlds to their own devices, content to control the astrospace, but this was not so for other interstellar powers like the United Humankind. There were profits to be gained in participating in the fight against the Empire.

That was not to say there were no counterarguments to the space faction's assertions. The UH was not some demonic scourge. It was a full-fledged democracy. Just because what used to be the Hania Federation surrendered without really putting up a fight didn't mean they would massacre its denizens. In fact, fighting the Empire would cost more lives in the end, even assuming they would eventually win.

However, the space faction had its own position to consider. Most of them were space force personnel. And all space force personnel were, without exception, of the space faction — because those who weren't had been purged behind closed doors.

The power struggle was a modest one, taking place in secret. The land faction had a hold of the Federation's power center, and they won. However, out in space, the smaller faction still maintained its power. In surrendering to the

empire, the land faction thought that it had succeeded in suppressing the space faction, but it was mistaken. The space faction unilaterally established contact with the Three Nations Alliance, deciding to dash Hania's neutrality and participate in the war.

Naturally, they couldn't do so openly. Not even Hania's power center caught on. This was a mutiny, a silent dagger in the polity's back. Bringing the fleets of the Three Nations Alliance into Federation territory had been challenging enough, to say nothing of the major restrictions on warship contributions they needed to contend with. Contributing even just two ships, simply as proof they were there in any capacity, felt like treading on thin ice. The Three Nations Alliance, or at least their upper management, was well aware of the space faction's circumstances.

Once the vicinity was cleared for safe passage, the two Hanian **warships** passed through the **Clybh Portal**. When those **warships** entered the **Countdom of Abliar**, the **FNA** armada were already poised and engaged in combat with the **Capital Defense Platoon's** main corps.

The bombardment continued, but its effectiveness was nosediving. For starters, the **mass-shells** launched by the **EM cannons** had lost nearly all significance. Though they reached 0.6 times the speed of light, it was not difficult for a ship that was moving at sufficient speeds to avoid shots fired from outside a range of ten light-seconds. While it was impossible to avoid **lasers** once they were fired, by observing the **laser cannons'** aim, they could be predicted to an extent, making it possible to veer away from where they *would* be fired.

The **FNA** armada had yet to counterattack, since the EM cannons and laser cannons equipped on the ships were too far away to be effective. However, they did steadily close ranks on the main **Capital Defense Platoon** corps while avoiding all of the ultra-long-range artillery. The **Defense Platoon's command center** was, of course, placed in the city-ship *Abliar*. However, upon the **Defense Platoon's** incorporation into it, the city-ship was given a different name — the *Sairiac Nocher Heca* (Dragon Egg Fortress). The eight-headed *Gaftnochec* was the symbol of the **capital**, and this was its offspring. The *Abliar* had been called the *Sairiac Frybarer* (Empire's Ovum), after all.

The most formal place in the **Imperial Palace** was the **Audience Chamber**. Apparently, it was once used for the **Emperor or Empress's** everyday duties, but with time its status rose and its former role shifted over to other rooms, such as the **Chamber of Larkspurs**. These days, the chamber was used only for particularly sacred ceremonies and services. Yet the *Glaharérh Sobrelacr Arocr* (Imperial Capital Defense Platoon Commander-in-Chief), Dusoom, made this chamber his **command center**. Nothing could be more sacred than safeguarding the Empire's future.

Commander-in-Chief Dusoom entered the **command center**, upon which the staff members bowed profoundly, saluting the eldest of the **Imperials**.

Thirty-seven hours had passed since the **Clybh Royal Palace Fortress** and its attached **garrison unit** were destroyed. The **Audience Chamber** was lacking its symbolic **Jade Throne**, which had been installed instead in the **Throne Bridge** of the **Star Forces Flagship Gaftnochec**, and as such had already disintegrated into **space-time particles**. Besides, sitting on the **Jade Throne** was reserved for the **Emperor or Empress**; not even a former **emperor** could do so. Dusoom was flamboyant, but he sat in a chair anybody with enough money could buy. To be honest, it was much more comfortable than a throne.

"Did they stop shelling?" asked Dusoom.

The **Chief of Staff** was Dusef, a fellow **abdicated emperor**. "Yes. I believe it was the right time to do so, so I took the liberty of having them stop," said Dusef. "Shall I have them restart?"

"No. This is fine."

"Then, may we be permitted to abandon the guns?"

"Kindly do so, *Nisothe*."

"I shall." Dusef issued his orders to his subordinates.

Smallcrafts left the huge **laser** and **EM cannons**. The personnel were escaping. That didn't mean they were withdrawing from the overall fight. They were getting posted to new missions on more maneuverable **strongholds** or armed spacecrafts.

The strongholds accompanying the **Dragon Egg Fortress** were organized into seven **garrison units**. The commanders of the **garrison units** were retired **soldiers**, and without exception they had a **noble rank** of Count or higher and a military rank of Grand Commodore or higher.

The seven **garrison units** assumed a compact formation centered around the **Dragon Egg Fortress** and prepared for contact with the enemy fleet.

“How is the evacuation proceeding?” asked Dusoom.

“Eighty-seven percent of the personnel set to evacuate have passed through the **Portal**,” said Dusef.

“That’s a lot of people left.”

“It is going well, but it’s still a huge number.”

“I suppose so.” Dusoom switched his *frocragh* to perceive the outside. Now he could sense the entirety of the **Countdom of Abliar**. The **Barkeh Portal** was hazy thanks to the swarms of vessels headed toward the **temporary capital**. “Is Dugahs still there?” asked Dusoom, referring to the youngest of the **Abdicants**.

“Yes, he is. Shall I put you through to him?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I just want to know why he’s dawdling like that. Might you know why, *Niso*th?”

“It’s because he wanted to fight,” said Dusef with a wry smile. “He grumbled more than a little when I had him leave the corps.”

Dusoom smiled just as wryly. “He’ll never grow out of that willfulness of his. There will be plenty of opportunities to fight in the future.”

“Or perhaps,” said Dusef, “he wishes to serve in the rearguard.”

“That would be quite daft of him. He has more important work to do.”

“*Lamlonh*-Nisoth is leading the way, which I imagine is a relief to hear.”

Lamlonh and Dugahs were the two **Abdicants** released from their duties as **Capital Defense Platoon** members, and they were to flee to the **temporary capital** in order to confer the **emperorship** to **Crown Prince Dusan**h on behalf of the **Council of Abdicant Emperors**. Usually, all eight **Abdicants** had to be

present, but in an emergency, even just one could be there. It was just that this was the first time the Empire had been driven into a crisis of this magnitude.

Lamlonh was the faster of the two to head for the temporary capital of **Sohtryoor**. It was possible Dugahs intended to leave it all to her.

“No, we can’t feel too relieved,” Dusoom lamented. “I’m worried two of us aren’t enough. I’m the one in charge of the **capital** and the **Countdom of Abliar**. On my authority, order them to depart with all haste.”

“I shall see to it.” Dusef relayed Dusoom’s orders.

Dugahs’s reply came soon after. It was a short, text-only message.

Reading it, Dusef smiled.

“What did Dugahs say, Nisothe-*Üasr Casarér*?”

““You need not worry, for I intended all along to depart while commanding *Byrec Gona Semraunirr* (Phoenix Fleet 4).”

Dusoom didn’t believe it. Dugahs had likely intended to take command of the backmost fleet, Fleet 6. He probably decided to leave with Fleet 4 afterward. That was about the level of trust Dusoom had in the youngest **Abdicant**. “That is a relief,” he nodded.

“Truly,” agreed the **Chief of Staff**. “It does mean all that preparation was in vain, but it’s leagues better that way.”

“What preparations?”

“Please don’t make me say,” replied Dusef bashfully, head hanging. “All I shall say is that in the unlikely event we were forced to arrest an **abdicant**, the blow to morale would have been considerable. Please infer the rest.”

Dusoom was amazed. “**Your Eminence** is prepared for every contingency.”

Then he turned his attention from the **Barkeh Portal** to the **Clybh Portal**. The enemy was there. They were like a flexible whip extending from the **Clybh Portal** in order to lay into the **Dragon Egg Fortress** and its followers.

“Distance to enemy fleet: three light-seconds,” reported an **exploration staff officer**.

“The enemy has commenced **laser cannon** bombardment.”

“Assess the damage,” ordered Dusef.

“It’s not a threat for now,” stated the **Strategy Staff officer**. Due to the distances involved, the ship-mounted **laser cannons** were stymied by a defensive smokescreen and had no effect at all. The enemy was under no illusions about it either. The purpose of the bombardment seemed to be to probe into their defensive position.

“It’s not looking great,” grimaced Dusoom.

The whip split in two. One swarm aimed for the main corps, the other for the **Barkeh Portal**. The group heading to the **Barkeh Portal** appeared to be their main force. They must have thought it would go smoothly so long as they kept the **Capital Defense Platoon** in check for the time being.

“They’re a nasty lot,” said Dusef.

“Can’t fault them for that; this is war,” chided Dusoom.

“Of course,” said Dusef, taken aback. “I was *praising* the enemy.”

“Forgive me. That you still have it in you to praise the enemy is commendable.”

“I stand obliged.”

“So what do you think we should do, *Nisothe*?”

“We would love to be just as nasty to them, but to my great consternation, we haven’t that much power.”

“Hrm...”

“What say we just go with Formation 21?” suggested the **Chief of Staff**.

Dusoom nodded. “Very well. Go with Formation 21.”

The positions of the groups of **strongholds** that made up the main corps were modified in accordance with their orders. *Symh Borair Bina* (Garrison Unit 3) bore the brunt of the enemy’s attacks. The unit was primarily responsible for ultra-long-range artillery, operating massive weaponry that was by and large useless in this day and age.

Flashily, the giant cannons pointed their muzzles at the enemy.

“Enemy fleet has begun **EM cannon** bombardment.”

A containing force heading for the **Dragon Egg Fortress** fired myriad **fusion shells**, attacking **Garrison Unit 3**, whose response was sluggish. They intercepted, but it wasn't much of a counterattack. To put it bluntly, they lacked the ability. Having fulfilled their shelling mission, they had no role left to play besides decoy or shield. All they could do was have armed spacecrafts feebly fire their **fusion shells** from within the shadow of the giant cannons.

One after another, **Garrison Unit 3's** enormous ordnance was destroyed. Since they were already abandoned, they had more or less fulfilled their role. Moreover, thanks to **Garrison Unit 3**, neither the **Dragon Egg Fortress** nor the other **garrison units** had sustained much damage to speak of. The unscathed main **Capital Defense Platoon** corps made its move toward the enemy's main force. The enemy's containing force seemed to have noticed them, for they altered course.

“**Garrison Unit 3** cannot hold for much longer,” reported Dusef.

“Use all the **garrison units**,” commanded Dusoom.

“Are you going to include this stronghold as well?”

“No, we'll impede the enemy's main force.”

“How greedy of **Your Eminence**,” said Dusef in stunned tones. “Do you mean to have us monopolize the enemy's main force all by ourselves?”

“Are you unhappy with that?”

“No, I was *praising* you,” he said, taken aback once again.

“I'm grateful.”

Even if they mustered the main **Capital Defense Platoon** corps in all its might, it only amounted to about half the strength of the enemy's containing force. Taking the **Dragon Egg Fortress** out of the equation, that figure became one third. Regardless, the seven **garrison units** leapt into a fierce war of attrition with the containing force. Meanwhile, the main force ignored the **Dragon Egg Fortress**. Their interest seemed to be directed at the escaping vessels instead.

“What rude customers,” said Dusef.

“We’ll just have to show them their just reward,” said Dusoom.

“Indeed. We shall have to teach them a lesson. Spare the rod, spoil the child.”

The **Dragon Egg Fortress**’s entire arsenal was aimed at the sterns of the passing enemy warships. The **EM cannons** were not very effective at zeroing in on fleeing targets, but the **laser cannons** amply demonstrated their usefulness. Though not as powerful as the giant **laser cannons** that bombarded the **Clybh Portal**, the Fortress’s cannons were far more powerful than those on **assault ships**. After losing dozens of ships, it seemed that the main force realized they could not, in fact, afford to ignore the **Dragon Egg Fortress**.

The Fortress was huge even compared to the **Royal Palace Fortress**. It was once the Abh’s entire world. The enemy, too, might be aware that it would be difficult to destroy, which would explain why they’d tried to ignore it.

“The enemy is concentrating its fire on Compartment 47,” reported the *Sarérh Daüsair* (Emergency Response Commander).

“Is there something there?” Dusoom cocked his head in puzzlement.

“Pull up the diagrams,” instructed Dusef.

A perspective view of Compartment 47 spread out in midair. There were turrets and wharfs, but none of the installations were particularly important or unique.

“What do you think, *Nisothe*?” asked Dusoom.

“I presume they think that as long as they can focus their offensive, anywhere is fine.”

“That does have a logic to it. But what are the benefits of concentrating on a single compartment?”

The answer was revealed twelve minutes later.

“An enemy ship approaches Compartment 47,” reported the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

“Can it be stopped?” asked Dusum.

“No, unfortunately,” replied Dusef.

The **garrison units** were locked in mortal combat with the containing force and could not afford to come to the **Dragon Egg Fortress’s** aid. And the Fortress had lost what firepower it had at Compartment 47.

“The enemy may be cutting their way in,” said Dusef.

“With airships?”

“If so, then this is bad.”

“I’ll be.” Dusoom clearly found this a curious development. “I’m surprised the situation found a way to get worse. What about it is ‘bad,’ *Nisothe*?”

“I never could have guessed they’d take the fight *inside* the ship, and we’re not ready to show them the proper hospitality. This will sully the Abliar name. Besides...”

“Besides what?”

“The more they surprise you, the more you end up liking the enemy.”

“So that’s it. This is serious,” agreed Dusoom sincerely.

“Enemy ships not decelerating. They’re going to collide with the Fortress!” said the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

“It seems your fears of a ground war were unfounded,” said Dusoom in a teasing tone.

Dusef simply shrugged.

“Collision in five... three, two, one, collision!”

The shaking, though slight, reached all the way to the **Audience Chamber**. The impact must have been heavy to have been too much for the **Dragon Egg Fortress’s gravity control system** to handle.

“It seems that it was a **battle-line ship** that hit us,” said the **Emergency Response Commander**. “I will send an emergency unit immediately.”

“Don’t.” But then Dusef remembered that as **Chief of Staff**, he didn’t have the authority to give that order. He bowed reverently toward Dusoom. “Please order them not to.”

“The emergency unit can wait,” ordered Dusoom, accepting the **Chief of Staff**’s wishes. “May I ask you why, *Nisoth*?”

“The enemy is probably...” started Dusef.

Just then, they felt a tremor incomparable to the previous one.

“The enemy ship exploded.”

“A suicide bombing?” asked Dusoom.

“It seems so.”

The ship was astir through matter-antimatter annihilation. **Antimatter fuel** was itself a powerful explosive. The enemy left the large warship unmanned (or possibly manned, but the enemy wasn’t that hard up), piled up antimatter fuel, and set it to crash against them. In so doing, they could essentially improvise enormous **self-flying shells**.

“Damage report,” ordered Dusef.

“Compartment 47 is almost totally gone. The central axis has also been lost. The adjacent sections have sustained serious damage. Expanding the scope of the perspective diagram.”

There were some unnatural blanks in the enlarged perspective view.

“The information system is broken,” said the **Emergency Response Commander**. “We’re trying to restore it, but there’s little hope.”

“If we get hit like that again, we may not be able to preserve our ancestral home,” said Dusoom.

“Indeed. It will snap,” replied Dusef calmly.

“Don’t bother trying to restore the system,” Dusoom told the **Emergency Response Commander**.

The Commander looked despondent. Had their pride been wounded? Dusoom contemplated apologizing, but thought twice, as it might only salt the wound.

“Two enemy ships approaching. Both **battle-line ship** equivalents,” reported the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

The enemy's aim was obvious, but the **Dragon Egg Fortress** hadn't the power to stop it.

"Three **battle-line ships**, to destroy our home? I see they're getting it done on the cheap," said a chagrined Dusef.

"It's not often you let your emotions to the surface, *Nisoeth*," said Dusoom.

"I can't bear this humiliation!" Dusef exclaimed, regarding the Commander-in-Chief with surprise. "But I send **Your Eminence's** remark right back at you. This is the first I've seen you with your eyes open."

Dusoom lived life with his eyes closed. While eyesight was not as important to those furnished with *frocragh* as it was to Landers, no one really knew why Dusoom never opened them. Some claimed His Eminence hated vision, and others speculated that the eldest **Imperial** might not like his jet-black eyes, though Dusef thought they were quite beautiful.

"Your tear-stained face is worth it, *Nisoeth*," commented Dusoom.

"By the way, how is the evacuation going?"

Dusef glanced at the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

"It's almost complete. We believe that it is impossible for enemy forces to capture any evacuees within the **Abliar Countdom**."

"Has this done something to alleviate our humiliation?" Dusoom smiled at the **Chief of Staff**.

"It has, *Nisoeth*," said Dusef, affecting a bow.

"The enemy ships will soon enter the Fortress," said the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

Dusoom did the best he could issuing orders. "Warn all hands they are to brace for impact."

"This won't be the kind of impact they can endure just by holding onto something," said Dusef defeatedly, though he was still smiling.

BOOM. Violent tremors rocked the **Audience Chamber**.

Though split in twain, the Dragon Egg Fortress yet lived. However, its combat

power was greatly impaired. Relatively small vessels snuck into the cross-section and fired. The strongholds were understandably powerless to defend against attacks against what used to be the city-ship's interior. Before long, the two masses that were once the Dragon Egg Fortress had burst into flame, by which time the **garrison units** had already been wiped out.

The enemy armada was divided into two, one group aiming for the **capital** and one for the **Barkeh Portal**. They were not interested in Lahkfacar itself. They considered the **imperial capital**, which had even evacuated the **Imperial Palace**, a non-entity no longer worth securing. And they were fairly justified in that thinking.

Their actual objective was to secure the **antimatter fuel factory**. The **Countdom of Abliar** contained the largest **antimatter fuel factory** in not just the Empire, but in all the known universe. It was called the *Rüéripoth* (Empire's Bosom). A belt-shaped structure measuring 500 *üésdagh* in breadth, it enwrapped the sun of Abliar like a round cage. Pairs of linear accelerators were lined up longitudinally atop the structure. Elementary particles were accelerated via the motive power pumped up from the other side, generating antiprotons without pause. The **antimatter fuel** produced here helped sustain the **Empire's** vital traffic routes. And the **FNA** wanted to take what was likened to the Empire's fountain of life, and functionally asphyxiate the Abh.

According to the analysis of the communications, facilities remotely operating the **Empire's Bosom** were thought to still be left in Lahkfacar. With Lahkfacar in their sights, the corps further split into two groups. One barreled through to the **imperial capital** while the other aimed straight for the **Empire's Bosom**.

The troops that invaded the **capital** received a warmer welcome than anticipated. While Lahkfacar *was* practically deserted, the **capital's** last inhabitants had remained in order to operate the large-scale weaponry.

Thus did the extremely unusual "street fight in space" unfold.

The military vessels of the **FNA** had to push through the harassment of **lasers** and **nuclear fusion shells** coming at them from unexpected angles. And the fact that the ones firing that hail of destruction had no regard as to their survival made it even harder to deal with. When they secured a path of retreat, it was

only so they could make another attack, and if they couldn't secure such a path, they didn't mind dying then and there.

Moreover, they were sending communications that had to mean something, and at times even drew in Alliance **soldiers**.

The fighting in Lahkfacar persisted up until the moment the Alliance Fleet reached within one light-second of the **Empire's Bosom**, at which point its self-destruct system activated, exploding the **fuel tank** that had temporarily stored antimatter.

Though the amount was something to behold, it wasn't enough to fully annihilate the matter in the enormous **Bosom**. But just as calculated beforehand, what fragments did remain fell toward the sun. Very few ships were caught in the blast, but the troops aiming to seize the **Bosom** had lost their objective.

Meanwhile, the ships invading the **capital** were yet more miserable. Nearly contemporaneously with the self-destruction of the **Empire's Bosom**, matter-antimatter explosion bombs planted all over the **capital** were activating.

The **Febdash Baron Capitol Manor's antiproton cannons** vanquished one enemy ship, after which it immediately exploded in order to take two more ships down with it.

Alliance ships thronging in cramped sectors suffered serious damage. The **soldiers and personnel** investigating what turned out to be a false communications hub, many of whom were some of the most capable people within the Alliance's military, evaporated.

The last battlefield in the **Countdom of Abliar** lay on the outskirts of the **Barkeh Portal**. The majority of the Alliance Fleet flooded the **Portal**. The Empire forces amassed to protect the **Portal** on the **3-space** side were just a facade. There were several strongholds surrounding the **Barkeh Royal Palace**, but they were abandoned. If some vessels in need of evacuating had remained, they would have kept fighting tooth and nail, but the withdrawal from the **Countdom of Abliar** was already complete.

When the enemy fleet drew close, a single **carrycraft** departed from the **Royal Palace** and rushed into the **Portal**. Immediately afterward, the **Royal Palace** and

the strongholds near the **Portal** self-destructed, their flames spelling the conclusion of the Battle at the **Countdom of Abliar**.

So fell the **imperial capital** of Lahkfacar. It was **Base of the Dragon's Necks**, the **Capital of Eight Portals**, the **Turbulent Capital**, the **Capital of Love**, **Homespace**, and the **Cradle of the Empire**. And it had lost another of its names — **the Unfelled** — forevermore.

Chapter 6: The *Cicirh* (Ebbing Tide)

Duhier awakened.

For a moment, he wondered where he was.

As was the custom, the **Banner of the Viscountdom of Wemdyse** was hung by his bed. Duhier stared at it vacantly. The five yellow petals gave it something of a weak and delicate impression, making even the **eight-headed dragon** look dismal through their inclusion.

Duhier was in a less than cheery mood as he slipped out of bed, got dressed, and stepped out into the passages of the **patrol ship** *Pundigh*.

The strike sub-fleet *Gudersec*, of which the *Pundigh* was part, had scurried to the Saleem System in the Hania Federation. In fact, the *Pundigh* was *all* that was left of the *Gudersec*.

Naturally, Duhier was not aboard the *Pundigh* as a crewmember. Though euphemized as a “hitcher,” he was there in actuality as a remnant of a defeated corps. They’d lost their ship without a real fight, and now all he could do was lament the boredom and ennui.

Large-scale ships such as **patrol ships** contained accommodations for passengers catching a ride. But the former crew of the **battle-line ship** *Caïsaumh* wasn’t the only group the *Pundigh* was housing. All of the survivors of the **strike sub-fleet** *Gudersec* had gathered here, which numbered far too many for a **patrol ship**’s residential sections, so they had constructed temporary housing in the **mine deck**, too.

Perhaps out of respect for his status as a **prince**, Duhier had been allotted the quarters of a **starpilot** as opposed to the provisional housing. At first, he’d taken that as a matter of course, but now that they were in anchorage, and he spent his days there without any post or duty, he just felt smaller and smaller.

Byrec Ghuta Gycnerr (Snow Crystal Fleet 5), which administered the logistics of the **Snow Crystal Fleet**, was deployed in the Saleem System. Fleet 5 lacked

fighting capabilities, managing and operating solely **supply** and **stock ships**. The *Pundigh* had also stopped by this system primarily to resupply. They couldn't go anywhere without replenishing their **antimatter fuel**, and they needed to load up on food and daily supplies for the massive number of passengers as well.

The *Pundigh* had actually already done most of its resupplying, but as the only remaining ship of the *Gudersec*, it was in a peculiar position. Would they continue acting independently, or be incorporated into some other **sub-fleet**? Assuming the latter, which **sub-fleet** would it be? Rumor had it there was even talk of making it a lodge-ship here in Saleem, which apparently infuriated *Gudersec Command* and the *Pundigh's Ship Commander*.

The **supply ships** of Fleet 5 were connected by a yet nameless **mobile base canteen**. Ships from other fleets were parked there, too, many of which were facing the same problems as the *Pundigh* and awaiting resupply.

The *Pundigh* was also fastened to the **mobile canteen** via connecting tubes, a privilege granted on a first-come-first-served basis. Two thirds of the warships moored in Saleem needed to use **smallcrafts** to send crew to the **canteen**.

That said, if Duhier got to at least fly a **smallcraft**, it might serve as a nice diversion. Even after obtaining **planar space navigation**, the Abh considered flying through normal **3-space** the heart of being an Abh. Even Landers could cross **planar space** so long as they had the necessary machinery. Put plainly, the Abh didn't have any advantage over Landers when it came to voyaging through the parallel dimension. But it was a different story for **3-space**. Engineered with **spatiosensory organs** called *froch* and a portion of their brains named the **navigation area**, their race was literally born to travel the stars. As such, Abhs generally preferred flying spacecrafts through the vacuum, and Duhier was no exception.

However, since there weren't enough **smallcrafts** and **intrasystem ships** to go around in the Saleem System at the moment, he was simply in no position to be using one for a joyride. Without the justification of running errands for the **canteen** or elsewhere, he couldn't so readily borrow a **smallcraft**. In that way, being moored at the *racnébh dadana* (nameless canteen) was actually an inconvenience.

Of course, it did also have its perks, one of which was the ability to drop by the **canteen** freely. If he'd needed to take a **smallcraft** over, that wouldn't be the case, as they were in short supply.

Aboard the *Pundigh*, one could only stay at the mess hall for an exceedingly brief time. He'd had to choose between wolfing down his food or eating in his room. The only exceptions were people ranked **Hecto-Commander** or higher, who were granted the privilege of staying longer, and even they were restricted to an hour at the longest. Duhier had been granted that privilege as well, but since he was only a **linewing starpilot**, that only made him feel awkward and uncomfortable. As a result, while Duhier was stuck aboard ship, he'd eaten his meals alone in his room.

Now he could grab a meal at the **canteen**, where anyone could eat for as long as they liked, irrespective of social status or military rank. While Abliars were raised to put up with frugal living, partaking while sitting on a bed still felt off to Duhier, so he was thankful to be able to sit at a **canteen** restaurant.

The **nameless canteen** was crowded. Its capacity was small, and it couldn't deal with all of the **soldiers** that paid a visit. One might be tempted to paint the scene as "lively," but many wore defeated expressions. The fact they'd lost had truly sunk in. And that only made Duhier even gloomier.

Duhier stepped foot into an establishment that seated around fifty named The Crouching Tigress. He'd been frequenting the place; it was the classiest restaurant in the Saleem System. Some might scoff that it had clearly only just been built and set up, and so it had no traditions or reputation, but that reaction would betray a fundamental ignorance of Abh business culture. Everything in a restaurant, from the dining rooms to the kitchen to even, in many cases, the proprietor's residence, were housed in encompassing frames beforehand, configured such that they could be incorporated into vessels and the like. That was standard practice in the **Empire**. When an establishment needed to be moved, it would simply be removed from its former structure and inserted into a new locale. The Crouching Tigress was just one example of this. While it had apparently been attached to the **nameless canteen** less than a month ago, according to the documentation, the Crouching Tigress had come to be about four hundred years back aboard the **passenger ship** *Spausænh*, and

had been constructed in its current form around two hundred and fifty years ago.

Supply shortages cast the **nameless canteen** in their shadow, making for a rather run-down feel, and not even a storied establishment like The Crouching Tigress could evade their influence. Of course, as the staple foods and rations were provided by hydroponic plantations and cultivation ranches, there were no quantitative “shortages” on that front. Rather, it was their quality that had undeniably taken a hit. With a reduced variety of ingredients, bills of fare went blank and chefs couldn’t muster the enthusiasm.

If **Operation Snow Crystal** had progressed smoothly, then not only the **Snow Crystal Fleet’s Commodore** but an imperial who’s who of distinguished persons would have assembled here in the Saleem System right around now. Perhaps high officials of the former Hania Federation would have been invited as well. In any case, the Crouching Tigress would have served as quite a glorious hub for socializing.

Yet now it was serving as a place for **soldiers** and personnel gutted by the defeat to fill up on food and nothing more. And the menu offered those hungry **soldiers** only two options, a light meal or a formal dinner. All they could order besides that was drinks and confections.

That did mean, however, that there was no need to stress over choosing what to order, so Duhier was actually thankful for that.

The usual server came, and Duhier ordered the light meal, and some hot **peach juice** as a pre-meal treat.

When he’d nearly polished off the pack of food, his **wristgear** beeped. It was **Vanguard Starpilot Bhonh**. Though reluctant, he had no pretext to refuse the call.

“What may I do for you?” he asked.

Their ship was lost, but *Bhonh*’s position was still the **Senior Communications Officer** of the **battle-line ship Caïsaumh**. Duhier was still the **Deputy Communications Officer**, and by extension her subordinate. That they had no tasks to attend to at the moment didn’t mean he could disregard that. Besides, he did rely on her to an extent.

“Where are you?”

“At the **canteen**. Allow me to send you my location.”

“Please do.”

Duhier worked his **wristgear**. “Here you go.”

“Did you finish eating?”

“I’ll be finished shortly.”

“Ah, all right. Could you wait for me there once you’re done?”

“Is there something you need from me?”

“I just want to drink some tea and have a chat with you. Or would that be a bother?”

“No, of course not. I’m pleased to have you.” It was a good thing she couldn’t see Duhier’s pained smile.

Duhier was drinking some of his post-meal **coffee** when *Bhonth* arrived. The coffee wasn’t the brand he liked, but that couldn’t be helped.

“For being on the same ship, we hardly ever bump into each other,” said *Bhonth*.

“You’re right.”

They were on the same ship, but not as crew, so they didn’t have any joint work to do. Without a reason to be together, it was only natural.

“That’s a bit of a problem, isn’t it?”

“I feel the same way.”

“Oh well. I guess there’s nothing for it.”

“On that count, I disagree,” said Duhier. “The *Caïsaumh* may be gone, but shouldn’t we have a regular assembly?”

“I’ll bite, **Deputy Communications Officer**,” said *Bhonth*. “Assemble to do what?”

“Train, of course.”

“That might be nice, I suppose,” she replied, resting her chin on a hand.

“May I ask you to relay that idea to the **Ship Commander**?”

“Why not do so yourself?”

“Because I’m just a **deputy communications officer**,” he said, a tad amazed. “I believe I should refrain from directly offering my opinion to the **Ship Commander** over my superior’s head.”

“Oh, right. I forgot I’m your superior. That aside, you’re so strait-laced. Guess that’s an Abliar for you.”

“My **surname** has nothing to do with this.”

“I must say, I’m surprised.”

“By what, ma’am?”

“Did you come up with that ‘we should be training’ thing just now?”

“No, it has been on my mind for some time.”

“If so, then why is this the first time I’m hearing this?”

“I was awaiting my chance, ma’am,” he said, his face reddening. “I thought it might be impertinent of me to say anything. However, now that you asked me, I used this chance to express those thoughts.”

“I see. I think I get you now, **Linewing**. That said, I don’t like this training idea.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t see the point. The way I see it, there are probably more fun ways to play at being chummy as a crew, **Linewing**.”

“There is a point. Wouldn’t you agree that at this rate, it’s unclear whether we’ll be able to so much as maintain our current level of proficiency?”

“Fair point, that. All right, as your superior, I will allow it. Please report your idea to the **Ship Commander**.”

“You’d like *me* to, ma’am? Mightn’t that offend the **Ship Commander**?”

“Ahh, I guess he can be uptight about that kind of thing. There are people out

there who get angry when somebody upsets the system, but don't care to keep the system running themselves. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying the **Ship Commander's** like that. Or at least, I'll reserve judgment. In any case, I understand." *Bhonh* activated her **wristgear** and spoke: "**Ship Commander...** Yes, the **Deputy Communications Officer** wishes to offer his opinion, and I allowed it. What is it about? Please ask him directly, sir."

Bhonh dropped the call, and Duhier stood up.

"If I've been granted permission, then I would like to report to the **Ship Commander** right away."

"There's no need."

"I'm sorry, ma'am?"

"He's already headed here. Said he hasn't eaten yet."

"I see." Duhier had no choice but to sit back down and order another coffee.

Hecto-Commander Behrsoht arrived about ten minutes later. Needless to say, his position was still **Ship Commander** of the late **battle-line ship** *Caïsaumh*. *Bhonh* and Duhier stood at attention and saluted. Behrsoht returned a hurried and half-hearted salute before taking a seat and ordering a dinner set, along with some pre-meal white wyne.

On the sleeves of the **uniforms** of the three **starpilots** at that table the crest of the *Caïsaumh* was adorned, but that felt hollow now.

"All right then, let's hear this opinion of yours, *Fïac Lartsor*," said Behrsoht, as he savored his wyne.

Duhier felt awkward raising a serious suggestion while the other end was indulging in drink, but he had to reply now.

"I have a proposal, sir," said Duhier. "Might it be a good idea to implement regular training?"

"What kinda training are you saying we do?" said Behrsoht. "We're on someone else's ship here. And it's not even a **battle-line ship**, it's a **patrol ship**."

"Would it not be possible to train via simulations, sir?"

“C’mon, *Fiac Lartsor*,” said Behrsoht in a fed up tone, “you do know what a rhetorical question is, don’t you? I wasn’t asking for an answer. I was turning that idea down.”

“I don’t understand your reasoning.”

“I don’t care if you don’t, **Linewing**,” said Behrsoht curtly. “It’ll be one thing if and when we get prospects of receiving a new ship, but I’m not about to play soldiers just to keep morale up.”

“Training isn’t ‘playing soldiers.’”

“Sure, on the surface.”

“And in reality, sir.”

“Sometimes we don’t see eye to eye.”

“Are you asserting that training is just surface-level even during this situation, sir?”

Behrsoht’s starter came. “I’m *saying*, don’t get your superiors wrapped up in your time-killing venture. You oughta just think of this as a break and scrounge up some fun. Why don’t you search for a *ïomh* (lover)? I’d like to be able to celebrate the birth of the next generation of the **Royal House of Clybh** sometime soon.”

“This isn’t the time or place for that.”

“Oh, but it is,” said Behrsoht. “I’m granting you a special furlough. I can’t order you to enjoy yourself, but do take it easy. For someone of your status, this state of limbo can’t be very common.”

“This is a first for me,” Duhier admitted.

His life up until then had been bound by his obligations as an **Imperial**. There was no getting around that for younger **Imperials**. The quickest one could be freed of those obligations was once they retired from military service. If an Imperial ended up acceding to the throne and/or gaining a seat on the **Council of the Abdicants**, then they’d have to fulfill their highborn duties for an even longer stretch of time. To Duhier, freedom seemed a million years away. Which was to say he wasn’t emotionally prepared to be freed from his responsibilities

as an **Imperial**.

“A first?” Behrsoht seemed surprised. “I mean, even **Imperials** get breaks, don’t they?”

“Yes, they do. However, military service is more of a ‘break’ than those breaks are,” he let spill.

Behrsoht tilted his head in puzzlement. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying? That life’s easier as a **soldier** than as an **Imperial**?”

“No sir; it’s not as though I am free of my duties as an **Imperial** when I’m serving in the military.”

“This is getting confusing. If that’s the case, then I reckon if you’re at least freed from your duties as a **soldier**, life should get that much easier for you.”

“It’s the ceremonies,” Duhier confessed.

“Ceremonies?”

“On leave, I have to be there for ceremonies. And I find them *distressing*...”

“Really? Honestly, ceremonies seem like a nice time to me. The occasional ceremony adds balance to one’s everyday life. Well anyway, it’s not as though they’ll be dragging you off to some ceremony *here*. So go enjoy yourself already.”

“Yes, sir.” Duhier saluted, and made to take his leave.

“Wait, **Linewing**,” said Behrsoht.

“What is it, sir?”

“I would like to impart upon *Fiac Bærr* (Your Highness the Viscount) one way to kill some time,” he said, as he moved aside his now-empty starter plate. “You got 100 *scarh* on you?”

Duhier blinked. “It’s no trouble, but may I ask why?”

“It’s no trouble, he says. It’s times like these a guy feels the social status wall,” lamented Behrsoht. “Nobody who works for a living would ever utter those words. Do you know it takes the average **linewing starpilot** three years of saving to reach 100 *scarh*?”

“It wouldn’t take *that* long,” said *Bhonh*. “If they put their mind to it, they could save that much in half a year.”

“Yes, but I’m asking if **Linewing** Abliar knows that 100 *scarh* is roughly three months’ salary for a **linewing starpilot**.”

“No, sir, I didn’t know,” he answered.

An **Imperial**’s livelihood was determined by the **royal house** they belonged to. Even if they were **soldiers** on active duty, they went unsalaried. Duhier was provided for by the **Royal House of Clybh**. He understood the concept of salaries, but he thought they had nothing to do with his current lived experience. To him, salaries were what he would be paying his **vassals** once he was free of his obligations as an **Imperial** and running the **Viscountdom of Wemdyse** himself. He’d never imagined he’d receive any himself.

“Never mind, I didn’t mean to gripe like that.”

So that was just griping? I see. “What exactly are you thinking, sir?” Duhier thought he’d been careful to keep his tone from sounding reproachful, but it seemed he’d failed.

“I’m setting the stage for your beloved training,” he replied huffily.

“Understood, sir. Thank you very much, sir.” Duhier wished to ask him about the details of this “training,” but he settled on the safe route of simply expressing gratitude, since anything else would likely grate on Behrsoht’s nerves.

“Don’t hold it in, **Linewing**.”

“Sir?”

“You totally want to ask me what the training entails.”

“Yes, I do,” he said, nodding enthusiastically. “May I ask you, sir?”

Behrsoht nodded. “We’re gonna play some *bairpoücoth*.”

“Are you a *bairpoücoth* fan, sir?”

Bairpoücoth was a sport that could virtually only be played by Abhs. It was barely even heard of in **landworlds**, let alone popular. Moreover, while nearly

all Abhs had heard of it, it wasn't that popular even in the Abh world. It did have its fans, though, and those fans were wildly enthusiastic.

Duhier hadn't known Behrsoht to be a *Bairpoücoth* fan, but then again, he knew next to nothing about the man's hobbies or tastes.

"No, I'm not. I've never played, nor do I plan to. It's just setting the stage for our training."

"Would it serve as training, sir?"

"Wouldn't it?"

"I think it would, sir," replied Duhier.

In actuality, Duhier wasn't sure it would. But it might at least shake up this period of stagnation.

"But **Ship Commander**," said *Bhonh*, "what will you use 100 *scarh* for? I can't imagine it'd be for renting the facility."

"It'll be the prize money. The '*Tych Bærr Üémdaiser*' (Wemdyse Viscount Cup). How about it? It's got a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

"It does, sir?"

"Forgive me, but might I suggest we at least make it the *Tych Caisaumr* (*Caïsaumh* Cup)?" said *Bhonh*.

"No can do. 'Cause then I'd have to throw in some money. Otherwise it'd look bad."

"How about if every *Caïsaumh* **starpilot** were to contribute a little?" said *Bhonh*. "I don't mind throwing in a *scarh* myself."

"C'mon, that's just stingy."

"So *I'm* the stingy one?" she muttered.

"Who'd want a cup with the name of a sunken ship on it, anyway?"

"It's the money they want..."

"Like I said, stop being so stingy."

"What will we do about the arena?" asked Duhier.

“You figure it out.”

“Me, sir?” said Duhier, bewildered.

“Yes, you. Did you intend to saddle me with *everything*?”

“So you say, **Ship Commander**, but what *will* you be doing?” asked *Bhonh*.

“I’m ordering you to recruit participants, **Senior Communications Officer**.”

“Sir, I was asking you what you were going to be doing...”

“Don’t be so stingy. You could stand to learn a little from **Linewing** Abliar’s royal docility.”

Is he making fun of me? Duhier wondered.

“All right, all right,” said *Bhonh*, shrugging it off.

“At any rate, where’s my entree?” said Behrsoht, tapping the table in irritation.

The server came, albeit without anything in hand. “I apologize, sir,” said the server, bowing politely.

“What, did my food’s ingredients do a runner or something?”

Neither Duhier nor *Bhonh* laughed at his wisecrack, and the server naturally didn’t do away with their courteous manner.

“No, sir. I’m afraid the Crouching Tigress will be closing effective now.”

“What’d you say? You closing temporarily? What happened? Don’t tell me you actually did run out of food?” said Behrsoht, and this time, he wasn’t joking. He was actually uneasy.

“That’s not it, sir. The Crouching Tigress will no longer be operating in this area. It hasn’t been decided where we will be opening next, but we humbly and sincerely request your continued patronage.”

“My continued patronage? This is the first time I’ve ever come here.”

“Never mind that, what’s going on...” said *Bhonh*.

Just then, an announcement: “Attention. Attention. On orders from **Snow Crystal Fleet 5 Command**, the **mobile base canteen** will shut down, with

disassembly to commence in three hours. All hands, please return to your ships as soon as possible.”

“Looks like this is no time for a **Wemdyse Viscount Cup**.” Behrsoht activated his **wristgear** and began gathering information.

“**Ship Commander**, might it be wise to return to the ship for the time being?” suggested *Bhonh*.

“Ah, yeah.” Behrsoht nodded with uncharacteristic candor, and got up. “Apparently, the enemy is closing in on this system.”

“What!?” *Bhonh* exclaimed. “Where from...”

Surprise attacks were hard to pull off in **planar space**, since **space-time bubbles** were observable from afar. They were basically only feasible if the enemy cloaked themselves as allied or neutral ships. As **Operation Snow Crystal** involved gaining control of the Hania Federation, they’d had to disarm Hania’s Space Forces as well, but that was to take place after seizing Hania’s capital. Until then, the **Star Forces** had been meant to treat the Hania Federation Star Forces as neutral. Only, the Empire had been aware that not all of the Hanian Space Forces had been persuaded to comply, so they were on the alert for attacks from rogue elements. As such, attention must have been paid to the movements of the Hanian Space Forces since **Operation Snow Crystal**’s very outset. A surprise attack was quite unthinkable.

“Beats me. It’s not clear at this stage.” As a **ship commander**, Behrsoht was allowed access to classified information mere **starpilots** weren’t. That he hadn’t been let in on more details meant that either there was information that was even more classified, or that even the higher-ups weren’t sure.

“There’s something that’s concerning me,” said Duhier. “It must have been the Federation that suggested we put our resupply zone in this system to begin with.”

“Are you saying this was a trap, **Linewing**?”

“I’m saying it’s a possibility. It’s all just conjecture on my part.”

“Feh,” said Behrsoht, annoyed. “You’ve got a pleasant imagination.”

“Will they be issuing a retreat order?” asked Duhier, ignoring that remark.

“No clue. Common sense says we just hightail it outta here, but we’re freeloaders on the *Pundigh* at the moment. We can’t have a say in what gets decided.”

Then all three of their **wristgears** beeped at once. *Bhonh* was the fastest to check the message. Behrsoht was too lazy to bother checking his; the fact that they all beeped simultaneously meant it was the same message.

“**Ship Commander**,” said *Bhonh*, “we’re actually getting chased off the *Pundigh*.”

“What’d you say?” This got Behrsoht to check his **wristgear**.

Duhier was also checking his. Just as *Bhonh* had said, the passengers had been directed to switch ships. They’d been assigned to a **supply ship** named the *Borcetairh*. Their things were already being prepared for transferral, so they were on orders to head there as-is. The disassembly process for the provisional housing in the **mine deck** was probably starting up as they spoke, to be replaced by its true cargo: **mobile space-time mines**.

“It appears the higher-ups have a different idea of ‘common sense’ from us,” said *Bhonh*.

“You mean you think they want us to intercept them?”

“Are you saying they *don’t*, sir?” *Bhonh* tilted her head, puzzled.

“Sure am. Traveling light works for escaping, too. I think evacuating after having secured combat potential makes the most sense, and I think they’re preparing for just that. Though if they really do want us to intercept them, then... I wonder if an unmanned **battle-line ship**’s fallen down from the sky somewhere,” he noted ruefully.

As an Abh, he too possessed fate genes. Being unable to participate in the fight was massively frustrating.

It was then Duhier remembered the directive he’d been given by **Star Forces Admiral** Cohtponee. “**Ship Commander, Senior Communications Officer**, I must report to **Fleet 5 Command** at once. Requesting permission to act

independently.”

Behrsoht turned to face him and raised an eyebrow. “We don’t belong to Fleet 5. Or at least, we don’t as of now. You do realize that, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” nodded Duhier. “However, the most senior person in this system is **Commodore Ghamperh**, the *Glaharérh Byrer Ghuta* (Fleet 5 Commander-in-Chief).”

“Is this your Abliar itch? In that case, take me with you. I don’t even mind serving *under* you, if you’re so inclined,” said Behrsoht.

“Sorry, sir. That’s not it...” Duhier didn’t know how to explain it, so he hemmed and hawed.

“Does this have to do with your *Néïc surnym*?”

“Yes.”

“Can you give me a slightly more detailed statement?”

“I must meet with **Star Forces Admiral** Cohtponee as soon as possible.”

“Well, that’s gonna be an issue,” said Behrsoht, scratching his head.

“It’s for that reason I must have **Commodore Ghamperh** accommodate me.”

“I feel for the **Commodore**. So what’s gonna come of this meeting? You gonna accede to **the emperorship** or something?”

“Loath as I am to say it, sir, I must say I don’t appreciate jokes concerning the **emperorship**.”

“Don’t get saucy with me, **Linewing**!”

“I’m truly sorry to say it, sir.”

“Well, you have a point. What do you plan to do after meeting with the **Admiral**, anyway?”

“I don’t know, **Ship Commander**.”

“So I don’t need to know, huh?”

“No, sir, I really don’t know.”

If there had been any higher-ranking **Imperials** in the area, he’d have been

able to return to military service, although he couldn't see himself being made to start from the position of **battle-line ship Deputy Communications Officer** again. There was no telling what position he'd have been given. He supposed he might have a seat provided for him in some **command center** somewhere.

"All right, I get it. Well, I don't really get it, but I'll have to say I do. Either way, you haven't got any work to do aboard the *Pundigh*. You do what you think best."

"Thank you very much." Duhier saluted.

"By the way, can I not come with?"

"I'm afraid you can't, sir. It's not up to me to decide."

"I was joking. Don't worry about it." But Behrsoht's smile didn't reach his eyes.

Multiple **space-time bubbles** have emerged from the **Barkeh Portal**," reported **Linewing** Lecsh. "They appear to be the enemy."

Jint looked at Lafier from the side, only to be taken aback. *Why's she smiling?*

"You seem chuffed," said Jint (though he was considerate enough to keep his voice down).

"I was this close to weeping earlier," she confessed, to his surprise.

"You didn't look like it."

"I was thinking, this is just like the *Gothelauth*. I'm always taken out of the fight."

"It's not the kind of fight that makes it into the history books, but if you ask me, that escape was a fight in its own right," opined Jint.

"It's just as you say. And compared to back then, we're protecting something far more important."

Jint and Lafier happened to be present at the time and place this war began. They had been aboard the **patrol ship** *Gothelauth*. Lafier had been a **trainee starpilot**, which was to say she was something between passenger and crew.

Jint, on the other hand, had been purely hitching a ride.

The *Gothelauth's Ship Commander*, Lecsh — the aunt of the **Linewing Starpilot** Lecsh currently with them — had had them flee from the field of battle. And apparently, Lafier felt she'd been entrusted with Jint's life.

Jint recalled the days they spent evading capture on the planet Clasbure after escaping from the **patrol ship** (plus a brief stop at the **Febdash Barony**). Back then, he'd had to brace for death countless times, but he looked back on those days with nostalgia.

Of course, their current predicament was plenty dangerous, too. And despite the crisis situation, Lafier had been entrusted with the **Pillars of Praises**. One could say they were nothing more than symbols, but they were a part of the Empire's history. And they were a rarity even amidst the vastness of the known universe, in that they were one of the few things the Abh regarded as holy.

It came as absolutely no surprise that Lafier, an Abh among Abhs, saw these inorganic stone cylinders as far more important than Jint's life. In fact, he had no doubt she valued them more than her own life.

Your average human would probably be right to feel miffed their own lives were being undervalued. But far from displeased, Jint was relieved his charming and lovely *Fiac* was being true to form. And the fact that he felt that way amused him to no end. His emotional sensibilities were out of line with those of genetic Abhs. And they might be rare among **landworlders**, too.

"Don't tell me you're planning to fight," said Jint.

"What are you saying?" said Lafier, mystified. "We're fighting as we speak, aren't we?"

"Yeah, guess we are."

This made him even more relieved. He'd nursed a modicum of apprehension she might feel like fighting with this old-model **patrol ship** that lacked **mines**, but it seemed Lafier regarded retreating to the **temporary capital** as a battle in and of itself. He supposed she'd matured a little.

After a short while, he realized this was no time to be feeling secure. The **Phoenix Fleet** was organized into six echelons, numbered in the order they'd

pulled away from Lahkfacar. The *Gaftnochec Dradr*, the ship bearing the **imperial treasures**, was part of Fleet 5, along with **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**, which was serving to escort them. According to the **planar space map**, Fleet 6, the **Phoenix Fleet**'s rear guard, had stopped advancing. They had spread out like a pair of wings, assuming the formation necessary to head off the enemy fleet's advance contingents. It would take a few hours before they engaged.

Jint was a **quartermaster starpilot**, but even he understood things were not looking good, and he knew that before the battle even started. The **Phoenix Fleet** was a cobbled-together corps whose objective was retreat. It lacked coordination, and the formations looked out of whack. There was a nonzero chance they structured the formations like that on purpose for some reason, but Jint really doubted it. He had his fair share of combat experience now, and the gap in power was just too wide. Fleet 6's fate was to be annihilated. Could their fleet make it to Sohtryoor in time without getting tailed? And even assuming they managed to, would they be able to get settled once they were at the **temporary capital**? His anxiety was intensifying.

"Jint," said Lafier. "You must be tired. Why don't you go rest?"

"What about you? Are you gonna be all right?" said Jint. *Huh, she doesn't usually say that.*

"Yep. Come to think of it, I haven't decided everyone's shifts yet." Lafier stared at the **planar space map**. "I'd like to hold a **starpilot** meeting in twelve hours. Let's do three four-hour shifts. Forgive me; I'll take the first shift. I don't want just the **Clerk** to take a break; the rest should, too. The shift after mine will go to *Gnomboch*, followed by Lecsh."

Jint understood why Lafier asked forgiveness. It was because her shift would be the easiest. She'd spend the next four hours on the **bridge**, and then get an ample eight hours of rest... if nothing came up, that was.

Gnomboch probably had it the roughest. After a break of four hours — hardly enough to rid him of his fatigue — he'd have to work for four hours, and then take another four-hour break. After that, there was no knowing when he'd be able to rest again.

Jint was impressed by Lafier's maturity — she'd taken a relatively easy shift

without getting stubborn like the absolute martyr she used to be. She was an adult now. And they were both mature enough for him to express his honest thoughts, without her taking offense.

“**Ship Commander**, if that is how it’s to be, then please give me a straight 12-hour shift,” said *Gnomboch*.

“Don’t be foolish,” chided Lafier.

Lecsh had her own suggestion. “How would you feel if **Rearguard Gnomboch** and I each did a six-hour shift?”

“Do not waste your break time on such nonsense,” she said, furrowing her brow.

She’s gotten so accustomed to acting mature, thought Jint. “**Ship Commander**,” he said, raising his voice. “I’ll be taking my leave.”

Jint felt like trying that in order to be of some assistance putting a stop to what he saw as a discussion between **Flight Branch starpilots** that wasn’t going anywhere.

In actuality, he couldn’t really afford to rest yet. Loading the **imperial treasures** and supplies — his most glorious task as a **clerk** — was behind him now, but there were still plenty of things left to do. The *Gaftnochec Dradr* had been asleep for quite a stretch. It would take time for a vessel of **patrol ship**-size to fully awaken.

Then again, Jint was on vacation compared to Samson. Samson was long gone from the **bridge**; he was probably running around here and there smacking down the defects and malfunctions that sprang up one after another. Plus, this was the first time he’d met many of his subordinates, making his job even harder.

That said, Jint understood where Lafier was coming from. She was probably operating under the assumption the *Gaftnochec Dradr* might have to fight. They had no **mines**, but they were able to revive the old **EM cannons**, furnishing them with the absolute minimum combat power for a **patrol ship**.

Of course, Lafier’s top priority was protecting the **imperial treasures**, just as she’d clearly stated, so she wasn’t going to actively pursue an engagement. But

if they themselves were pursued, the likelihood they would get dragged into a fight was extremely high. It made all the sense in the world to have the crew rest up now if a battle of self-defense was in store for them. That was why he had to at least pretend to be resting, for her sake. All while taking what measures he could in the unlikely event they had to fight — so Jint was thinking.

Of course, she was right to have the **Flight Branch starpilots** rest. There were only three of them, after all. If it came to a fight, their heads would start spinning in short order.

Jint hoped there was some change for the better by the time he returned to the **bridge**... while at the same time tormented by doubt: would he even get to see the **bridge** again?

The **flagship** of **Snow Crystal Fleet 5** was the **supply ship** *Mercetairh*. The fleet's **Commander-in-Chief, Commodore Ghamperh**, gave off a vaguely *unhealthy* air. Perhaps it was how pale his complexion was. Meanwhile, his hair was such a light blue that it could be mistaken for silver.

As demanded of him, Duhier transferred Cohtponee's directives to the man's **wristgear**. As soon as they were authenticated, *Ghamperh* read them with care.

"I see. So we need to escort you to *Glagamh Byrer Gycnerr* (Snow Crystal Fleet Command), huh."

"Yes, sir," said a mortified Duhier, nodding.

"According to those orders, we're to deliver you there even if it means the fleet gets smashed to pieces. Were you aware of that?"

"Lonh-*Cotponir* told me, sir."

"Is that so?" *Ghamperh* paused to think.

Duhier fidgeted a little; he was ill at ease.

"I believe **His Highness** should be informed of our present circumstances," suggested the **Chief of Staff**.

All **Imperials** were taught to forget about their status for as long as they wore **military uniforms**, but Duhier had no intention of chiding the Chief of Staff for

calling him “*Fiac.*” While it was out of the question for Duhier himself to be flaunting his princeliness, he wasn’t expected to conceal his status, which was impossible anyway. Despite his best efforts to just be a soldier, however, it wasn’t uncommon for others to end up treating him as an **Imperial**. If he got cross over something so trivial every time it happened, that would just be petty of him. Besides, it was obvious he was here not because he was a **linewing starpilot**, but because he was an **Imperial**.

“Right you are.” *Ghamperh* got to his feet and snapped his fingers.

A large **planar space map** appeared, projected on the floor of the **Commander’s Bridge**. At its center lay the *Saudec Salimer* (Saleem Portal), with blue symbols representing Empire ships thronging around it. Some were on the move from very far away, too. Yet it wasn’t just the blue marks that were headed for the **Saleem Portal**. Red marks representing the enemy were approaching in their orderly battle formations.

“Those are confirmed to be the enemy, right, sir?” asked Duhier.

“Yes. Signs they have already engaged with our fleet have been observed.”

The **Commodore** didn’t mention the results of those engagements, and Duhier didn’t inquire. It was a foregone conclusion.

Trailing the trim and neat red blips were red dotted lines, all originating from a **portal** that was also shining red. This was the *Saudec Üéïbarer* (Waybar Portal).

The name rang a bell for Duhier. “That’s one of the Hania Federation Space Force’s bases of operation, isn’t it?”

“It is.” *Ghamperh* continued matter-of-factly: “The reason we placed our resupply zone here was to contain Waybar’s enemy fleet until we finished the process of occupying Hania’s sphere of influence. As you know, we were ultimately to disarm the Federation, but it was a convenient location for that as well. We simply couldn’t predict they had maintained this level of firepower.”

“How did the Federation’s leaders explain it?”

“No idea,” shrugged *Ghamperh*. “I wasn’t involved in negotiations with Hania, so I can’t say anything besides speculation.”

“I don’t blame you, sir,” said Duhier, blushing with embarrassment.

It had been Duhier’s grandmother, the **Empress Lamagh**, who had decided to take the leaders of the Hania Federation at their word and embark upon the Federation’s occupation. None of the responsibility could be laid on a novice **starpilot**’s shoulders, but he felt ashamed as an Abliar all the same.

“That aside, according to the information **Snow Crystal Fleet Command** sent my way, there should only have been a smaller-scale fleet in Waybar. Most of the operations base’s war potential was supposed to have lain in the **strongholds**. Although... I really don’t think *all* of that can be Hania Space Force ships. After all, even just the forces that were observed in this area exceed what we understood to be the Federation’s entire space military.”

“I see.” Duhier could but nod.

“Your destination, **Snow Crystal Fleet Command**, is thought to be somewhere here,” he continued. A blue field appeared on the **planar space map**. It was quite a ways away from the **Waybar Portal**.

“Is there no conclusive information, sir?”

“Last we heard, they departed the Maygahn System for the How’rye System. Assuming the voyage went smoothly, they should already have reached How’rye. However, we have yet to receive any confirmation to that effect.”

The *Saudec Méïganr* (Maygahn Portal) was displayed in a particularly strong blue glow.

“Was the intel on their arrival slated to reach you the usual way?” asked Duhier.

“No. We were to be informed via special transmission.”

In **planar space**, communications were typically conducted via conveyance vessels. Lightweight **interstellar ships** were the overall optimal method for communications. There was, however, a faster method for when speed was prized above all else — using **space-time particles** by way of **inter-bubble communications**. This came, however, with major limitations — the range was small, and the information came in a trickle. For the simplest of notifications, they could transmit over larger distances at the same speeds using pre-

established relays. The downside to this method (to say nothing of the sheer expense) was that it couldn't be used often. That was because if multiple transmissions were sent at once, they would interfere with each other, making their range extremely short and making the relays useless. As such, only select transmissions, called "special transmissions," were sent through this means.

"Is it safe to assume from the lack of any notification that they never arrived, sir?"

"No," said *Ghamperh* flatly. "It seems the relays were effectively destroyed."

"The relays..." Duhier was dumbfounded. The situation was worse than he'd expected.

Landers were often under the mistaken notion that Abhs feared not death, when in fact, it was simply that their fate genes allowed them to gladly die if it was for Abhkind's sake. On first blush, one might believe that wasn't any different, but it was entirely different. The Abh did value their own lives. Much like most of humanity, to an Abh, life was like a jewel, singular and precious. Sacrificing that precious jewel for the benefit of their people was a pleasure unparalleled, but throwing it away for no reason was the most abhorrent of acts.

And yet, as things stood, they could be *forced* to throw away their lives in vain. They would die as helpless prey, deep in the enemy's sphere of influence. And it would take centuries for their compatriots to even learn of their deaths — and only if, in fact, the Abh race even survived for that long.

Duhier was almost scared witless, but he managed to keep from bawling, perhaps due to his dignity as an **Imperial**.

"Indeed," nodded *Ghamperh*. He pointed at the **planar space map** with his **command baton**. "This was what this fleet's course was going to be before we received **Admiral** Cohtponee's orders."

A blue dotted line stretched from the **Saleem Portal** toward the **Bargzedeh Monarchy**. It was closer than any other Empire territory. Moreover, as far as they could gather from the **planar space map**, there were no potent enemy forces blocking the way between the fleet's main troops and Bargzedeh. There was a possibility they'd have to fight, but it'd be easier than heading for the

Skeer Monarchy.

“If **Admiral** Cohtponee retreats to Bargzedeh, then you can go with your initial plans, right?”

“I’m afraid not. **Snow Crystal Command** is likely heading for **Skeer**.”

Of course. The **Maygahn Portal** and *Saudec Haürair* (How’rye Portal) were closer to the **Skeer Monarchy** than elsewhere.

“But sir, might it not still be possible to head for **Bargzedeh** depending on the state of affairs regarding the enemy?”

“There is a possibility, of course.” *Ghamperh* smiled faintly. “However, we have been notified of an emergency plan by **Snow Crystal Command**. This was when the tide of war looked to be in the **Empire’s** favor, granted, but according to the latest plan of action, if executing **Operation Snow Crystal** runs into difficulty, we are to retreat to **Skeer**. Needless to say, there is also the possibility we may simply be unaware that the plan has been revised since then. The current situation may also compel a change in plans.”

Long story short, not much was clear at this point.

“Roger that, sir,” said Duhier. “Please just forget about me. Pick the path that best serves *Glagamh Byrer Ghuta* (Fleet 5 Command)...”

“That won’t do. We already have our orders. And we will search for the best path forward, so long as it is within the scope of our orders.”

“But won’t carrying those orders out be difficult, sir?”

“That is not for you to worry about. Our orders are to bring you before **Star Forces Admiral** Cohtponee. Your wishes do not enter into the picture.”

Sounds like someone could be more flexible, thought Duhier. “Forgive my impertinence.”

“Let’s analyze possible paths for the time being. **Chief of Staff**, do you have any suggestions?”

“It’s only a rough plan at present.”

“That can’t be helped. Unfortunately, we have to spend time analyzing.”

“I know, sir.”

Three green dotted lines appeared on the **planar space map**. Things felt hopeless for Duhier. No matter the path, it didn't seem as though they'd be able to avoid engaging with the deadly enemy forces that emerged from the **Waybar Portal**.

“We must brace for a rougher voyage than we'd anticipated,” said a stony-faced *Ghamperh*. “As the most senior starpilot in the area, we will order all civilians to abandon their possessions. Please order them to find shelter without their belongings.”

Up until then, establishments such as The Crouching Tigress had been permitted to retreat in their individual enclosing frames. The Abh, being a race of traders, usually viewed personal assets quite seriously. But Fleet 5 no longer had the capacity to carry restaurants with their luxurious interior design intact.

“Roger that,” said the **Chief of Staff**.

“Then I want you to prepare the **Viscount of Wemdyse** a room.”

“More so than a room, please give me a mission,” requested Duhier.

“We cannot,” replied *Ghamperh* immediately. “Lonh-Cotponir's orders strongly suggested you are to be given preferential treatment. Consequently, we cannot treat you like a mere **linewing starpilot**.”

“In that case, could you at least allow me to stay on the **Commander's Bridge**?” he asked, shuddering at the thought he might be confined to his room.

Ghamperh sized Duhier up, his eyes reproofing. “Do you have no clothing befitting an **Imperial**?”

“No, sir. They were not brought to the battlefield.”

“Don't forget to bring them next time. Well, just take that as a word of advice.”

“I hope there is a next time, sir,” blurted Duhier, but he instantly regretted it. It went without saying.

Luckily for him, *Ghamperh* didn't appear to mind: “Indeed. Do you have some other civilian clothing? Anything will suffice.”

“No, sir. I only have my **military uniform**.”

“There’s a tailor in the **base canteen**, but we don’t have the time.”

“We do have at least that much time, sir. Or will you be giving me some kind of mission?”

Ghamperh gave Duhier a sharp sidelong glance. “There’s not enough time for the tailor. They’d have two hours at most to bid their store farewell, select which tools to take with them, and board their designated ship.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Duhier now had yet another reason to blush as he cursed his own lack of consideration.

“I’d have liked you to change clothes if possible, but no matter. For now, you may remain on the **bridge**. I do not, however, grant you permission to speak, nor will I give you a mission. We’ll leave your room for later. We’ll provide you a proper seat shortly, so please stay seated over there for now. I will explain things to you, but when and how will be at my discretion. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” he nodded. *Good grief. Guess I’m just a passenger here, too.*

Yet the mood on the **bridge** had clearly gotten more spirited. Perhaps the mission to deliver a **royal prince** of the **Empire** to Senior **Command** had stimulated their fate genes.

“First, we must change each ship’s payload,” said *Ghamperh*, who issued order after order to his subordinates. “Their crews, too. I trust I don’t need to tell you we’ve no time to spare, but I also need you to keep errors to a minimum. Any slackers who think they can gloss over even small slip-ups during the voyage will be forced to stand up and read their own poetry in front of everyone. I’ll even go so far as to make the topic ‘aching love.’”

Watching as the command center staff grappled with their respective labors, Duhier was reminded of those times before he enrolled in an **academy** that he was forced to stand perfectly still during *those* ceremonies. And just like then, the best thing he could do at the moment was become a living statue.

“**Your Highness**, this way,” said a **starpilot**, guiding Duhier to a seat in the corner.

He supposed he should appraise “being given a seat” as a hearty welcome.

“Thank you very much,” said Duhier, taking the seat. Duhier knew no one was looking at him, but he put his knees together, straightened up his back, and bottled up his emotions.

That’s right. This is where my destiny unfolds.

The time had come. Lafier tidied herself up and hurried toward the **bridge**.

Every **starpilot** had assembled there, including the **Clerk**, Jint, and the **Inspector Supervisor**, Samson. They saluted.

She returned their salutes and fixed her eyes on the **planar space map**. It seemed the enemy fleet had been whittled down a slight amount, but it didn’t look as though their numbers had decreased all that much. By contrast, the allied battle formations had changed greatly.

“What happened to Fleet 6?” asked Lafier.

“Ma’am,” said *Gnomboch*, who seemed to be holding back tears, “Fleet 6 will soon be no more.”

“So they’ve fulfilled their duties.”

“They struggled bravely, ma’am.”

Lafier closed her eyes and sacrificed a very brief sliver of time for a moment of silence. This came as no surprise. The power gap had been clear as day.

The fleet she was a part of — **Phoenix Fleet 5** — would have even less of a fighting chance. Unlike Fleet 6, whose mission was to protect the rear, Fleet 5 was almost purely a transport corps, with scant firepower. **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** had cutting-edge tech, but aside from that, the corps contained **cargo passenger ships**, **supply ships**, and old ships like the *Gaftnochec Dradr* that were being tasked with transport. Their **flagship** wasn’t even a **patrol ship**; rather, a **stock ship** had been assigned that role.

But the **planar space map** also displayed a ray of hope. A new group of ships was heading toward them from up ahead.

“It seems help has arrived,” said Lafier.

“Yes, ma’am. They entered our search range three hours ago,” stated Lecsh.

Lafier didn’t intend to grill her over not being informed of this earlier. What appeared to be a rescue party was still far away and wouldn’t come into play anytime soon, a fact which had been even truer back when it was first detected. She must have judged it was nothing to wake up a sleeping **ship commander** over, and that was the correct assessment in Lafier’s eyes.

It would be another hour before Fleet 5’s environs would flare hot and furious. Would the enemy fleet catch up to them first, or would they get scooped up by an allied fleet in time?

Wonder how close it’ll be, thought Lafier. “Has anything else changed?”

“Allow me to explain.”

Lecsh kept her report concise; nothing in particular drew Lafier’s attention. “Good work, **Linewing**,” said Lafier, before looking at Samson.

“If I were to report everything that happened in detail, I think it’d take more than a day,” said Samson.

Thinking his attitude disrespectful, Lecsh cast a hostile gaze Samson’s way, but he didn’t even notice. Naturally, by now, Lafier didn’t really care.

“Is there anything I should know?” she asked.

“No, **Ship Commander**. Please leave everything to me.”

“Understood. Do what you think you should do. How about you, **Clerk**?”

“I ditto the **Inspector Supervisor**,” said Jint.

Lafier compared Jint and Samson. *Has the man gotten into lazy habits?* she asked herself. Their relationship had shifted from colleagues to lord and servant. Now that lord-and-servant relationship was making Jint sloppy and lax. To put it bluntly, might Jint be presuming upon Samson?

That said, this was not the time to be looking into that personal misgiving of hers. She could scold him *after* they survived this.

With time, the enemy fleet closed the distance. On the other hand, Phoenix Fleet 4, which was traveling at the head, merged with the rescue corps. But that

lasted a mere moment, as Fleet 4 continued on toward Sohtryoor, the **temporary capital**, and the rescue corps also maintained its own course. The rescue corps separated from Fleet 3 and approached both Fleet 5 and the enemy fleet.

“An **inter-bubble communication** from **Fleet 5 Command**,” said Lecsh.

“Read it.”

“‘A crew-only escape was looked into.’ End of message.”

The *Gaftnochec Dradr* also housed **conveyance ships**. It was a suggestion to transfer to them if and when push came to shove. This would of course mean abandoning the **imperial treasures**.

“I see,” Lafier nodded.

But the Empire had already lost many Abliars. Lafier was a member of a clan that faced extinction, and unsurprisingly, many believed them to be even more important to the Empire than the **Pillars of Praises**. Then again, while it was true that the **imperial treasures**’ purpose was purely symbolic, the same could be said of much of the value of the **Imperial Family**. She could not and would not abandon the **treasures**, if for no other reason than because it was a direct order from the **Empress**.

“Droves of **space-time bubbles** coming from enemy fleet!” shouted Lecsh. “They appear to be **mobile space-time mines**.”

She seems to know her stuff, thought Lafier, but you can tell she has little actual battle experience.

Panicking wouldn’t change the situation. Of course, there was next to nothing the *Gaftnochec Dradr* could accomplish, so if shouting like that calmed her nerves, Lafier didn’t mind. However, Lafier thought keeping busy was the best way to keep calm.

“**Gunner**, report on the mobile turrets.”

“All turrets clear to fire,” replied *Gnomboch*.

One of the scant few things an old-model **patrol ship** on a transport mission could do was shoot enemy **mines** using the mobile **laser cannons** arranged on

the hull, though it would be the **compucrystals** doing the aiming and firing. All a human could do was authorize it.

“Release all of the safeties on the mobile turrets,” ordered Lafier.

“Roger that.”

To tell the truth, once the battle started, it was the **Inspector Supervisor** who would be the busiest. If they took a direct hit from a **mine**, they’d simply explode, but even destroying them through the **laser** and **antiproton cannons** often led to hull damage due to all the shrapnel.

Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 fell back and extended behind the *Gaftnochec Dradr* in an attempt to protect the antiquated **patrol ship** by attracting what **mines** they could.

In the end, a group of enemy **mines** struck Fleet 5. The **bubbles** around the allied large-scale **supply ships** burst one after the other.

The humiliation. Lafier gritted her teeth.

They could do nothing — nothing but stand and watch.

“**Bubble** droves coming from allies in front,” reported Lecsh. It was a defensive mine volley.

“Will they make it in time? Run the calculations,” directed Lafier.

On the **planar space map**, an orange strip representing the estimated zone of contact appeared, along with the future position of Fleet 5 after making contact. **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** was situated such that they would just barely be saved by the defensive mines. However, although this would reduce the number of enemy **mines**, there was no guarantee all of them would get destroyed. It was too soon to rest easy.

Byrec Semraunirr Dana (Phoenix Fleet 7) was formed in haste at the **temporary capital**. And Fleet 7’s **Chief of Staff, Associate Commodore** Cfadiss, was disconsolate. *Byrec Semraunirr Buna* (Phoenix Fleet 6) had been wiped out, and the enemy was about to reach Fleet 5.

So why is the woman so cheery? I can’t imagine it’s because she got promoted

alongside everybody else.

Despite himself, he ended up looking her way.

“Whatever could it be, **Chief of Staff?**” The *Glaharérh Byrec Semraunirr Dana* (Phoenix Fleet Commander-in-Chief) **Grand Commodore Sporr Aronn Saicsepatr Nimh Laitpanr Painaigh** stared back, head tilted in puzzlement.

They had known each other for quite some time now, so Cfadiss knew trying to gloss it over with some half-baked excuse might end up striking an extremely grave blow to his mental wellbeing.

“It’s nothing, ma’am. I was just wondering why you seem in such high spirits despite once again fighting a losing battle.”

“It’s not a battle *I’m* losing,” said Sporr. “If you think about it, the last ‘losing battle’ was *forced* on me by that Abliar princess.”

“Ah. I see.” *I wonder if she knows “that Abliar princess” is in the fleet ahead of us.*

She probably did. That the **Pillars of Praises** were with Fleet 5 had been relayed as a matter of critical concern, and although the fact they were entrusted to the **Royal House of Clybh’s Viscountess of Parhynh** wasn’t terribly important, it wasn’t a secret, either. Cfadiss knew, for one. And unless she’d missed the memo or filed the info into the “who cares” portion of her brain, Sporr had to know, too.

“Besides, this time around, it was the Abliars who came crying to me to save them. This is as delightful as a battle gets!”

I don’t know about that, thought Cfadiss.

Sporr had been appointed the **Phoenix Fleet 7 Commander-in-Chief** because she complained about the tedium of being *Roìglaharérh Chtymer Sotyrer* (Sohtryoor Astrobase Vice Commander-in-Chief). She had been selected from among a handful of candidates, but Cfadiss didn’t think it was because she was a Sporr. If Cfadiss were in her shoes, he’d be happy to know he’d probably been selected due to sheer competence or battle experience. But it looked as though his **Commander-in-Chief** possessed different sensibilities.

Someone of the *Roiglaharérh Chtymer* position usually didn't command a single ship, but the Astrobase had a **command center** such that it could be fit for someone of the **Fleet Commander-in-Chief** position at any time.

Until recently, Cfadiss too had been made to work in a position without much in the way of duties, as **Chief of Staff** under **Vice Commander-in-Chief** Sporr. Consequently, he happened to be present at the moment Sporr was made Fleet 7 Commander-in-Chief. Needless to say, there was no time to put on a formal appointment ceremony; their new titles and duties were hastily communicated to them, and that was that. Incidentally, it was the astrobase's Commander-in-Chief that gave the order. As far as Cfadiss knew, no one "came crying" to her. Cfadiss wondered whether "the Abliar who came crying to her" was referring not to **His Highness the King of Barkeh**, but rather the "Abh princess," **Her Highness the Viscountess of Parhynh**. Either way, there was no way to verify something that had happened in Sporr's imagination besides asking the woman herself, something he had no intention of doing whatsoever.

"**Space-time bubbles** coming into contact," reported the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

Moments before the enemy mines struck **Phoenix Fleet 5**, allied **mines** intercepted. The clash of **mines** caused the fabric of **planar space** to undulate. More **mines** kept getting fed into the zone of contact, forcing back the enemy **mines** momentarily. Nevertheless, it seemed the enemy **mines** had a slight numerical advantage. The zone of contact drew nearer and nearer to Fleet 5.

"What are they doing?" Irritated, Sporr stood up. "Don't just get overpowered! Shoot more **mines**!"

"Ma'am, I think it might actually be wiser to curb the number of **mines** they're firing. They've already expended a fourth of the mines in their possession. Fleet 5 contains **Trample Blitz Squadron 1**. Can *they* not be expected to intercept the mines that get through?"

"What are you saying!? They'll shoot every single one of those **mines**."

"Are you going to order them to pour everything into the defensive mine volley?" he asked, unable to believe his ears.

"That's right," she said flatly, her expression blank.

Cfadiss thought this was preposterous. “That is short-sighted.”

“There’s no time to be thinking things through. We’re in the middle of a battle here!”

“With all due respect, I cannot agree to squandering those **mines**,” objected Cfadiss.

Phoenix Fleet 7 came with all the **mines** they could scrape together. This carried significant implications. Mines needed **space-time bubble generators**, and only a **construction site** could manufacture those, said sites having existed solely in the **capital**, Lahkfacar. The **construction sites** were evacuated with maximum priority and had already arrived at Sohtryoor, but it would take time to construct them and resume operations. In other words, the Empire’s **mine** production capability was currently nonexistent. The fleets deployed in remote areas and each sector’s base of operations had **mines** in stock, of course, but there were none in stock in the **temporary capital**.

That being said, what Cfadiss objected to was not the prospect of using up all of their **mines** on this battlefield. If they could drive the enemy away for a brief window, they’d gain some time until the next incursion, and by then the **construction sites** would definitely be operating and supplying them with **mines**. Cfadiss simply thought they should aim at least half of those mines at enemy ships, and they ought to avoid directing all of those mines toward blasting the enemy’s mines.

“So cheap, **Chief of Staff**,” said Sporr, astonished.

Cfadiss was ticked off. “I may have come from a humble background compared to someone from an **archducal house**, but—”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I wouldn’t even buy something as boring as **mobile space-time mines** anyway. They’re neither delicious nor entertaining.”

“That’s not the issue,” said Cfadiss, deadly serious. “The **Star Forces** are poor right now, too. Please consider that reality, ma’am.”

“You do realize I’ve been put in charge of these weapons, right?”

“Of course,” nodded Cfadiss. “Which is all the more reason to use these precious **mines**—”

“It’s precisely because the **mines** are precious that we should use them when they’re the most effective.”

“Are you saying using them against other mines is when they’re the most effective!?”

“Yep, that’s what I’m saying. Do you understand why the enemy is giving chase?”

Well that’s obvious. “I believe it’s so they can magnify their military gains, ma’am.”

“Yes indeed. Such sass.”

“‘Sass,’ ma’am?”

By that remark, she must mean the enemy as a whole. While Cfadiss was glad she wasn’t speaking ill of *him*, he didn’t understand.

“The Empire didn’t just lose Lahkfacar. It lost its unity. And they should be satisfied with that result. Yet here they are, in their high-handed impudence. It can only mean they think the **Star Forces** are in maximal disarray, and abjectly weak,” she said, voice dripping venom.

“Loath as I am to admit it, I think that is the correct assessment,” said Cfadiss, mustering the resolve to correct his superior in case her grasp of their state of affairs was off.

“It is,” Sporr sighed. “The enemy has a good head for business, too. They’re using their limited firepower in the most effective way possible.”

Cfadiss was relieved she did in fact seem to grasp their predicament, but soon he was growing even warier. “I see.” He refrained from asking who *else* she thought had a good head for business. He already knew the answer.

“That’s why we have to make it seem we’re *not* so laughably weak.”

“But ma’am, to use all of the **mines** defensively would—”

“You still don’t get it?” said Sporr, shocked. “Listen: Right now, the **Star Forces** *are* laughably weak.”

“...Ah. They are?” It seemed Sporr had viewed the **Empire’s** situation even

more harshly than he did.

“Which is why we need to *bluff*.”

“A bluff, you say...” Though his skepticism hadn’t totally abated, Cfadiss no longer had grounds by which to object.

Sporr was simply taking a gamble. To Cfadiss, who prided himself on his scrupulousness, the thought was intolerable. Yet **Phoenix Fleet 7** and the whole of the **Empire** lacked the wherewithal to set up a certain victory based on solid groundwork. And so they had no other choice but to take a chance, even if the odds weren’t extremely promising.

Cfadiss reckoned his superior was probably a better gambler than him.

“If you get it now, then go and **split off** all the mines. And hurry!” said Sporr.

Every ship in Fleet 7 released all the **mines** they had on hand, which was a lot. The entire **planar space map** glowed blue from all the blips representing allied **mines**. They overwhelmed the enemy **mines** at once. The **mines’** zone of contact drifted away from Fleet 5 toward the enemy’s lead units.

Go! Cfadiss cheered inwardly. When he looked her way, she was sporting a truly ferocious smile.

Finally, the opposing **mines** stopped pouring in. The enemy was eating up supplies in order to occupy the **imperial capital**, after all. They must have run out of **mines** themselves.

The **compucrystals** in **mines** chose their own targets. Enemy **mines** were coded in as higher priority targets, but if they disappeared from their search range, they were set to automatically target enemy ships. Swarms of allied **mines** devoured their enemy counterparts, eating away at the enemy fleet.

We win! thought Cfadiss.

Now that their **mines** were gone, the enemy couldn’t lay a finger on Fleet 5, as they would clash with Fleet 7 before they could. And Fleet 7 and that enemy fleet were evenly matched. Even if things went poorly, they could at least bring the battle to a draw. Fleet 7’s objective was to rescue the ships retreating from Lahkfacar and dampen the enemy’s designs on invading Sohtryoor. They had

already essentially fulfilled their goal.

“See? We didn’t have to hold any back, did we now?” said Sporr, elated.

“That’s just a posteriori reasoning,” said Cfadiss. The gamble had worked out this time, but he couldn’t stand gambling *every* time.

“Your grading is always so severe,” Sporr pouted. “I’m glad you were never my professor.”

The feeling’s mutual, thought Cfadiss. For a long time, he’d suspected being Sporr’s superior would be an even harsher fate than being her subordinate. And he had no doubt that if he’d ever been her professor, he’d develop a stomach ulcer within the first three minutes.

Needless to say, the least stressful relationship to have with Sporr was none at all.

Around the time that Fleets 7 and 5 crossed paths, the enemy fleet began to retreat.

Epilogue

At the *Dreuhynh Lesyder* (Countdom of Lesyood)...

The *Saudec Lesyder* (Lesyood Portal) lay in the periphery of the **Skeer Monarchy**, not far off from the Hania Federation's sphere of influence.

A small corps was presently passing through the **Portal** and emerging into the Countdom, and the **supply ship** *Mercetairh* was at the head, followed by the *Borcetairh* and several other ships.

"**Patrol ship** *Chaïcaü* identified!" reported the **Exploration Officer** on the *Mercetairh*'s **Commander's Bridge**, to much jubilation.

"Don't rejoice just yet," chided *Glaharérh Byrer Ghuta Gycnerr* (Snow Crystal Fleet 5 Commander-in-Chief) *Ghamperh*.

"But sir, we've fulfilled our mission," said the **Chief of Staff** in comforting tones, before turning his gaze to Duhier.

"Sir," said Duhier, getting up to salute. "I thank you for taking care of me."

Ghamperh had thoroughly impressed Duhier. Despite getting captured by the enemy fleet, they'd managed to come all this way without taking heavy damage. What left the deepest impression on Duhier, however, was how deft he'd proved at the art of acceptable losses. He'd gathered people into the smallest number of vessels they could and sacrificed the unmanned vessels unsparingly. He'd even occasionally used them alongside the **mines** as decoys, and to great effect. Furthermore, by paring down the number of ships, he made it look as though their small corps was inconsequential — an evaluation that, granted, wasn't terribly divorced from reality — and thereby evaded drawing too much of the enemy's notice.

Of course, Duhier didn't actually voice any of those thoughts. If a novice **starpilot** could appraise a **commodore's** command record without express permission, the military's structure would slacken.

"But many sacrifices were made," lamented *Ghamperh*.

“With all due respect,” said Duhier, blinking, “none were killed or wounded in the whole fleet, if I’m not mistaken. It’s true that many unmanned ships were lost, but—”

“That’s not what I mean,” said *Ghamperh*. “I’m referring to all the times we had to leave isolated allied troops to their fates.”

“Please forgive my shortsightedness, **Commander-in-Chief**,” said Duhier frankly.

Ghamperh nodded, his expression telling Duhier he was satisfied with that apology.

As he stared at his face, Duhier thought: *You say that, but didn’t Fleet 5 lack the power to save them anyway?*

From *Ghamperh*’s standpoint, saving allies who were likely feeling helpless and disheartened was probably more important than escorting Duhier without being down any of the **soldiers** who were in the Saleem System. Obviously, ushering isolated troops into his jurisdiction would have been a perilous task. Even so, it seemed he concluded that that course of action would have saved more **soldiers** of the **Empire**. The reason he didn’t take that risk was, needless to say, due to Cohtponee’s orders. In order to deliver Duhier, he had to chart the safer path.

He’s a man of self-discipline who’s tough on himself, thought Duhier.

The safer path was nevertheless fraught with peril, and **Snow Crystal Fleet 5** could be categorized as “isolated troops,” too. In Duhier’s eyes, the fact that *Ghamperh* still regretted his inability to rescue those allied troops might speak to the fact that he shouldered almost too heavy a sense of duty. That train of thought caused Duhier to change his view of the man — perhaps it wasn’t so much that he was too tough on himself. Perhaps he just had too high an opinion of himself.

“Communication line established with **Snow Crystal Fleet Command**,” said the **Communications Staff Officer**. “Time lag is 5.7 seconds.”

“Ask whether we can salute **Admiral** Cohtponee,” said *Ghamperh*. Then he glanced at Duhier. “Though I’m sure the **Admiral** will want to speak with *Fiac*

Lartsor.”

Out of politeness, Duhier kept silent.

Glaharérh Byrer Gycnerr (Snow Crystal Fleet Commander-in-Chief), **Star Forces Admiral, Imperial Marchioness, Cotponic Aronn Laïturairr Ìarlymec Lonh-Lazeriar (Her Excellency Noble Princess Lazeria) is now on the line,” said the **Communications Staff Officer**, not unlike a **ceremony master**.**

Everyone at the **Command Center** stood up and saluted the main screen. Naturally, Duhier followed suit, inwardly embarrassed that he’d ended up meeting her again as little more than set dressing.

“I’m truly ecstatic that all of you made it here unharmed,” said Cohtponee bluntly. But they could tell from how the **Star Forces Admiral’s** blood-red lips (the **family feature** of her line) were slightly curved that this was no lie.

Duhier didn’t know her personally, but she was a Cohtponee and he an Abliar — both members of the 29 Founding Clans. Their families’ fellowship had lasted for generations and generations.

“I humbly express my relief that **Your Excellency** is safe as well,” said *Ghamperh*.

“I’d love to put on a celebratory banquet, but unfortunately we cannot stay here for long,” said Cohtponee. “As I’m sure you’ve already been told, Lahkfacar has fallen. As such, we have lost our link to the **Eight Monarchies**. We may surmise **His Excellency the Crown Prince Dusanh** has acceded, but we cannot, for the time being, report with certainty of any triumphal return before the **Jade Throne**.”

“Understood, ma’am. It’s an absolute tragedy,” said *Ghamperh*.

Before zooming into the **Lesyood Portal**, they made contact with a **carrycraft**. It was a ship under **Snow Crystal Fleet Command’s** direct control. That was why *Ghamperh* shared Cohtponee’s understanding of their state of affairs, which had also been explained to Duhier.

Duhier thought of his grandmother. She was, in all likelihood, no longer in this world. His great-grandmother, too, could only have fallen alongside the **capital**. Then he thought of his sister. It wasn’t clear whether Lafier had survived. He

hoped she was alive and well. Yet Duhier would not be permitted to stand around indulging in reminiscence.

“I see you’re alive, fledgling,” said Cohtponee. There could be no doubt those words were for Duhier.

“It’s all thanks to how on point the fleet conducted itself,” said Duhier.

“Uh-huh.” Cohtponee nodded. “I’d half given up hope. **Commodore Ghamperh** and his outstanding subordinates should be praised and commended once more.”

“You’re too kind, ma’am,” said *Ghamperh*.

“Now then,” said Cohtponee, “on to what is to come. I’ll be the one to inform you. The **Skeer Monarchy** is cut off in the enemy’s midst. We should make the **Beesehs Astrobase** our provisional nucleus and reestablish contact with the Empire’s nucleus while squaring off against the enemy in the **Skeer Portal** zone. In accordance with that plan, we are coordinating with various corps. Within the next few days, I daresay we’ll be departing for Beesehs, too. After which the highest-ranked **Imperial** this fleet will be able to contact is the father of **His Highness the Viscount of Wemdyse, His Highness the King of Clybh**.”

Duhier was relieved in more ways than one. First, that his father was alive and well. Second, that he wouldn’t need to serve as the **Imperials’** representative.

“Does that mean **His Highness the King of Clybh** will preside over us?” asked *Ghamperh*.

“That’s not for me to decide, and the situation is fluid. I can only assume that since we have been cut off from **the Crown**, we must make him our figure to rely on. By the way, *Fiac Bærr Üémdaiser*.”

“Yes, ma’am? What is it?” Duhier felt nervous, getting called by his **noble rank** like that.

“Your — no, **Your Highness’s** position is extremely unclear at the moment. I’ve decided that until a confluence of things becomes clearer, I will be treating **Your Highness** not as a **soldier**, but an **Imperial**. And I will brook no objections. Transfer to the *Chaïcaü* as soon as possible, and receive the respect we pay the Abliar Clan, *Fiac*.”

“Roger that, ma’am,” saluted Duhier.

Though he had no choice but to accept it, his position’s state of uncertainty left him ill at ease. The faces of Behrsoht, *Bhonh*, and the other crewmembers of the **battle-line ship** *Caïsaumh* — or former crewmembers, given the *Caïsaumh* didn’t exist anymore — floated to mind. The days he’d spent alongside them were largely dreadful, yes, but he still looked back on that era fondly. Would the day come he would fight as a **soldier** once again? He’d have liked to work under a **ship commander** who was a bit less objectionable, but he’d take Behrsoht as his superior over his present predicament.

His **wristgear** rang. It was a message from Behrsoht. Though Duhier was weary on the inside, he opened it up:

DON’T THINK I FORGOT ABOUT THE **WEMDYSE VISCOUNT CUP**. WE COULD MAKE IT THE *TYCH CILUGAIR* (Crown Prince’s Cup), TOO.

I never got the feeling he was that proactive, thought Duhier. *What’s this about?*

Duhier didn’t think the message had some kind of deep meaning behind it. He wondered whether Behrsoht just wanted to dispel the gloom that attended their escape. Duhier even entertained the silly notion that maybe, just maybe, Behrsoht was, in his own way, trying to cheer him up.

Duhier’s opinion of the man was elevated a tiny bit.

At the **Sohtryoor Astrobase**...

Sohtryoor’s sun was a yellow dwarf. The **Sohtryoor Portal** revolved around it, and an inhabited planet followed it on the same orbit.

All astrobases had inhabited planets, which were used for **landworlder NCCs’** recreation. Sohtryoor’s was named *Satneigh*, and like the planet named *Claberh Soss* in Lahkfacar before it, it would likely be used for **trainee pupil** ground war exercises going forward.

A variety of facilities and a great number of vessels were in orbit around *Satneigh*. In the past, vessels emerging from the **Sohtryoor Portal** used to head for *Satneigh’s* satellite orbit first, but now that was somewhat difficult due to

how crowded it was. If an observer unaware of the **Star Forces'** circumstances took in this scene, they'd probably be overwhelmed by their sheer might. But upon closer inspection, they would undoubtedly notice the composition of the fleets was all over the place, not to mention the multitude of damaged ships.

An **orbital city** was taking form between *Satneigh* and the **Sohtryoor Portal**. Ships that couldn't settle above the planet tended closer to the inchoate city, which was still undergoing agglomeration. Within the city, **construction sites** were getting built. And though none were complete yet, the production of **space-time bubble generators** had already begun.

The **orbital city** had been dubbed *Lacmhacarh Sela*. There was a particularly large structure near the city's exact center. The structure was originally in *Satneigh's* satellite orbit as the headquarters of the astrobases; it was hauled into orbit around Sohtryoor's sun as a temporary Imperial abode.

The *Gaftnochec Dradr* was moored alongside that abode. The **Pillars of Praises** in the **mine deck** were still enclosed in the foaming agent Jint had gathered.

Even now, the number of names that needed carving into those pillars kept increasing. More than a few people asserted that they ought to promptly work out a plan to honor the souls behind those names. But at the moment, a plan to reconstruct the **Hall of Remembrance** had yet to materialize.

While the Hall of Remembrance could wait until later, they had to prepare for the **Emperor's** enthronement straight away. All of the halls and chambers in the Astrobases' headquarters were too small to be suitable. Some believed the structure should be expanded upon, but there was no time to go about something so leisurely. There was no other option — they would do interior construction on an unused storehouse and hold the coronation there.

On the day of the coronation, a large number of **intrasystem ships** came in and out of the abode without interruption so as to deliver attendees there. Lafier was of course one of those attendees, but she didn't need to ride one of those ships that day. She had been staying there the whole time. She hadn't had much of anything to do since entering the abode. All she'd done was play with the cats of the **Clybh Royal Palace**, which had escaped aboard a **passenger**

ship a step ahead of the rest.

On this day, those idle days would come to an end.

Lafier was in not her **military uniform**, but in a crimson **long robe** over her purple jumpsuit, along with the splendorous **circlet** of a **princess**. She exited the room into an antechamber.

“Sup, Lafier.” Jint, dressed in his **count’s** long robe, got off the couch and bowed.

It wasn’t just Jint. The **starpilots** of the *Gaftnochec Dradr* — Samson, *Gnomboch*, and Lecsh — were in the antechamber, too, and they were all wearing formal **long robes** over their **military uniforms**.

“**Ship Commander**,” said Lecsh. “While we may have been relieved from our current duties on this day, I hope I get to fight under you again soon. Please remember me.”

“Hey, no fair!” muttered *Gnomboch*, who stepped forward. “I implore you not to forget **Rearguard Starpilot** *Gnomboch* either, ma’am.”

“How could I?” smiled Lafier.

Jint and Samson exchanged glances and grinned. Jint had all the confidence in the world he’d be made Lafier’s subordinate again. He didn’t know what was going through Samson’s mind. For all Jint knew, he wasn’t fixated on working under Lafier.

The personnel of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** were also present.

“And I’d also like it if you didn’t forget me,” said **Associate Commodore** Atosryua. “I know you’ll overtake me in rank soon enough, but I hope we keep touch in some form or fashion.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Lafier. “I believe I will continue to be indebted to you one way or another.”

“Glad to hear it.”

The **Squadron Senior Staff Officer, Kilo-Commander** Sobash, was there as well. “With your promotion, I will feel at ease once more. Being ranked higher than you feels off. Please use me again.”

Lafier was about to nod, but she changed her mind. This was her last chance to interact with him as his subordinate.

“Yes, **Kilo-Commander**, sir.” She saluted. “I thank you for working with me.”

Sobash returned the salute with a smile.

The crew of the **raid ship** *Flicaubh* was also there. They had survived. **Vanguard Starpilot** Yatesh, Arbohf (who had sadly been promoted to **Deca-Commander**), and *Roibomoüass Scæmr* (Mechanics Vice Hecto-Commander) Grinshia were all saluting. Beside them, **Acting Ship Commander Vice Hecto-Commander** Ecryua was staring fixedly at Lafier’s face.

Lafier stared back. *Has she got something to say?*

“*Fiac?*” Ecryua said at last.

While she wondered why it was a question, she was soon convinced it was because Ecryua wasn’t sure what to call her anymore. “What is it?”

“Do I just say ‘congratulations’?” she asked, tilting her head in doubt.

“Yep. I thank you for congratulating me.”

At that, Ecryua beamed.

“It’s almost time,” said Sobash. “Excuse us, **Ship Commander**, we’ll be leaving a little earlier.”

Everyone save for Lafier exited the room. Then a **chamberlain** entered.

“**Your Highness**, I humbly ask that you look over the program of the ceremony.”

“What, again?” she replied wearily. “I already did many times over during the meeting.”

“This would be one last look,” said the **chamberlain** in assertive tones.

“But I’m not even the central star of the ceremony,” she protested.

“This is not the kind of thing *Fiac Dusanr* will be giving a final once-over.”

“I see,” said Lafier in resignation.

The final check lasted around fifteen minutes, after which the **chamberlain**

led her inside the ceremony hall.

The **Ceremony Master** announced Lafier's entry: "*Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Bærh Parhynr Fiac Lamhirr.*"

The venue was already filled to capacity with attendees, though the path leading to the **throne** remained open. On either side of that path stood **Imperials** too young to have enrolled in an **academy**, each side facing the other. But there weren't that many Imperials at Lahkfacar Sela, so the intervals between them were quite spacious. As such, the **nobles** and high officials that were usually behind the **Imperials** were now in front of them.

Lafier headed toward the **throne**. On her way there, she spotted Jint in the front row. He was a **count**, which was no lowly rank, but also not really high enough to be standing all the way in front. Many of the important **nobles** and officials who would normally be in attendance during such a momentous ceremony were missing, their places taken by slightly lower-ranking people.

She found the sight of Jint, who was even more jittery than normal, slightly amusing. He could never get used to the fact he was a **noble**.

Just like the Audience Chamber at the **Imperial Palace**, a great many **crest banners** hung from the ceiling, but one wondered how many of those **territory-nations** and **domains** were still under the **Empire's** rule. She caught the *Glac Bærr Parhynr* (Banner of the Viscountess of *Parhynh*) in the corner of her eye. That **viscountdom** lay in the **Clybh Monarchy**, which meant her domain, too, was cut off from the Empire's control.

Lafier stood at the base of the stairs leading to the **throne**, where the **Imperials** who were already serving in the military stood. They were few in number, and horrifyingly, Lafier, a mere **Hecto-Commander**, was the highest-ranking among them. The bitter truth that the **Imperial Family** had turned sparse had sunk in. Some were absent because they couldn't make it in time, but others were left stranded somewhere in the galaxy, separated from them by **planar space**. It wasn't clear whether they were even still alive. Lafier couldn't help feeling desolate. She thought of her father and brother as she waited for *Dusanh's* entry.

The **throne** was created by molding artificial stone. Two **abdicated emperors**,

Lamlonh and Dugahs, were standing to either side of the **throne**. In ordinary times, four **abdlicants** would be lined up on each side.

This was Lafier's second time attending a coronation. She had been very young during her first time, her grandmother's coronation, but it had nevertheless left an impression on her, so she remembered it well. At the time, the 26th **Emperor**, Dugahs, had been seated at the **Jade Throne**. The **Emperor's Gaftnochec circlet** adorned his head, and he held an identical **circlet** and the **Imperial Command Baton** in hand. The **circlet** in his hand was the new **Empress's**. As **circlets** had to be tuned and adjusted to fit their wearers, lending or borrowing them served no purpose. The **circlet** of the **eight-headed dragon** was not inherited; rather, a new one was made whenever a new **emperor or empress** acceded.

The **Imperial Command Baton** usually *was* handed down the generations, but the old one had disintegrated into **space-time particles**, so a new one had been crafted with care for the occasion.

A brand new *Gaftnochec circlet* had been placed alongside the new **Imperial Command Baton** on the empty **throne**.

"Please receive **Crown Prince Abliarsec Néïc Lamsarr Larth Barcær Fiác Dusanr**," said the **ceremony master**.

The attendees lowered their heads. *Dusanh* swaggered past the fold as they bowed profoundly. Then he kneeled before the stairs leading to the **throne**.

"*Dusanh*, are you prepared to bear the **Empire's** past on your left shoulder?" asked **Abdlicant Lamlonh**.

"Yes, ma'am," *Dusanh* replied respectfully.

"*Dusanh*, are you prepared to bear the **Empire's** future on your right shoulder?" asked **Abdlicant Dugahs**.

"Yes, sir," he replied, still kneeling.

"*Dusanh*, are you prepared to bear the **Empire's** present on your head?" asked *Lamlonh*.

"Yes, ma'am."

Were this a peacetime enthronement ceremony, each of the **abdlicants** in attendance would have had their own respective line to say. It seemed *Lamlonh* and Dugahs intended to say those lines between the two of them.

“Then bear them,” ordered Dugahs.

Dusanh stood up and slowly ascended the stairs.

Lamlonh picked up the **circlet** off the **throne**, and Dugahs the **Imperial Command Baton**.

Dusanh did not take his seat immediately upon reaching the top of the stairs. Instead he removed his **circlet** and kneeled anew.

“The **Council of Abdlicants** deems you worthy to receive this.” *Lamlonh* placed the **circlet** of the **eight-headed dragon** upon his head.

Dusanh stood up.

“The **Council of Abdlicants** deems you worthy to wield this.” Dugahs handed him the **Imperial Command Baton**.

Baton in hand, *Dusanh* turned to face his subjects.

Lamlonh addressed the attendees: “The **Council of Abdlicants** recognizes *Dusanh* as this **throne**’s rightful occupant.”

“Rejoice,” shouted Dugahs sonorously, “for **His Majesty Dusanh** is your new **Emperor!**”

This was Lafier’s cue; the time had come for her to fulfill her role.

She let out the air she’d filled her lungs with in an off-the-cuff tune. The air vibrated her throat, giving rise to a mellifluous euphoria. Lafier let the state of rapture guide her voice and her melody. Her singing was not loud, but rather long and thin, like a silken thread. The **Imperials** wove their own lyricless songs in response, followed by the distinguished ladies and gentlemen in attendance. Their songs naturally twisted together like a braid, filling the chamber with their harmony. This was the Song of Celebration, yet it bore traces of grief and sorrow as well. Was it due to the resonance of the song, or to Lafier’s heart?

Dusanh listened to the song expressionlessly. When the singing reached a fever pitch, the new **Emperor** swung his **Imperial Command Baton**.

The singing stopped on a dime.

“We thank you all, and We express our joy as We bring the Song to a close,” he said, uttering his first words as **Emperor**. “The Song is beyond beautiful, and We intend to have you sing it for Us each time one of our enemy’s nations vanishes from the map. We can hardly restrain Our excitement at the prospect of hearing it four more times.”

The ovation of his subjects resounded. “*Sathote Frybarari!*” they cheered. Victory be the Empire’s.

Dusanh called upon a **chamberlain** who was waiting at the side with a **tray** held reverently in both hands. A **command baton** was atop the small ultramarine silk cloth laid over the tray. It was ornately decorated, though not to the level of the **Imperial Command Baton**.

“Come, *Fiac Lamhirr* of the **Royal House of Clybh**.” *Dusanh* looked down upon Lafier.

“My Liege.” Lafier climbed the stairs, stepped in front of the **throne**, and kneeled.

“You are the most senior **soldier** among the **Imperials** Our voice can reach. As such, We hereby make you the interim **Crown Princess**. At the same time, We hereby promote you to **Commodore**. Customarily, We would appoint you to **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, but since you are now **Crown Princess** on a provisional basis, and since you are still very young and inexperienced, We and the **Council of Abdicant Emperors** elected to postpone that. No objections, I trust?”

“It is with great reverence that I say I can but follow the will of Nisothe-*Fanigaracr* (Their Eminences the Abdicants) and of **Your Majesty the Emperor**,” she replied, her eyes downcast.

She’d been promoted to **Hecto-Commander** just a few days ago, and now she’d been promoted another three ranks. She was well aware it didn’t match her merit or level of competence.

“Then bear that burden with humility and respect.” *Dusanh* took the **command baton** of the **Crown Princess** off the **tray** and proffered it.

“As Your Majesty decrees.” Lafier got up and accepted the **baton**.

Heavily it weighed down on her.

End of Part 1 of BANNER OF THE STARS

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Afterword

If I recall correctly, it was an American Indian tribe: a people whose language lacks a word or phrase meaning “long time no see,” so they start conversations the same way no matter whether they were apart for a second or for ten years.

On that note, hello, everyone.

Ah, ahem.

Long time no see. It’s been quite some time.

I’m sure most have forgotten this series exists, and I’m sure those who do remember ended up thinking, *there’s no way another volume will ever come out at this rate.*

I never once gave up on completing the series, but I did let my time go to waste for one reason or another.

I’m truly sorry. I have no words to express my regret to the concerned staff or, needless to say, to the readers I’ve kept waiting.

Due to an unhealthy lifestyle, when I felt unwell and decided to visit the hospital, I was actually on death’s door and hospitalized right then and there. They even administered intravascular treatment while fearing the aftershocks of the earthquake that occurred right after hospitalizing me. During my strict confinement to bed rest after the surgery, I did get hit with a rather intense aftershock. These days, however, I’m in relatively good health.

My new routine-regulated lifestyle is so different from before, it’s comparable to a salaryman quitting and starting a new life. Though it’s an undisciplined lifestyle compared to your average working adult.

At any rate, it was my first time getting rocked by such a serious life-threatening illness, so I spent my days grasping in the dark after I was discharged from the hospital. It looks as though I’ve no choice but to give up on my longtime dream of participating in a triathlon while chain smoking at the same time (a dream I’d been putting off since I could never figure out how to

smoke while swimming). But it appears even my weakened heart is up to the task of writing SF novels.

I know, from the bottom of my heart, that I'm a fortunate man.

Now then, let's move on. I have taken the liberty of making this the end of "Part 1." The following text will be touching a tad on what transpires in this volume, so please bear that in mind.

The primary objective behind *CREST OF THE STARS* was to depict a world with a system of faster-than-light travel called planar space navigation. I believe that through Volume I of *BANNER*, I showed the current state of, and how things work for, combat in that world in greater detail than *CREST*. And I believe that through Volumes II and III of *BANNER*, I showed the current state of the lieges and governance of the Empire in greater detail than in *CREST*. As for Volumes IV and V, I thought I'd write about how the race known as the Abh is able to maintain their Empire.

Abhs are, in essence, bio-computers created via genetic engineering for the purposes of working in space. They then became independent, obtained faster-than-light travel, and established an interstellar nation — I banged that story out fairly smoothly. But while I was pondering the Empire the Abh built, I thought to myself: *Seems like it'd be kind of tough to keep going, though, doesn't it? It'd hold like that for two, maybe three hundred years, but wouldn't it be impossible for it to hold for over a thousand years, like in the story?*

That train of thought led me to realize that in order to give the Empire that level of staying power, I'd likely need something that goes beyond culture or ideology or religion. I shed light on that in the short called "World Creation," as featured in *FRAGMENTS OF THE STARS* (as for what magazine it was first published in, I just checked — it was the February 1999 issue of S-F Magazine).

To make a long story short, I tried writing about a future where faster-than-light travel exists, then I got the urge to paint the stage setting that was the Empire, and then my interests turned to the actors on that stage — the Abh.

Starting with Part 2, we must now come face-to-face with history.

Now I know what you're thinking: *Part 2 is never happening, is it?* And I wouldn't blame you whatsoever for thinking that. But I can tell you that I'd like

for you to be able to read it as soon as possible, so I humbly ask for your continued support.

—February 25, 2013

Selected Glossary, Part 6

The following glossary is a curated version of the working document used throughout the translation process. As such, some portions of it are arranged topically rather than alphabetically. The “complete” glossary is a substantially larger document, spanning many dozens of pages of Baronh words, their English translations, and explanatory translator’s notes. Further selections from the glossary will be made available in the future, as the series progresses.

Note that true Baronh does not have capitalization, as it is written in the ath script.

General Glossary: Adjectives

- Afta: many.
- Alsaima: hair-blue.
- Béna: every.
- Bhoca: a lot of.
- Bïara: scorching hot.
- Biddac: underway, en route.
- Butoca: difficult.
- Cairaza: unexplored.
- Ceurena: wide, vast.
- Cïaba: showy, flashy.
- Cimena: coded.
- Cnérura: civilized.
- Cüaïra: howling.

Daga: long.

Dalüana: underage.

Difaca: bespoke, purpose-built.

Éni / Éna: good.

Facsi: peculiar, funny.

Factina: short-lived.

Faina: for practice.

Faissasade: restless.

Far: my.

Fatluca: calm.

Fronétara: not to be forgotten.

Ftéca: short.

Glora: hot (weather).

Gnana: glamorous.

Gora: armored.

Graca: open.

Haita: general.

Hata: hard.

Hocésa: easy to move.

Laci: tall, high.

Ladi: free of charge.

Lagoradha: independent.

Laicena: ferocious.

Léca: close.

Lésa / Lisa: small.

Lœza: closed.

Loma: together.

Loni: far.

Lori: grueling.

Lüancha: restrained, tame.

Luïeni: strong.

Lyga: next.

Maca: deep.

Mura: former.

Nach / -nachi: seemingly.

Nata: new.

Néhati: thankful(ly), much appreciated.

Nihota: splendid.

Noüa: beautiful.

Oba: heavy.

Raica: former, previous.

Rona: like that.

Saura: light.

Seurena: yellow.

Sézaca: lofty, sublime.

Sibonaita: involving living things.

Simesauza: a fixed number/value of something.

Slona: out-of-ship.

Socrceureni: magnanimous.

Socréüni: pleasant (of things).

Solaicena: lightly armored.

Sommara: popular, well-liked.

Son: this.

Sona: like this.

Sona: lightweight.

Sonma: preferred, favorite.

Süamha: meager, modest.

Üasi: slow, late.

Üésa: delicious.



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Banner of the Stars: Volume 5

by Hiroyuki Morioka

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