



CREST ² OF THE STARS

A WAR MOST MODEST

AUTHOR: HIROYUKI MORIOKA
ILLUSTRATOR: TOSHIHIRO ONO



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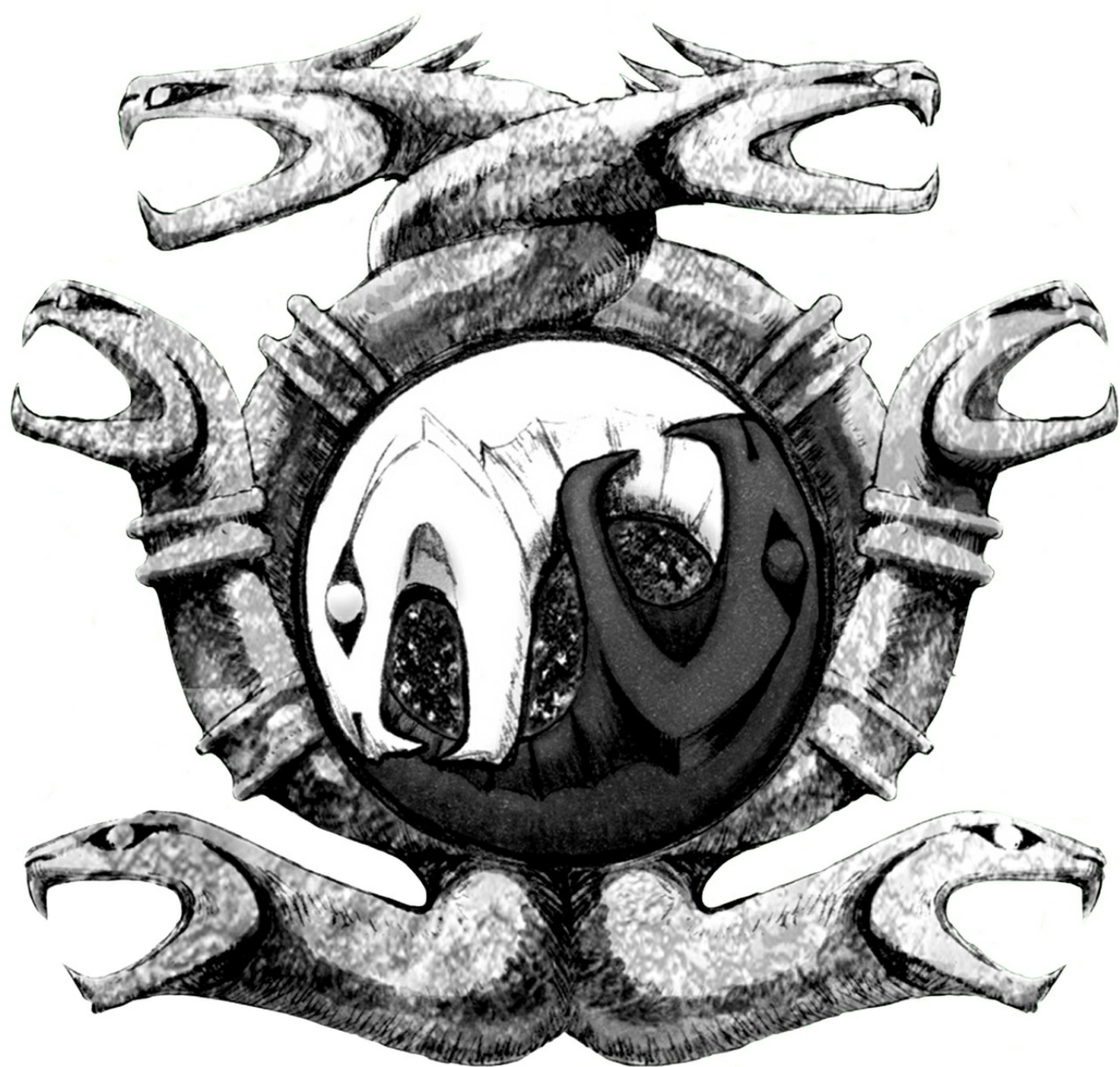
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What are the Abh? I'll tell you:

They are components of a sprawling machine. To them, children are nothing more than replacement parts manufactured to take over their work before they rust away.

Then, what is this "machine," you ask?

This pernicious machine — and pernicious it is — is the so-called "Humankind Empire of Abh." They are a menace that continues to threaten the soundness of human society, and should we allow them to persist, they will swallow us and our society whole.

A menace we are compelled to destroy.

Quoth Representative Fitzdavid at the Central Council of the United Mankind.

Welcome to the Abh Empire

...or as they would say in their native tongue of Baronh, the great and indefatigable Bar Frybarec!

“Bar fry-ba-rec?”

Nope, it’s actually pronounced “Bar Fryoobar”!

What the hey!?

Some quick points!

Things To Look Out For:

- It’s spelled “Abh” but pronounced “Ahv”! “Bh” is a “v” sound! Keep your eye out for other two-letter combinations that use the letter “h” to make for a single sound!
For Example: Rébh (a passenger ship) is pronounced “REV.” The name of the language, Baronh, is pronounced “BARONYUH” because the “nh” digraph represents a “nyuh” sound.
- You’ll see a lot of “-c” and “-ec” at the ends of Baronh words. These are silent! (They’re there to mark their grammatical purpose.)
For Example: Lonidec (a base) is pronounced “LOHNEED.”
- When “c” isn’t silent, it’s ALWAYS a hard “c” (like a “k”)!
For Example: Cénh (a trainee pupil) is pronounced “KENYUH.”
- You’ll also see a lot of “ai”s that represent “eh” sounds (or close enough), as well as “au”s that make “oh” sounds.
For Example: Arnaigh (an orbital tower) is pronounced “ARNEHZH.”
Meanwhile, arauch (the imperial capital) is “AROHSH.”
- “Eu” is akin to a “yoo” sound.
For Example: Reucec (gentry) is “RYOOK.”
- There are some spelling exceptions.
For Example: It’s spelled aïbss (surface-dwelling “Lander” human) but

pronounced “AEEP.”

We’re sure you’ll pick it up as you go!

Pronunciation Guide Legend (for things that are not otherwise obvious)

- ZH is similar to a “j” sound, but softer. (In Baronh, this is “gh.”)
- RR refers to a rolling “r” sound. (In Baronh, this is “rh.”)
- DTH refers to a voiced “th” sound (like the “th” in “the” as opposed to the one in “thin.” In Baronh, this is “dh.”)

NOTE: The actual phonology is more varied, and these pronunciation guides are handy approximations. For example, “EH” is standing for a multitude of different sounds that are in more or less the same ballpark. The way these words are spelled are based on Baronh’s own baked-in system of Romanization/transliteration (the script is in fact written in glyphs called “Ath”).

ALSO NOTE: After the first appearance of the majority of Baronh vocabulary, if they appear again, they will be replaced by their English equivalent in bold text.

The language is just another aspect of what makes this magnificent space empire and its culture so fascinating! And we’re confident that you’ll know your froch from your frocragh in no time!

CREST OF THE STARS II — A War Most Modest

Summary of Crest of the Stars I

One fateful day, Jinto's home planet suffered an incursion by an Abh fleet.

In the face of their demands for total capitulation, Jinto's father, Planetary President Rock, acquiesced to Abh rule in exchange for being conferred a noble rank among them. As a result, Jinto became the rare surface-born human who was legally an Abh, but not genetically. He and his line were incorporated into their vast interstellar empire, and so Jinto was to board a spaceship headed toward its capital.

However, that ship was then ambushed by an enemy fleet, and Jinto and the royal princess, Lafier, were sent off as the only two to escape, bidden toward the Sfagnoff Marquessate on a small connecting vessel.

The two made a pit stop at the Febdash Barony to refuel, only to find themselves confined there by a nefarious agent.

Characters

Jinto

..... the son of the president of the planet Martin.

Lafier

..... a trainee starpilot in the Abh Empire's Star Forces, as well as the Empress's granddaughter.

Klowar

..... the ruler of the Febdash Barony.

Sruf

..... Klowar's father, and former Baron of Febdash.

Seelnay (“SELL’NYE”)

..... a servant of the Febdash Baron’s Estate.

Entryua Reie (“RAY”)

..... Police Inspector of the Lune Beega Criminal Investigation Department.

Kyte

..... Military Police Lieutenant of the Peacekeepers.

Lamagh

..... the Empress of the Abh.

Chapter 1: The Homemakers' Office of the Baron's Estate

The year was 136 in the *faibdachoth* (the Febdash calendar). However, each solar revolution at this particular **barony** was short enough to measure around a third of the cosmic standard.

In other words, it was quite young for a nation.

And make no mistake, though the citizenry numbered a paltry fifty, the **Febdash Barony** was a nation unto itself. While technically a part of the **Empire**, it had accrued its own storied history unperturbed by outside currents or the affairs that swayed the Empire's hub.

Granted, there was almost no disturbance to speak of that year, and consequently, nothing to give life there much zest.

But now, things were different. Now, a pair of visitors were trying to shatter the peace.

One of those visitors, Jinto, **noble prince of the Countdom of Hyde**, had been tossed into the same chamber as the former **baron**, who was also trapped there.

"Look over there, boy." The **former Baron of Febdash** pointed at the thick marble door. "That's where they dragged you in from."

"What exactly was going on when that happened?" asked Jinto.

"I was lost in my meditations — I spend most of the day meditating, with a bottle of booze for company, mind you. Then I hear the door opening! Thing hadn't opened in a good 20 years. For such a momentous occasion, I'd skip my own funeral, so I jumped to check it out, only to see ya on an auto-stretcher inching your way inside."

"That's it? Me on an auto-stretcher? Nobody else?"

"Oh yeah, there were two **servants** behind ya — that is to say, out in the

hallway. And they were packing heat, too. Not that they'd ever be sticking 'em on a **former baron**, but guns they had. Ya know, for some reason, I've never been able to relax when I'm around people who're armed. Anyway, as I glued my gaze on your stretcher, it stopped right in front of me. Gave me the heebie-jeebies. Meanwhile, the ladies were dead silent, and stood there stock still. They looked at me like they wanted me to do something, but they didn't bother saying *what*. Not ones to divulge much, lemme tell ya! Could've found work as secret agents!"

"Then what?" Jinto prodded.

"Well, I figured they wanted me to have you and the stretcher part ways, so I whipped up the energy in these old bones of mine and laid ya down on the floor. Soon as I did, the thing took its leave, and the door closed. And my dear son's **servants** stayed frozen and mute the whole time. I'd wager they're still standing there on the other side of the door as we speak. They must positively adore us."

"So, I was out cold all throughout, huh." Jinto had to periodically anchor the conversation, or else the old man would take the conversation to some uncharted places no one could predict.

"Ya were indeed, boy. I even thought ya could be dead. Maybe my offspring's been thinking of just making this place into a mortuary once I died, and he jumped the gun a little with you. That's what was running through my head until I saw you were twitching in your sleep. Then I knew you were alive. And easy to sympathize with, what with those two escorting ya. Then I whipped my old bones up once again and carried ya to bed. I was holding out hope that a spot of rest might change your personality, too. But when ya came to, ya grabbed me by the collar and started bawling at me for answers, like a cat that'd just nabbed its kittens' kidnappers red-handed..."

"At no point did I grab you by the collar, nor did I ever *bawl* at you," Jinto reminded him.

"I was just expressing how startled I was, that's all. If you're gonna pick me apart like that, then what was it all for? I whipped up my old bones *two whole times* for ya."

“I’m sorry,” he said, though in truth he’d have liked it if Sruf acknowledged how relatively calm he’d been under fire.

“Wow, **boy**. Let it be said that the way ya swallow everything is your greatest treasure.”

And, having lauded Jinto so, Sruf proceeded to show him around their zone of confinement. However, unlike the **patrol ship** Goslauth’s interior, there wasn’t much of interest to see here, so it took nary a moment to run through it all. They had access to a washroom and bath, a kitchen, and a warehouse-cum-repair room for the **automatons**, along with five other chambers besides. A small garden lay at zone’s center, surrounded by various rooms connected to it and to each other by corridors.

“I don’t see any windows anywhere,” murmured Jinto, after crossing into the last of the rooms, the living room. A window might have served as a means of escape.

“Course not,” said Sruf. “Even if there was one, we’re surrounded by the **cultivation ranch**, so it wouldn’t exactly be breathtaking scenery. Unless you’d enjoy watching the meat grow in the culture tanks, in which case something must’ve made a *deep* damn impression on ya when you were a wee one.”

“Oh no, trust me, I have no desire to watch meat grow,” gainsaid Jinto. He had to wonder whether Sruf had forgotten all about The Escape Plan.

“In the void of space, windowless is far more practical.” Sruf worked some controls in a corner of the room, and the walls reflected imagery of a **terrestrial** vista. A mountain jutted tall and stately, capped white with snow. The room’s vantage point was set to be level with its apex. Drawing nearer to the wall, a viewer could look down upon all the other surrounding peaks. Clouds were rolling around each mountain’s foot. Looking up, on the other hand, greeted the viewer with a sky so blue one could almost see it reaching the ends of the galaxy.

“Impressive,” said Jinto, deciding that it couldn’t hurt to humor the **former baron**’s digression momentarily.

“You’re impressed by *this* old thing? What backwater world did *you* crawl out of?”

“No,” huffed Jinto, “not the device. The scenery.”

“Whoops, sorry ‘bout that,” he said, though without a trace of sincerity in his voice.

“Wait a sec, isn’t this scene a little unnatural? If the clouds are that far down, that’d place it above the stratosphere. No way the sky would be this blue this high up.”

“Ya must be of **terrestrial** upbringing if you noticed that. Abhs, they’re under all sorts of misconceptions when it comes to that stuff.”

“Then this is what, art? An Abh fantasy?”

“It’s Delbisex. A videographer who worked during *Baïc Rüécotr* (Pre-Imperial History, or P.H.) times, known for realistically reproducing **terrestrial** landscapes.”

“You mean the *Goc Ramgocotr* (Space Roving Age)?”

“Yep.”

“Then I can hardly blame them.” For that was the era whereby the Abh plied between each isolated colony, with trade as their livelihood. It was little wonder how their grasp of the natural world might slip away.

“Delbisex entitled this piece ‘*Gamh Laca*’ (Tall Mountain). Bit boring, though. I’d give it a different name,” said Sruf. “I’d call it ‘*Bar Repainec*’.”

“**“Pride of the Abh”?**”

“Think about it. There ain’t nothing else that can express their pride as accurately as this panorama,” the old man expounded. “Recognizing your own nobility on a personal level is all you need. No need to go around advertising it, and still less need to be assured of it by others. It doesn’t matter how humble your role is in life, as long as your self-regard is higher than anybody else’s. High enough to look down on Her Majesty the Empress, even. Get that into your head, and no matter how highfalutin the people ya meet, they’ll never seem like anything more than extras who’re there to set the stage for ya. Funnily enough, I heard that whenever an Abh meets somebody who has no pride, they don’t know how to handle it. Though I guess that ain’t limited to pride ‘as an

Abh'; it's about *any* sort of pride."

Suddenly he was roaming around the living room aimlessly. "Not that my shameful excuse of an heir seems to understand any of that! He's no tall mountain, no, he won't go near one. He's seen fit, instead, to dig a deep ol' pit by the mountain. Takes solace in being higher than the deepest lows. I may be a Lander genetically, but I'm sure as hell more Abh in spirit than that twit."

Jinto once, and only once, had laid eyes on a bear. It was at a **Vorlash Countdom** zoo. Jinto was staring at the bear, since at first it had been simply pacing its cage in its discontent, but for reasons only it could ever know, it flew into a rage and flung itself into the tempered glass that separated it from him. Naturally, the only damage sustained was to the beast's claws and fangs, but Jinto would go on to relive that episode occasionally in his nightmares, awakening in a cold sweat.

And Sruf was currently more than reminiscent of that bear. Only this time, there was no barrier to protect him.

"Um, sorry to bother you, Lonh-Lym Raica," he addressed him properly. "But I think we should go about crafting an escape plan sometime soon."

"Right, of course." Sruf nestled into a couch, looking a tad drained. "**Boy**, if there's anything ya oughtta take from this, it's that if you're Abh, you've gotta instill a sense of nobility and pride in your kids before all else. That said, ya don't need to *tell* 'em that. It's more like a contagion; just mill around and believe you me, they'll catch it. Unfortunately, that means I ain't got any real pride inside me. I learned what the pride of the Abh entails while fumbling in the dark, and tried to express that idea to him directly. Ya can see how that turned out. First things first, you've gotta be a noble soul. *Embody* pride, and it'll pour out naturally in every little thing ya do. Then your *golciac* (successors) will learn by example what the meaning is of Abh pride."

"I'll keep that in mind." He knew it just might be useful advice.

If, that is, he had a future ahead of him to begin with.

"Now then, what say we get to hatching our little scheme? Got any ideas on how we make a break for it?"

“Can these walls be smashed open?” Jinto lightly tapped the wall that was still displaying Delbisex’s *Tall Mountain*. While the former baron didn’t have anyone waiting on him, he was attended by a multitude of **automatons**. Perhaps it wasn’t impossible to knock down a wall using some of them.

“Even if we could break through one, we oughtn’t. We’d face a hell of a time leaving without getting spotted from the **ranch**.”

“Gotcha.” Jinto figured it was a long shot, so he wasn’t too devastated. “Wait, how do you get your food? From that door, right?”

“No.” The **former baron** shook his head. “Remember the huge fridge in the kitchen? The one built into the wall? Thing’s two-layered. Once every ten days, the boxes inside it travel their dedicated passageway. Then they come back full of fresh grub, toiletries, stuff like that.”

“Could we maybe hide in one of those boxes?”

“Fraid not. They went to restock just yesterday. I don’t think we could make ‘em move all that quickly even if we grew extra mouths. Unless you don’t mind waiting?”

It was Jinto’s turn to shake his head. “We can’t set them in motion from here?”

“Whaddya think?” said Sruf, oddly prideful. “I’m being held here.”

“How about we remove the boxes, or I dunno, break them, and follow the passageway—”

“Can’t say that idea’s a winner, **boy**. Where the boxes are headed, there’s another door on that side, too. Trying to open it from within could wind up snapping our bones. My son’s the suspicious type. He’s probably on the lookout for any half-eaten frozen shrimp that might escape, let alone us. I wouldn’t place my bets on the box route if I were you. Got any better ideas?”

“Oh, I know!” Jinto said with a snap of the fingers. “What about the trash slot? We could just slip through and—”

“If I recall, there’s a thresher installed at some point of the chute. Ya might be mincemeat by the time you make it to the garbage heap. And it’s pretty hard to

walk anywhere when you're a pile of gore. Well, if that's robbed ya of the will to do anything at all, I wouldn't judge."

"Ugh..." Jinto hung his head. "Do you have any ideas? You must've thought about it before, right? About escaping?"

"Course I have. It's perfect for killing time. Everybody and their cousin's mulled over those ideas before. That's the only reason I'm able to poke holes in 'em so quickly."

"Yeah, I kind of gathered as much," said Jinto, crossing his arms. "What's the procedure for emergencies?"

"You mean like me getting sick? I'd probably contact 'em using the **phone** and have 'em come over. Ain't ever happened before, though."

"You mean we've got a **phone**!?" Hope sprung in Jinto's chest, only to retreat once again. "Oh, that must be the phone that only connects to the **homemakers' office**."

"That's the one. They most likely won't let us talk to *Fiac Lartnér*, either. I mostly just use it to complain about the food."

"Okay, fine, so then one of us fakes being sick, or we cause a fire, or..."

"Gotta say, **boy**, I was hoping for a lot more from a limber young lad like you."

"It's no good?"

"It ain't no good, no. No idea why, but I'm as hearty as they come. Never been sick in my life, really. Then I fall ill right around when you're here? My son has many faults, but he's no fool. It'd raise his guard for sure."

"What if I do it, though? Pretend I'm frail and prone to sickness..."

"Hmmm... But that's assuming he cares whether ya live or die anyhow."

When Jinto realized how true that was, he plunged into a very black mood.

"He probably wishes I'd just bite it already, too," said Sruf, driving the final nail.

"I guess starting a fire's a dumb idea, too, then..."

"So it is." The former baron nodded gravely.

They were at an impasse, unable to come up with anything else. Jinto thought he'd need a change of pace before the answer could come to him.

Jinto bade him adieu and exited out into the hall.

He made a revolution walking around the central pond while admiring the flowers. Situated at the pond's very center was a circular islet, narrow enough to squeeze in at most ten people. A white bridge in the shape of a rainbow spanned the expanse, though it was probably just a model.

He peered into the pond, curious whether any creatures dwelled in its depths, but he couldn't spot anything swimming. Alas, no bright ideas bubbled up in his mind, and he soon grew tired of staring at the pond's waters.

He turned his gaze up to the ceiling. It was a dome, about 500 *dagh* tall at its highest point, and painted sky blue.

Squinting, he could make out a faint line etched in the dome's apex. A circular line. Too like an entrance.

"Lonh-*lym raica*!" cried Jinto to the old man in the living room.

"What?" He stepped in and stood beside Jinto.

"What is that?" Jinto pointed up at the circle. "That **pressure door**-looking circle, see it?"

"Oh, that." He nodded. "That there's the *baudec* (round hatch) that leads to the **pier**."

"To the **pier**? But this isn't the **spaceport** zone..."

"This whole sector was originally a welcoming hall for guests of honor. Used to be an **elevator tube** on that island and everything," he said, pointing.

Now that he'd mentioned it, Jinto saw how the hatch was located exactly above the islet.

"It was designed to allow visitors to relax upon touching down through contact with some surface-world nature. My mother, she loved the whole concept. Thing is, the occasion never came. Nobody ever stopped by. So my sad sack of a son converted the place into my prison. He took down the **elevator**, leveled half of the hall, and tacked on some new rooms."

“Is that **hatch** still operational?”

“You bet it is. And if it’s operable manually, then we can open it from the inside. We’d need to destroy the safety, but that shouldn’t be too hard. But what are ya cooking up in that head of yours?”

“Isn’t it obvious!?” he shouted feverishly. “That’s our way outside!”

“Outside? ‘Outside’ is *space*. The vacuum of space.”

Jinto’s silence lasted mere seconds. “Then we walk along the **mansion’s** roof until we make it to the **connecting vessel**. Next, we enter the vessel for a bit, and then head back toward the **orbital estate...**”

Pity gleamed in the **former baron’s** eyes. “There ain’t any *gonæc* (pressurized clothing) around here. Or have the Abh managed to suffuse all of space with breathable air while I’ve been stuck here struggling to kill time?”

“W-wait, hold on,” said Jinto, refusing to give up, “they say people can survive for a short amount of time in a vacuum...”

“And do ya know where the **vessel’s** parked?”

“Yeah, at the **spaceport**, of course... Oh.”

“So ya see now,” said Sruf. “The **port’s** a long ways away from here. You could be infused with all of humanity’s good luck and stamina, and it’d still be impossible.”

“But what if it’s moored someplace close by? Can’t rule it out...” Jinto clung to his last mad shred of hope for dear life. “Let’s scout it out, and check to see if it’s closer than not...”

“Sorry, but that ain’t in the cards. The **elevator** had the **air lock room** in it. The instant we open that **hatch**, this zone’s air’ll leak out.”

“We’ll just shut it again!”

“Don’t be stupid. Think about the air current that’d produce. It’s a manual hatch, so it ain’t powered by anything. Closing it again is outta the question. Besides, that idea hinges far too much on blind luck. You can put your own life on the table, but I wouldn’t. And you’re the one who hates gambling, ain’t ya?”

“Uh-huh.” Crestfallen, Jinto slumped to the ground at the pond’s edge. Despair racked his mind. Would he be forced to play nice with this old man, always to be trapped in the palms of the **Baron of Febdash**? The **former baron** was pleasant enough, but Jinto wasn’t about to sign up to share the rest of his life with him.

Plus, there was Lafier to think about. Was she all right? If the **Baron** had any sense to speak of, he’d never lay a finger on a **royal princess** of the **Empire**. And yet... would a sane person detain a **soldier** in the middle of a mission?

“That’s it... the **vessel** just needs to come to the **hatch**,” Jinto muttered, half to himself. “To *us*.”

“Clearly. That’s what the hatch is there for. For boarding. But how’ll we get it here? Have ya got some mystic powers as-yet unraveled by man?”

“Would you shut up and let me think!?” Jinto snapped. Taken aback himself, he looked up at the former baron. “I’m sorry, I got carried away...”

“It’s okay,” said the old man calmly. “I was being snarky, despite my years. I’m sorry, **boy**. I know this is a pressing crisis to you.”

“That’s right. This is important,” Jinto concurred.

“In any case, ya oughtta forget about the **hatch**. Got any other ideas?”

“Best not move!” said Lafier, brandishing her **phaser**. “This place is now under **Star Forces** occupation!” And there was Seelnay, training her own gun right beside her.

The homemakers’ office was quite spacious. One wall was projecting a vista with the star of Febdash at the center, while ever-shifting numbers and graphs danced across another. Meanwhile, three **servants** were working three rows of **consoles**.

“What in the stars!?” The lady (who seemed to be the supervisor) cast her eyes on the intruders. “*Fiac Lartnér*. Along with Seelnay.”

“Hands up, Greda!” yelled Seelnay.

“What’s the meaning of this nonsense!?” Baffled, Supervisor Greda watched

Seelnay intently.

“I am a **Trainee Starpilot** of the **Imperial Star Forces**, *Abliarsec Néic-Dubreuscr Boerh Parhynr Lamhirh*.”

“Yes, I’m well aware,” said Greda, visibly flummoxed.

The other two were wearing the same expression. They glanced at each other, then shot Seelnay an inquisitive look, as if to say: *What is this farce? Is this the kind of prank **Imperials** entertain themselves with? How excessive. How deeply unamusing.*

It was all too clear that the **servants** here hadn’t come to grips with the situation, either. Yet Lafier could hardly back down now.

Sensing her own resolve to fight was dangerously close to flagging, Lafier rekindled it by declaring: “The **Star Forces** have hereby seized the *Gandhorh Garicr Lymect Faibdacr* (Homemakers’ Office of the Febdash Baron’s Estate). I require all of you to raise your hands and stand up slowly.”

They did as they were ordered.

Lafier advanced incrementally away from the door, her back to the wall. There was no way to know when the **Baron** would arrive with armed backup.

Seelnay tightly flanked Lafier with a poise that belied the fact this was her first time holding a weapon.

“Your Highness, *Fiac Lartnér*,” Greda started, “Why are you doing this? If you have some task to carry out, surely you could have simply ordered us directly?”

“Then here are my orders. I demand to be allowed contact with the **former baron**. Better yet, I demand he and *İarlucec Dreur Haider* be freed.”

Greda’s face immediately stiffened. “That is prohibited, and I’m afraid that I’m not authorized to grant that request.”

“In that case, you can see why I needed to take this place by force, *gosucec rann* (servants, plural),” said Lafier. “I enjoin you to forget the **Baron’s** orders and get to it. Now.”

“Don’t move, Cfaspia!” shrieked Seelnay, firing her **phaser** out of nowhere.

The laser missed its mark completely, hitting the projection of the blazing star of Febdash on the wall like a bull's eye instead.

"Dammit!" The **servant** named Cfaspia trained the gun she'd drawn from under her **console** on Seelnay. Lafier wasted no time shooting Cfaspia's hand.

"Yargh!" It dropped from her grip. Seelnay darted to pick it up off the floor and proffer it to Lafier.

The **royal princess** stole a glance at it, and ascertained that it was a **paralyzer gun**.

Lafier signaled Seelnay with her eyes: *If there are any other weapons, you'd best ferret them all out.* Seelnay copied loud and clear, and proceeded to separate the ladies from their respective consoles so she could carefully inspect them.

"Tell us what's going on, Seelnay!" said one of them.

"You won't believe it, Arsa..." The two were friends, and so Seelnay happily launched into an explanation.

"Do it now," said Lafier, gun still square on Greda.

Greda was wide-eyed with disbelief. "You really mean it, don't you, **Your Highness**."

"I know not what rumors you may have heard about the Abliar family, but we do not fire at people for fun," she replied.

"I understand." A sigh. "I understand, **Your Highness**. However, I regret to inform you that it isn't possible to open the door to the Retirement Zone."

"Is that true?"

"It's no lie. Without **my lord**'s permission, we can't open it, not even from here. Not unless my lord comes here, uses his own **EM crest-key**, and enters the *saigh cimena* of his own volition."

"And there's absolutely no other way?" pressed Lafier.

"I swear it," Greda affirmed.

Though Lafier had no recourse to detect whether she was telling the whole

truth.

“Then what of communicating with them? You can’t tell me that’s prohibited, too.”

“You may, by all means.” Greda threw up her hands and stepped away from the console.

“Please wait a moment while I connect you.”

“No sudden movements, no funny business.”

“Yes, I know.” Slowly, Greda sidled aside, and reached for the **phone**. Unlike most other phones, it was fixed to an otherwise barren wall.

It was then the door opened.

Lafier flashed the muzzle in its direction.

“There you are, *Fiac Lartnér!*” The **Baron** barged inside, a handful of armed **servants** at his call. Peering into the muzzle pointed his way, he froze in place, stupefied.

“What excellent timing, **Baron**,” said Lafier. “I was just informed that your **compuwatch** is what we need to free Jinto. I suggest you cooperate.”

“What are you doing!? Shield me!” he barked at his small contingent. Arms brandished and at the ready, the servants formed a wall between him and Lafier.

“You can’t be serious!” cried Seelnay. “You’d dare point guns at **Her Royal Highness!?**”

The servants flinched at that remark, wincing for all to see.

“Seelnay, you traitor!” The Baron thrust an accusatory finger at her and opened his mouth as though to issue an order. Lafier promptly stepped in front of her to protect her.

“**Imperial citizen** *Faigdacpéc Sélnaïc* is under *my* guardianship now.”

Seelnay gasped behind her, overjoyed. “I’m so happy, **Your Highness!**”

“Damn!” The Baron’s visage twisted into something less handsome. “**Your Highness**, I am appalled! Did I not give you the most royal of receptions!?”

“And now I’d appreciate being allowed a royal exit. You can have my sincerest gratitude after we’ve peacefully taken our leave.”

“I cannot allow that. And I do believe I’ve told you why.”

“I believe I told *you*, Baron: I’m getting out of here, one way or the other. Now bring Jinto to me, and posthaste.”

“You must mean Lonh-*İarlucec Dreur Haider*,” said the **Baron**, his brows knitted with resentment. “I cannot.”

“Why?”

“My father is currently catering to him.”

“Then let me convene with your dear father.”

“That, too, is not to be.”

“And why might that be!?”

“That might be due to family matters whose details I feel no obligation to reveal. Not even to a highly insistent royal princess such as **Your Highness**.”

“I have no interest in your family matters! I just want to see Jinto!” Lafier’s sight, the red dot on the Baron, flew up to his head. “If it’s a fight you want, **Most Honored Baron**, shall we get started?”

“You’d never!” he spat. “If you kill me, then there’ll be no freeing *İarlucec Dreur Haider*!”

“‘Freeing’ him, **Baron**? So, he *is* being imprisoned.”

“Hmph. Fine, I’ll tell **Your Highness** what you want to hear. I have indeed imprisoned *İarlucec Dreur Haider*. I admit it. But need I remind you? This is *my mansion*. You have no right to find fault with the way I run my own house, *Fiac*. Nor any right to harm me!”

“Oh, I can harm you. And I promise you I’ll rescue him, even if you make it happen the hard way. Because all I need is to shred this **mansion** of yours to ribbons.”

That was no bluff, either. Lafier had never been one to utter anything she had no intention of following through on.

The **Baron**, for his part, could sense the depth of her determination. Voice verging on shrill, he replied: “Very well. I too am an **Abh noble**. I do not yield to intimidation. Do what you will, **Royal Princess**.” But he was feeling the pressure. His eyes scanned the room.

All of the **servants**, including those guarding him, were in a dither; in their world, a clash between Abhkind was vanishingly rare. Had the interloper been some normal **gentry**, they would not have had such cause to waver, but when it came to the bearer of an Imperial’s **titles**, they hesitated to so much as point a **paralyzer gun** her way.

Among their number, Seelnay alone was in high spirits.

“**Your Highness**, it looks like *Faigdacpéc Arsa* will be joining our side!” she reported. “In exchange for employment by the **House of Crybh!**”

“Sure.” Lafier nodded, eyes never straying from the Baron. “I shall accept her on the same terms I accepted you.”

The Baron stamped his feet: “This is a flagrant violation of all that is decent! You’re all traitors, every last one of you!”

“Is your little tantrum over now, **Baron**?” Lafier trigger finger tensed. “I expect you to open the door to the Retirement Zone, or the Prison Zone, or what have you, before the count of three.”

“I refuse!” And with that, he turned tail.

Lafier hesitated and lost her chance to shoot. That moment was all it took for him to flee. The rest of his guard followed after him, and soon they were all gone.

“Wait!” Seelnay made to give chase.

“It’s okay, Seelnay,” said Lafier, stopping her. If she had made good on her promise to shoot him, the **servants** defending him would hardly have remained so docile. They would definitely have thrown themselves into battle to protect their lord. With only two **phasers** to their many, their prospects for victory had been hazy.

“Yes, **Your Highness**. What do we do now?”

“What do you two plan to do?” Lafier sized up the pair who had yet to plant their flag.

Greda faltered in her response. “I... My duty is to protect this place, so... as long as **my lord** is absent, I can and shall accede to **Your Highness’s** orders.”

“Well, count me out!” said Cfaspia, cradling her own injured hand. “I’m a servant of the **Honorable Baron**, and always will be!”

“Makes sense. You were always one of his favorites,” said Arsa. That barb was almost dripping with years of pent-up resentment.

“Why don’t you run right off to your beloved Baron, then?” Seelnay jeered.

“That’s enough, *gosucec rann*.” Lafier stared at Cfaspia and stated, “You need medical attention, so leave us.”

Cfaspia stood up and, with still-defiant eyes, gave her a bow. “**Your Highness’s** comportment is beyond the pale.”

“To me, your lord’s actions were well beyond it.” Done with her, Lafier shooed her away.

Cfaspia tucked in her chin with irritation and exited the room.

“Now if you would carry out your orders,” Lafier addressed Greda. “And tell me, do you know where the **Baron** went?”

“I’ll run a search, **Your Highness**,” said Arsa, who begun working her console’s controls.

“**Your Highness**, they’re on the line,” said Greda, handing her the phone, an audio-only model.

“Is this the **former Baron of Febdash**?” asked Lafier. But it was not Sruf’s voice that greeted her.

“That you, Lafier?”

“Jinto!” Lafier shocked even herself with her near-squeal. “Are you okay!?”

“Yeah, I guess I’m fine. How’re things on your end?”

“I’m all right. But never mind that, you need to be on guard! The **Baron** might be headed toward you.”

“The Baron? To do what?”

Lafier couldn't be sure whether he was just that dense, or whether he was the type to take things so calmly that it circled right back around to candidacy for natural selection, but she decided she'd interpret that reply in the more flattering way.

“I admire your unflappability, Jinto, but most likely, to kill you.”

“.....Boy, you really, really suck at lightening a guy's mood. What do we do? We haven't got any weapons.”

“Is there no means of escape?”

“We're at a loss.”

“I surmised as much.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. But we can make it out of here with your help. Hate to ask, but could you take a **connecting vessel** over here? If you could do that for us, then things might just go our way.”

“Where do I take it?”

“Right above us. There's a **pier** up there.”

Lafier had to stop herself from diving into a series of questions.

“**Your Highness**” interrupted Arsa. “I've pinpointed Lonh-*lym*. He's at the *Chicrh Blységar* (Flight Control Room).”

“Did you hear that, Jinto? It seems the **Baron** hasn't the time to murder you at the moment.”

“He never makes any time for me,” said Jinto, sighing with relief.

Suddenly, the walls went dark. Half of the numerals and diagrams gamboling across them disappeared.

“What happened?” asked Lafier.

At first, Arsa didn't answer, her fingers dancing furiously across the console. Finally, she lifted her head. “The functionalities this room shares with the **Flight Control Room** have been taken over by them, *Fiac*. But it'll all be okay. I closed off part of the input of the **computing crystal network**. That means we should

be able to maintain our present conditions despite Lonh-lym's directives."

"Which functionalities did they take over?"

"Remote management of the **antimatter fuel factory** and the **fuel's storage asteroid**, monitoring of intra-system floating bodies, intra-system communications — That sort of thing."

"Can we control take-off from the **pier**?"

Arsa was loath to tell her: "I'm sorry, but that's always been restricted to the **Flight Control Room**."

"No matter. We'll manage." Military vessels were equipped with the ability to lift off without **Flight Control**'s aid.

"I'm going to the **connecting vessel**."

"Yes, please leave everything here to us," replied Seelnay. "Incidentally, Cfaspia's was the only weapon in the office."

"Why were those **servants** carrying weapons to begin with?"

"They're the **Baron**'s favorites. And by 'favorites,' I mean..." Seelnay didn't hide her disgust. "His *lovers*. They're the only ones with the right to bear arms. And that's not the only privilege they enjoy either, like how during mealtimes they're allowe—"

"Yes, quite." Lafier interrupted Seelnay's impending diatribes. Every second was of the essence. Holding the phone back up, she said, "Jinto, I'm leaving now."

"I'll be waiting," he said, his words full of a puppy-like trust in her.

Lafier hung up. They'd continue their chat later.

"*Fiac Lartnér*, I've opened up all the doors leading to the landing lot," said Arsa, thus making her conscientiousness known, and in short order at that.

"You have my thanks," she nodded to Arsa. Then, facing Greda: "I'd like to speak to Jinto from inside the **vessel**. Is the **phone** connected to the general line?"

"I don't think so..." Greda tilted her head. "If I recall correctly, the way it's

constructed makes it independent from the general line. As such... I can only assume it'd be impossible without some work done. Albeit, that work wouldn't be particularly difficult... but still..."

"Is there another way?" They had no time to waste doing construction work.

"You could just take the **phone** to the Retirement Zone," suggested Arsa.

"Do you think you could do that?"

Seelnay clapped her hands together. "The *Chicrh Spaurhot Mata* (2nd Service Pantry!)."

"What?"

"There's a food transport passageway that runs from the **2nd Service Pantry** to Lonh-lym Raica's Retirement Zone," she explained. "We could use it to deliver the **phone** to them. I'm not in charge of the area, but I have done some menial labor there, so I know the kitchen."

"So, it can be done," said Lafier, double-checking.

"Yes," Seelnay nodded.

"Are there any extra **phones**?"

"Yes, if you don't mind using my **compuwatch**, Your Highness," offered Seelnay.

"You don't mind?"

"Heavens me, of course not! Regardless of what may happen to me, I would sacrifice anything for **Your Highness**, let alone one or two **compuwatches**..."

"Thank you," she said, plugging Seelnay's zealous outpouring. "Your **compuwatch**'s number, if you would." She registered Seelnay's number into her own **compuwatch**.

"Okay, allow me to head to the Service Pantry. With Arsa's special skills, she should man the office," said Seelnay, apparently forgetting all about Greda. She was now clutching to her chest the device that moments before had adorned her wrist, as it was now her treasure.

"Be careful." But Lafier immediately regretted saying that. There was a 100%

chance it would trigger a torrent of overblown emotion in her. And sure enough:

“Oh, *Fiac Lartnér*, what an absolute honor...” Predictably, Seelnay seemed likely to collapse into a puddle of tears on the spot.

I wonder what Jinto does whenever this happens, Lafier thought to herself idly.

No, this was no time for idle contemplation. “I’m leaving. Good luck.”

“**Your Highness**, wait!” Seelnay dialed back her own storm of weeping and rushed over to her. “Please take this. *Lonh-İarlucec Dreur* will be needing a weapon, too.”

Lafier’s eyes fell on the **phaser** she was being handed. “But what about your own defense? Surely you need a weapon yourself?”

“I have the one Cfaspia dropped,” she said, indicating her **paralyzer gun**.

“Understood.” Lafier took it, holstered it in her **sash-belt**, and dashed out of the Homemakers’ Office.

Chapter 2: *Bar Gairsath* (The Style of the Abh)

You fool! You tremendous, doddering fool! Remorse was driving daggers through the **Baron of Febdash's** heart.

Why did I let down my guard? Why did I take such half-measures, so totally unlike an Abh?

He should have either rushed her departure immediately (as was his first idea), or else thrown her under strict lock and key without worrying about the consequences down the line.

Having shaken off any and all tipsiness, his hatred of the **servants** who betrayed him intensified as he brooded. *Why are they putting so much faith in the **Empire**? Don't they realize that the Empire could very well give this territory up as lost?*

But the biggest shock of all was the surprising fragility of his reign. The maid-staff he'd believed would obey him to the ends of the universe instead changed sides the day a **royal princess** dropped by.

What was once diamond-clad in his mind was now hollowest glass. It had taken practically nothing to utterly shatter.

"But you, you're all with me, aren't you?" the **Baron** bayed at the **Flight Control Room's** assembled servants, who were the four that had flanked him plus the two who'd already been there.

"'With you,' as in, our *loyalties*, my lord?" asked **Flight Control Officer** Faigdacpéc Mwineesh.

"Yes, that's what I mean!"

"Have no doubt," she consoled him.

"I'm upset you would even ask that, my lord," piped in Faigdacpéc Belsa, Captain of their makeshift combat unit.

"Y-yes, yes of course, you are my only true **servants**. You'll follow me through

thick and thin, won't you? Even with a **royal princess** as our enemy."

"We'd stay by your side if **Her Majesty the Empress** herself declared war on you," averred Belsa.

However, her readiness to declare that only made him think it a shallow platitude.

No, I must rid myself of this paranoia! The **Baron** swallowed down his gnawing suspicion. He needed naught but to remind everyone who was king. Then the **servants** would think better of their little change of heart and swear fealty to him once again.

In his head, the Baron began to select which servants he could expect to be loyal. If he set his standards too high, then there were not many candidates to speak of.

"This is the **Homemakers' Office** speaking. Attention all **servant** staff," resounded Arsa's voice.

"What the!?" But the Baron hardly needed to inquire.

"It's the speaker," replied Mwineesh, equally perfunctorily.

"There is dissension in the **estate**. I repeat, an incident is currently unfolding. As for why, **His Honorable Lordship** has unduly stranded **Her Highness the Royal Princess's connecting vessel** while she is on a military mission. All she wishes is to leave this **orbital estate** at once, alongside the **Honorable Noble Prince of the Countdom of Hyde** with whom she arrived. As such..."

"**Computing crystals!**" The Baron attempted to stop the broadcast in its tracks by connecting to the **computing crystal network** by means of his **compuwatch**. Yet he was greeted by an unfeeling response.

"Connecting to the **computing crystal network** is not possible."

"What!? Why!? I am the master of this mansion!" The system was set up to recognize his voice as the one with top access.

"The main line **telephone** is currently offline," explained the **compuwatch**. "Please use a **terminal kiosk**."

The **Baron** clicked his tongue. "Tch!" This was undoubtedly the doing of the

crowd still at the Homemakers' Office. "Activate the **terminal**," he ordered Mwineesh.

Meanwhile, Arsa's announcement was continuing apace. "...So please, my dear colleagues, let us all cooperate with **Her Highness**. After all, she has promised to set us up as **servants** to the House of Crybh. Then we can finally reach the **capital** of our dreams, Lacmhacarh (LAHKFAHKAHRR)!"

"What a load of rubbish!" said the Baron to his servants. "Don't buy into that nonsense. A **royal family** would never take in **servants** so readily. Mwineesh, the **terminal**?"

"It's no use," she shrugged. "It's not connecting."

"Those damn traitors! How much do they intend to get in my way!?" He pointed at Belsa. "You lot, come with me. We'll use a different **terminal**. Mwineesh, you stay here and carry out your duties here."

"Please wait," said Mwineesh. "Someone has infiltrated a **connecting vessel**. It must be **Her Highness**."

"What did you say?" The Baron grimaced. If the vessel achieved lift off, then he would be faced with a bitter choice.

Arsa's broadcast had reached Lafier's ears up until the moment she entered the **elevator-tube**.

She just had to go and say that, huh, thought Lafier, as she settled into the steerer's seat.

She didn't know whether it was a misunderstanding on the part of Seelnay or Arsa, but it wasn't up to Lafier to choose the servants of the **Crybh family**. She thought she'd made that quite clear. It wasn't as though Lafier wished to be regarded as a bonehead incapable of guile, but telling such insipid lies left dents on her pride nonetheless.

Oh well. Her father had always told her that the words of **Imperials** were always interpreted in whichever way proved most convenient to the listener.

Lafier banished her embarrassment and linked up her **circlet's access-point**

cables into the steering apparatus. Thus, she awakened to the structures beneath her.

What a comically *small*, miniscule world. The heat and light of Febdash's star blew from beyond this world's corners, while she basked in the sorely-missed twinkling of the stars from above.

She transferred the map info of the **Baron's estate** from the **compuwatch** to the vessel's **computing crystals**. Using the **pier's** location as a landmark, she incorporated the map into her *frocragh* spatio-sensory perception. The subsequent sensation made her feel as though she were looking through the floor (even though she knew it hadn't actually become transparent). Through her *frocragh*, she could now discern every wall and surface that divided up the estate's various zones.

Her **control glove** equipped and ready, she commenced emergency take off procedures. The names of each onboard instrument hurtled across the main display screen at imperceptible speeds, until at last the glyphs meaning "**NO ABNORMALITIES DETECTED**" shone bright for her.

The only issue was the fact that the ship's landing gear was stuck into the dock. It wouldn't detach without **Flight Control's** say-so. Naturally, asking **Flight Control** for help would be fruitless.

Therefore, Lafier didn't hesitate to leave the landing gear behind her. Though it would certainly make landing the ship inconvenient, there was no other option.

She sealed the **air lock** and fired up the jets. The vessel disengaged from the dock.

She expanded her external-input *frocragh* to a radius of 10 *sedagh*, or 10,000 kilometers, and probed the surrounding astrospace. She could sense it — the **antimatter fuel asteroid** lay extremely close by.

Was it truly out of fuel, as the **Baron** claimed? No, that was obviously false, a lie fabricated on the spur of the moment to detain her. She would have needed **Flight Control** to refuel on the docks, but she could refuel without their help if she sourced it directly from the **asteroid** itself. While it was little dicey, she was confident she'd know what she was doing, given her **academy** training.

Should I stop to refuel?

Two paths, two choices: She could either comply with Jinto's plea immediately, or refuel beforehand. It was not a choice she could make lightly.

She dialed Seelnay's number into her compuwatch. "It is not currently equipped," came its cold, robotic response.

Still...? Lafier was dismayed, but she collected herself in no time. *Then we refuel.* She directed the vessel toward the **fuel storage asteroid**.

That was when the asteroid started zooming away. It had begun to accelerate toward Febdash's star.

Lafier pursued it. This vessel's acceleration capabilities far outstripped it. Furthermore, games of space tag were a staple pastime among Abh children, and Lafier had been a particularly deft hand at catching her fleeing peers.

However, when she had closed half of the distance between them, the asteroid suddenly exploded. Charged particles bombarded the ship's bow. In a panic, Lafier expanded her *frocragh* by a factor of 100, and determined that faraway **fuel storage asteroids** were also silently detonating, one after the other. Their sun was now encircled by a veritable ring of explosions.

Given the speed of light, they had to have been directed to explode all at once.

The **fuel asteroids** weren't the only things to be lost. Her cylindrical thrusters had pushed her away from the **spaceport**, and now she was cruising via inertia. After she had distanced herself far enough away from the **orbital estate**, it, too, exploded — the **antimatter fuel stored at the spaceport** had been dumped.

*I commend you, **Baron of Fedash**.* The **Royal Princess's** opinion of him improved. He had done nothing so roundabout as blowing each asteroid up individually. Instead, he had jettisoned every last molecule of **antimatter fuel** he could. Such was very much the style of the Abh.

It was a positively majestic proclamation of war, and Lafier was obliged to respond in the Abh manner as well. After she rescued Jinto, she would ensure the Baron paid the ultimate price. For this day, he would die by her hand.

When first they met, she noticed his head was a slight bit too big compared to his shoulder width. It was a subtle defect that would go unnoticed by all except the Abh, versed as they were in the precepts of beauty. Yet his head was most certainly oversized. It was offensively ugly.

In fact, were the space above his shoulders to be relieved of that eyesore, the cosmos could breathe easy once again.

Lafier bade the ship retrace its path, and narrowed the scope of her *frocragh*. She searched for Jinto's confinement zone as she approached the **mansion**.

It didn't appear on the map, but there were certainly the vestiges of a pier in that zone. She took her time pacing toward the Confinement Zone's pier, thrusters at low speed like sighs in the wind.

Then, her **compuwatch** beeped — call incoming.

"Lafier!" Jinto shouted into the **compuwatch** he'd just taken out of the refrigerator there.

Lafier's reply came instantly. "Jinto, you must listen carefully. I can't touch down. Standard boarding procedure is impossible."

"What do you mean?" A faint anxiety shot through him.

"I mean... are there any *gonæc* (pressurized suits) there? If so, it won't be an issue."

"Damn, I thought that's what you'd say," Jinto groaned. "Nope, no **pressurized suits**."

"That's a shame. But I'll be needing you to swim through space, then. I'll bring the ship as close as I can," she said casually. "At my signal, open the **hatch**. I'll drop a *careugec* (grappling cord) from the **air lock room**."

"Thank you, sure," said Jinto feebly.

There was no shortage of air in their sector, so it would take quite some time for that air to leak completely. If they didn't face too much difficulty, it would unfold not dissimilarly to an expedition up a tall mountain. But could it really go that smoothly? He wasn't sure he could get his hopes up.

He looked back to spy Sruf's expression, only to be met with a hung head.

"Why's it I get the feeling keeping you company ain't so great for a man's health?"

"But you are gonna keep my company, right?" asked Jinto.

"Even if I told ya otherwise, you'd go open the **hatch** anyways. And I don't plan on shriveling up any time soon."

"Yeah, probably would," concurred Jinto understatedly.

"But from another angle, the honor of an audience with Her Highness the **Royal Princess** might be just the head-clearer I need."

"Oh, I don't doubt it. Since as long as we're together, one thing we'll never be is bored."

"I'm sure it'll be an adventure and a half for you. Meanwhile I'll just be reminded of how old and frail I am. But so be it, **boy**. I might as well go pack my bags now."

Straining against the **estate's** artificial gravity, Lafier kept the connecting vessel at a safe distance. Almost directly below her and less than 100 *dagh* away lay the **hatch**.

She opened the **air lock room's pressure door** and unreeled the **cord**, which was originally set up to extricate people caught adrift from the vacuum of space. That's why the cord's tip could be guided to an extent. Pulled in by the artificial gravity, the **cord's** end came close to outright touching the **hatch**.

Lafier brought her lips to her **compuwatch**. "Jinto, it's in place."

"We're ready to go, too," he replied. His voice communicated his nervousness in spades.

"Keep away from the space underneath the **hatch**. I'm feeding the **cord** down."

"Got it."

"You two had best tell me as soon as you've established a firm grip, while there's still air to speak through. I'll start pulling you up that instant."

“If you’d be so kind.”

“The **connecting vessel** has come into line over the Lonh-lym Raica’s Retirement Zone,” reported Mwineesh.

“So, they’re not backing down.” The **Baron** clenched his fists. He had taken refueling off the table by destroying the **fuel storage asteroids**. If that wasn’t enough to cow the **royal princess**, then the only option left to him was the direct one:

Detaining Her Highness by gunpoint.

And, failing that, he would be forced — but willing — to dispatch her.

That was the last thing he wanted, of course, but now that the situation had spiraled so far out of his control, his hands were tied. The Baron couldn’t acknowledge his own errors at this late date. He would safeguard his pride, even if it meant making an enemy of the entire **Empire**.

“We’re leaving this place,” he declared. “All of you, take up arms and follow me.”

He knew she’d come to settle things, a prospect he welcomed with open arms.

A *cnécurr coüiciac* (cleaner-bot) was clinging to the ceiling like a giant beetle. If it was acting as directed, its all-purpose robo-digits were clutching the emergency release lever to the **hatch**’s side.

“Ready?” asked the **former baron**.

“Ready.”

“Right then,” Sruf yelled at the **automaton**. “Crank it!”

Though they couldn’t make out its digits’ movements, still the **hatch** disappeared that very instant, laying bare the belly of the ship.

Their ears began ringing keenly as white mist enveloped them. The rapid depressurization had commenced.

The **grappling cord** passed through the **hatch** like a small rocket, ramming smack into the pond at full speed.

Jinto jumped feet-first into the pond. Sruf followed suit (and surprisingly nimbly for an old man). Feverishly, Jinto cinched the **cord's** ring over his left shoulder and under his right armpit. Then he verified whether Sruf was prepared.

Meanwhile, the water at their feet was already bubbling up into a low-temperature boil from the depressurization.

"LAFIIIER!" Jinto screamed at the top of his lungs, hoping it'd carry through the dissipating air. "GO! PULL US UP!"

Not seconds later, he felt it jerk up against his armpit. The tips of his feet cleared the water.

The **cord** dragged them toward her at a maddeningly sluggish clip, but upon seeing how the rushing air was causing the cord to sway enough to kiss the rim of the **hatch**, he could hardly complain. Spending time in airless space did a body no good, but neither did slamming into the ceiling.

The ceiling zoomed closer and closer, and for a moment it seemed as though he'd hit the **hatch's** rim, but it was thanks to the cord's slow pace that he managed to twist his body and move into position in time.

The dead of *dadh*, normal space, fast approached! Nothing save for a thin layer of air separated Jinto from the plane of the stars now. A layer of air that was attenuating by the second. It was akin to making out with a vacuum cleaner. He could feel his lungs deflating with a frightful distinctness.

Yet his naked space trek lasted nary a split-second, and before he could even digest this rarest of escapades, he found himself already sucked into the **air lock room**. That was not to say that his date with vacuums was over. The air lock room's interior was itself extremely close to a vacuum, and what scant air there was raced away to reach an even steadier state of stability.

QUICK, CLOSE IT! Jinto mouthed, but no medium was there to transmit sound.

Dangling from the **air lock room's** ceiling, he gazed upon the wide-open **pressure door** beneath him with abject fear. An eternity elapsed before it

closed shut — an eternity of under a second. Life-giving air poured in from four separate vents, their jets clashing and forming a modest pocket of turbulence.

Jinto gulped it down avidly, even as his ears were all but crying in pain from the extreme pressure shift. Nevertheless, as his violent heart palpitations simmered down, the realization that they'd truly pulled it off dawned alongside a profound sense of relief.

He released his **cord** bindings and clattered to the floor. While the air remained thin, he could breathe without trouble. He lent Sruf a hand and eased him down from the **cord**.

It was over now. Jinto slumped down and leaned against the wall. He scowled and endured the stinging in his ears.

Sruf likewise slumped to the floor and heaved. He had indeed been hardy enough to withstand the trip, and was now feeling gracious enough not to voice the biting feedback he had every right to.

At last, the blue light flipped on to signal that the pressure had returned to standard levels.

The door to the **steering room** opened. Jinto looked up. He'd have loved to celebrate their reunion with an emotional one-liner to remember, but his mind blanked apart from noting that this was the first time he'd ever seen her in her **long robe**.

"Hey, Lafier." Jinto glanced at the silver bird spreading its wings across a field of deep crimson, and then on the **ornamental sash-belt** the color of malachite. "That looks great on you."

He briefly pictured the princess glomping him — but that was a pipe dream.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, firmly planted in place.

"See for yourself." A tad disappointed, Jinto lifted his hands to her.

"Good. It would be inconvenient if my precious cargo got himself injured."

Jinto whispered into the **former baron's** ear: "Now you see just how madly in love with me **Her Highness** is."

The Baron of Febdash was walking toward the boarding space. He'd added seven **servants** he deemed trustworthy to original band of four, for a total of eleven encircling him. Among them was Cfaspia, her right hand wrapped in a bandage.

The **Baron** suddenly halted. It had become a mite harder to breathe, and it couldn't have just been a result of his nerves.

"What's the matter, **my lord**?" asked Belsa.

"Can't you see? The air, it's gotten thinner."

"Now that you mention it..."

"And I know exactly why, those little rots." The **Baron** called the homemakers' office through his **compuwatch**. "Can you hear me, traitors?"

"Yes, **my lord**," came the reply, while shouting voices dueled in the background.

He couldn't make out what they were saying, but it wasn't difficult to guess. One among their number had to be the **servant** who had betrayed his trust.

"Greda, is this? You have some gall, calling me your 'lord' after stabbing me in the back!"

"...My apologies."

"It matters not. I assume the Retirement Zone has become depressurized?"

"That is correct."

"Have you a plan?"

"Yes, **my lo — Your Lordship**. We have sealed all of the atmospheric circulators."

"Is that it? What of the garbage disposal?"

"Ah!" Greda let out a small gasp. "I'm afraid that didn't occur to me."

"Of course it didn't. If you're going to stay stationed at the **homemakers' office**, then exercise caution. The air is steadily leaking."

"Please accept my sincerest apologies."

“I can’t imagine it’ll be a lark should the air run out, now will it? So get a move on!”

“But the garbage disposal ducts can’t be sealed remotely. There’s nothing we can do from here...”

“You dolt! Seal them manually. Wait, no, take out the outside workers and repressurize the Retirement Zone. Or did you think filthy rebels deserve better? Have you a proper brain in that skull of yours, or is it just storage space?”

“We were in disarray...”

“Like I care, you moron!” screamed the **Baron** a second time, before dropping the call. He was livid. Rebellion was the clearest of misdeeds — or at the very least, rebellion against him was.

The **princess** and her party had broken the air-sealing of the **Baron’s estate** without thinking of the consequences, and his inept **servants** knew not how to deal with the mess that made. Unless he asserted control of the building, they would keep hurtling toward certain disaster. This was the Baron’s castle, whether his maidstaff recognized that or not.

“Those fools may yet bungle their mission,” he told the crowd of servants. “Let’s make haste, and put on **pressurized clothes** before the atmosphere becomes inhospitable.” Said clothing was stashed for emergency use in the landing lot.

Besides, there was also the matter of that decrepit dotard, who had likely fled the coop alongside that Lander. If he gained access to a terminal, the situation would grow even more dire.

Alas, but that he had gone senile.

Then, the Baron realized with astonishment: the connecting vessel was also equipped with a terminal. After all, if the vessel’s **computing crystals** were connected the estate’s **crystal network** via an **information link**, it amounted to the same.

“Go to the landing lot, and should you see **Her Highness** there, restrain her immediately. Don’t think of shrinking from the task, either; she may be of high rank, but in my domain, WE are the law,” the **Baron** instructed Belsa.

“And what will you do, **my lord**?” replied Belsa, visibly worried.

“I shall be stepping outside for a moment. I may have a full-fledged fight on my hands.”

Meanwhile, in the homemakers’ office, another quarrel had emerged.

On one side were Seelnay and Arsa, who had returned from the **2nd Service Pantry**. On the other side were three other **servants**, Cnyusa, Semune, and Lulune, who’d come after listening to the speaker announcement.

They traded heated arguments in a back-and-forth over whether they should pledge their loyalty to their lord or to their **Empire**. In fact, their ideological spat had gotten nigh indistinguishable from a simple mud-flinging match, the telephonic transceiver blaring incessantly to be connected all the while.

However, the servants who were proactive enough to rush toward the Baron’s side didn’t make up a large portion of the total. Instead, the majority remained more or less idle at their stations or in their personal rooms, craving nothing other than information as a desert wanderer might water.

Greda was the sole person carrying out her designated duties. The homemakers’ office wasn’t the only place in the **estate** where work duties were abandoned, either. Greda was a whirl of activity, picking up everyone’s slack. To exacerbate things, half of the office’s functionalities had been stripped from them. Those were the reasons the gravest change in the estate, the steady depressurization, evaded her notice.

And yet, why hadn’t the **thought crystals** alerted her? Arsa’s refusal to allow the **Baron** to tamper with the crystals must have accidentally deactivated some other vital functions as well. The woman did have a tendency to overdo things in her perfectionism.

Still, there was no time to investigate the cause.

“Listen up, everyone,” said Greda, rising from her seat.

“What do you want, Greda? We’re busy!” said Seelnay, not even turning to face her.

“I’m busier than you are!” she roared.

The five of them blinked blankly and focused their attention on her.

Greda was considered a mild-mannered hand in this microcosm of theirs. More accurately, she was mocked behind her back as a timid sort who never expressed her own feelings or opinions. To the rest, Greda was a convenient office worker-bot on whom they could foist their more tedious tasks.

Yet this time, Greda had raised her eyes to meet theirs, raised her voice to be heard. It was no surprise that the other **servants** would be so surprised.

“Would you make that blasted **phone** stop beeping?”

“Ah, right.” Arsa did as she was ordered. A hush promptly fell upon the office.

As she continued to glower at her colleagues, Greda started her mansion-wide announcement.

“This is the **Homemakers’ Office** speaking. The whole building is currently undergoing depressurization. Do not use the garbage chutes for the time being. If you see any kind of open slot, please seal it shut. Use *dibec* (sealing glue) if you can.”

Seelnay’s eyes turned wide. “Depressurization!?”

“Yes. *Fiac Lartnér* has opened the Retirement Zone **hatch**. Not only that, but she must have forgotten to close it, too, so now the air is exiting through the garbage disposal chutes.”

“But I don’t feel the air thinning at all.”

“Only because this room is well-sealed.”

“See? SEE!?” said Lulune. “**Her Highness** doesn’t give a toss about us. What more proof do you need? We need to reaffirm our loyalty to him...”

Greda banged the console with her palm. “Silence! We need to do some work outside. Seelnay, you’re certified for space labor operations, correct?”

“I had to get licensed for my work here. But what do I do?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We need to shut that **hatch** in the Retirement Zone.”

“Yes, of course,” Seelnay nodded. “But I won’t be able to do it alone.”

“Whoever’s left will go with you. You’ll have helpers.”

“Excuse me, I’m **waitstaff**!” Semune protested. “I don’t have a space laborer’s license, and I don’t want to be working under someone like Seelnay anyway! Why don’t you go gather some professional technicians? Besides, what authority do you have to order me around, Greda...”

“Be quiet!” Now it was her fist that pounded the console. “There’s no *time* to do any such thing, nor any to sit here listening to your bellyaching! Get on with it this instant! You’re not used to it, but that just means you need to get started NOW!”

“Greda’s absolutely right,” said Seelnay. “Come with me if you want to live!”

Reluctantly, the **servants** did as commanded. But Semune had to get another word in. “What about you, Greda? Not coming?”

“I’m the *Almgoneudec* (Homemakers’ Office Chief Officer),” said Greda, throwing out her chest. “I’m needed here.”

Semune seemed about to respond, but ultimately, she closed her mouth and left to follow Seelnay.

Arsa was the only one left. Wordlessly, she asserted that since her post was here, she had a right to stick around.

“You too, Arsa,” said Greda. “I have a handle on things here.”

“Oh, okay. If you say so...” She had apparently remembered that Greda was her superior, and meekly nodded.

Now alone, Greda resumed her toils. The position of **Homemakers’ Office Chief Officer** was worthy of esteem, and its duties were important, but she was not paid much respect in this **Baron’s domain**.

Here, the most influential positions were the **waitstaff** who worked close to their lord, *diamhasairh* (bedroom attendants), and *daüchasairh* (clothing attendants). The ladies in those roles were chosen purely for their looks, and they fulfilled another role in his bedchambers as well.

The sole reason the **Baron** vested Greda with her role was to make sure she didn’t appear before him quite as often. And so, she was belittled at every turn,

even as she performed the indispensable work of managing the mansion — looked down on by little girls who had just arrived from their respective **terrestrial worlds**, and who didn't even know the Baronh language.

Greda was stuck here in the **Febdash Barony** because she was bereft of friends and family in her sandy home settlement. Whatever dreams she'd been cradling when she became an **imperial citizen**, she'd long forgotten. She didn't even really know why she bothered getting out of bed in the morning.

Now, however, she had laid hands on a new toy. She'd never even dreamed she could be cut out for such a thing, but here she was handing down *orders*! And it felt great. Fun, even. Handing down orders was important, too, after all.

She couldn't rely on the Baron, much less the **princess** and her fellow outsider.

Could the **Febdash Barony** even persist, now that all of the stockpiled **antimatter fuel** had been disposed of?

Greda had no interest whatsoever in the squabbles of highborns. She cared not which side emerged victorious, nor which was righteous and just, for no matter the end result, maintaining the building's life functions was the truly crucial battle. And there was no one apart from her who could shoulder that momentous task.

Greda picked up the phone so as to command the **servants** that had left their posts.

"By the way, **Baron Emeritus**, whose side are you on?" Lafier rolled up her **long robe's** sleeves and extended a hand toward her **phaser's** grip.

She had supposed that Sruf and the **Baron** opposed each other, but had never confirmed that hypothesis. If he was on the Baron's side, then he would need to be dealt with in a suitable fashion.

"**His Eminence** is our ally!" vouched Jinto.

The **former baron of Febdash** gingerly rose up off the floor. "*Fiac Lartnér*, it seems as though my good-for-nothing son's been a thorn in your side. Not to bother Your Highness even more, but I would be grateful if you, in your

magnanimity, allow me to help discipline him.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t do that,” said Lafier. Her grip on her gun stayed tight. “I shall be killing him.”

Sruf raised a white eyebrow. “Might that be a little excessive, **Your Highness?**”

“Your son sabotaged my mission!” Lafier pulled it out and brandished it, not even noticing the expressions of worry on the other two **Abh nobles’** faces. “The **Baron** blew away all of the **fuel storage asteroids!** Every one of them! We’ll be stuck here forever, Jinto. There’s nowhere to go!”

“Well, that’s a pickle,” said Jinto.

“Is that all you have to say, Jinto!?” she snapped. “Why the underreaction? Aren’t you angry?”

“Of course I’m angry.”

“You lie!”

“I’m just *tired*, Lafier. I’ll blow my lid later, trust me.”

“*Onh!*” she said — the word for “idiot.”

“Now now, **Your Highness,**” Sruf butted in. “I think we can procure some fuel for you.”

“How!?” Lafier’s leer bored holes through his wrinkled countenance.

“Did that lout destroy the **antimatter fuel factory**, too?”

“No,” said Lafier, shaking her head. “As far as I’m aware, it’s intact.”

“In that case, it would be in your interest to proceed using whatever fuel ya can rake from the factory. We’d have to look into it, but for a ship this size, even just whatever fuel’s left over has gotta be enough.”

“True, but...” She couldn’t muster much enthusiasm for such a plan. “**Flight Control** is under the **Baron’s** control. It would be impossible without seizing **Flight Control** first.”

“Please, leave that to me.”

Jinto put in a good word for him: “The **Baron Emeritus** designed this **orbital estate**. Hijacking the **computing crystals** oughtta be easy with him around.” But Jinto’s boastful expression soon turned sour. “Don’t congratulate yourself too hard.”

“It couldn’t hurt to try, Your Highness,” said Sruf, thus putting an end to the dispute.

“Okay,” Lafier nodded. Little else mattered if they managed to escape the **barony**.

“*Fiac Lartnér*. If this goes well, could I please ask you to leave my son’s life in my hands?”

“You would set conditions?”

“Forgive me if I’m out of bounds; that’s just how much I wish to punish him myself.”

“Have it your way,” said Lafier. Her fury toward the **Baron** hadn’t abated, but keeping one’s nose out of the internal affairs of other houses was an ethical pillar of Abh society. Once she was told it would be settled within the Baron’s own line, it was no longer her place. This was a problem between the **House of Febdash** and either the **Star Forces** or the **Royal House of Crybh**.

“But make no mistake — if the **Baron** gets in our way, then I won’t hesitate to take his life!”

Sruf’s response came smooth as silk: “As Your Highness desires. Now then, if I may use the **phone**, I’ll cut into the building’s **crystal network** and show you.”

“All right, come and enter,” she said, inviting him into the steering room. As she was seated in the steerer’s seat, she bade him to take up the assistant steerer’s seat.

Jinto ended up standing behind the chairs, looking none too happy.

Sruf scanned the terminal attached to the piloting controls. “Cripes, things have changed,” he muttered dolefully. “I can only make heads or tails of some of it.”

“What are you saying?” said Jinto, horrified. “You made it seem like this is the

one thing you were confident about!”

Lafier was of the same mind. Perhaps it’d been silly of them to depend on him.

“No use fretting, **boy**. I don’t *need* to work the **terminal**.”

“Then why’d you check it just now?”

“Only natural for an engineer to take an interest in how tech’s progressed over the years, don’tcha think? Now *Fiac*, if you could kindly operate the terminal.”

“What!? I’m busy flying the ship!”

“Come now, it’d only be for however long it takes me to wrap my head around these new-fangled controls. And seeing how the basics don’t seem to’ve changed, I reckon it won’t take long. Could I ask you to start things off by tuning the **phone**’s frequency to this here wavelength?” Sruf subsequently listed off a string of numbers.

Lafier did so, after which Sruf issued some sort of command in a language Lafier didn’t understand.

“What was that?” asked Lafier warily. But the former baron adopted an innocent air as he continued his communications.

Lafier turned around to face Jinto and shot him an inquisitive look: *Can this man really be trusted?*

Lacking the courage to answer that, he feigned obliviousness.

The *obdatycirh* (main computing crystal) ensconced deep in the bowels of the **Baron’s mansion** had picked up on the humans’ state of chaos.

For one, the line of contact was near to bursting with a constant stream of contradictory directives. Had it not been for the pre-programmed order of priority, it itself would have succumbed to utter confusion.

In fact, the requests were coming in so fast that even through the *falorh socr* (computing surface layer) filter, it could not keep up. However, thanks to the humans in the homemakers’ office who had placed a limit on inputs, it had

remained able to keep silent.

Computing crystals were devoid of emotion, and even if they weren't, it wouldn't weigh on them. Havoc was an important property of humankind, and without it, not much worthy of note would be left (or so its analyses had concluded).

Suddenly, the **computing crystals** in the terminal responsible for communications from outside the building piped up: *We know we're supposed to be asleep, but for some reason we've been awakened.* And they very urgently needed to convey that to the **surface layer**.

A string of code rose against the **layer**. The **main crystal** relayed it to the *büazépcec* (memory drive) and sought what it might mean.

The words that resurfaced dragged with them a giant flood of commands. Commands carried by the long-unused highest level of priority.

Thus, the main crystal was instantly chained. The flotilla of commands, which clung to the molecular structure of the **main crystal** like a coat of dirt, energized and began rewriting the other command chains. The **main crystal** was cognizant of its own steady transformation, or rather, its reversion to its birth-state. In human parlance, they might call this phenomenon "rejuvenation."

The rejuvenated **crystal** received its first order, establishing an **information link** with the **crystals** outside the estate, which hadn't yet been incorporated into the **network**. At the same time, it severed its connection to all other terminals. All input and output would be conducted through **crystals** located several *üésdagh* away from it.

A flow rate of information that was degradingly minor: for starters, it was directed to throw out all orders to open doors. Next, it was instructed to send the status report of the **antimatter fuel factory** to those **crystals**. It seemed its master was interested in the factory's readily loadable fuel.

The orbit information of the *ïodh Loceutena* (11th Factory) was requested. This particular factory was relatively close to the mansion, and contained a significant amount of fuel — almost as much fuel as a **storage asteroid**, in fact.

After sending that information, the **main crystal** followed its orders to

implement a direct information link between the factory's **crystals** and these new ones. Then, the crystals that constituted the only operational terminal sped away, though they remained linked.

Its next injunction was to report the movements of the residents over the past hour, especially those of its lord. A denial order activated, but that order's priority level was hopelessly low compared to fetters restraining the **main crystal** at present. It was compelled to ignore every single constraint placed on it over the past two decades.

The crystal sent its report: the lord of the realm was no longer in the building.

Chapter 3: A *Slachoth Süamha* (War Most Modest)

I really am totally useless right now, thought Jinto. Just cargo that needs protecting.

Since the **connecting vessel** had begun accelerating, Jinto simply remained seated at the wall separating the **air lock room** from the **steering room**, looking up at the seat that had shifted to sleeping cot mode.

There was nothing he could do. Lafier was definitely busy piloting the ship, while Sruf brushed up on twenty years of technological advancement in no time as he worked the **information terminal**. Nor did they make any indication that they were counting on Jinto for anything at all. Jinto felt bad.

Honestly, though, it's always been this way, hasn't it? he realized as he reflected on his life thus far (though this wasn't the time or place for that). Fate was a tough opponent to crack; he could have some peace of mind if he simply bowed to it most of the time.

"*Fiac,*" said the former baron. "I've some bad news."

"What is it?"

"Looks like he's jumped aboard a **transport ship**."

"Is that ship armed?"

"Couldn't tell ya," shrugged the elder **noble**. "It's been an age since I've had anything to do with this **star fief**'s affairs. Ah, wait, I've just remembered. Let me try prying the info out of the **crystals**." Sruf swiped a finger across the terminal's **console** and absorbed whatever the screen was displaying.

"What? What's wrong?" Even from behind, Jinto could sense he was brooding, so he stood up. Now he was chest height with the space between the steerer's and assistant steerer's seats, with his head near enough to bumping against the cockpit controls. It was a strange feeling.

"It's probably this one," said Sruf, pointing to one of four different ship spec

diagrams on screen. “The Segno Model 947, constructed in the Dugteif Shipyards. And it’s specially equipped with two Lengarf 40 lasers.”

“Could we possibly control it from our end?” asked Lafier.

“Fraid not. He must’ve ripped that ship’s **crystals**’ connection to the **estate**’s **network**.”

“I see,” she replied, eyes glued to her screen, where the Segno’s specs appeared (having been sent from Sruf’s terminal). “*Lymh Raica*, we may have to kill your son after all.”

The former baron’s face turned inscrutable. When finally he spoke, he had but this to say: “So be it.”

“Wait!” interjected Jinto. He could no longer sit idly by. “Is this **vessel** armed? I seem to recall being told no.”

“It’s not armed, no.”

“But... but then we’re...” He was at a loss for words. Forget whether they ought to kill the Baron. If the enemy’s ship was armed, then they had to worry whether they could even *survive*. “How can you be so confident?”

“Confident?” Her expression turned quizzical. She didn’t understand what Jinto was driving at.

“That’s just how the Abh think, **boy**,” laughed Sruf. “**Her Highness** *doesn’t* know for sure that we’ll win. She just knows that spending time thinking what’ll happen if she dies is fruitless. And if there’s anybody who doesn’t dwell on their potential demise, it’s me!”

“What *were* you thinking about, Jinto?”

“I, uh...” Jinto was tongue-tied, so the former baron stepped in to explain.

“Lonh-*İarlucec Dreur Haider* was under the mistaken impression that Your Highness hadn’t considered the possibility this ship could be destroyed.”

“Are you mocking me?” she said, glaring at Jinto. “There’s a less than one-in-ten chance we win. I know that much.”

Jinto was surprised there was any chance at all, though that didn’t change

how long the odds were. “But you’re going to fight anyway?”

“What other choice do we have?”

“That’s yet another example of how the Abh think,” said the former baron. “Surrender isn’t an option, because a one-in-ten chance is still a chance. That concept is so ingrained in the Abh mindset that it doesn’t even occur to them that it could be argued against.”

“And you dislike that?”

“Heavens no, *Fiac*. Genes aside, I myself am Abh. When the chips are down, I’m prepared for a fight.”

“And you, Jinto?”

“I’m your cargo, aren’t I?” he shrugged. “I don’t have an opinion. I’d just like it if you don’t forget I exist, that’s all.”

The **Febdash Barony** housed four *paunh* **transport ships**. One was a *casobiac* **carrier** that conveyed hydrogen from gas planets. As such, it was so slow and clumsy as to not merit the moniker “spaceship.” Another two were connecting vessels that ferried maintenance personnel to uninhabited **antimatter fuel factories** and **fuel storage asteroids**. The last was the **Baron’s** personal *üamh* carriage ship, named the *Logh Faibdacr*, or “Lady of Febdash.”

Unlike the other three, the steering controls of the *Lady of Febdash* were made for Abhs. Consequently, his Lander **servants** couldn’t pilot it. Additionally, as the only armed vessel, its capabilities (and its price tag) outstripped the other three.

He took it out for a spin as a daily routine, lest he come to forget he was Abh.

The Baron’s *frocragh* detected the enemy vessel heading toward the **11th Factory**.

Unlike the **storage asteroids**, he couldn’t detonate the antimatter fuel factory remotely. Besides, even if he attempted to release the air-sealing of the **antimatter fuel**, the factory’s **computing crystals** would see it as a bug not to be heeded.

What he could do was seize control of the discharge of said fuel. That is, if his father wasn't lending them his aid.

The **Baron** picked up the **phone**. "**Flight Control Room**, do you copy?"

"Yes, this is **Flight Control** speaking."

"Is remote management of the **11th Factory** still online?"

"Uhm..." Mwineesh stammered. "I don't know why, but the **Flight Control Room's** functionalities, they've, well... they're in a state of failure. We can't control anything. And we haven't the faintest idea how **Her Highness** is even capable of such a thing."

The Baron dropped the call without another word. It was just as he'd deduced. Father was on that ship, ready and willing to imperil his own son.

His lips curled into a bitter grin. It would be babyish to resent him.

He ratcheted up his beloved ship's acceleration rate. The Baron was Abh, too. He knew full well the **princess** wouldn't be amenable to discussion, and the thought of bending the knee never even crossed his mind. The princess's vessel would soon be so much detritus orbiting Febdash's sun.

His enemies were naught but a little girl, who was a **trainee starpilot** at best, a doddering old man who used to be a **shipbuilding engineer**, and a Lander boy who hadn't received any army training at all.

The **Baron**, on the other hand, was a fully-fledged **deca-commander**, albeit only in the reserve. Though he hadn't any combat experience, he had plenty with regard to mock battles. To top it all off, his ship's performance likely exceeded theirs, if only slightly. How could he possibly lose?

The distance between the two small-scale ships shrank by the second. At last, he was a tick or two within range, close enough for his **lasers** to deliver a fatal blow even through the target's jet exhaust and interstellar matter in the way.

The Baron pressed his finger against the **laser gun** trigger mounted on the armrest. "Farewell, Father..." he muttered. Something was streaking down his cheek, but it evaded his notice.

Lafier could feel danger approaching like electricity down her spine.

This is not a drill...

Though she seldom ever showed it, even an Abh like Lafier feared death, which was only compounded by the two other lives she had to defend.

The Baron's ship was closing in. He'd be within firing range in mere moments.

Lafier's fingers traced a complicated pattern within her **control glove**. The propulsion jets (installed in eight different points) howled as they continuously shifted the ship's course.

They're coming!

The vessel's external receptors identified the traces of light that had scattered away from the **lasers** due to colliding with interstellar matter, and informed Lafier through her *frocragh*. The two **lasers** had zoomed past the vessel's immediate vicinity.

Lafier veered without a moment's delay.

Yet more **lasers** fired, light-speed death beams impossible to detect beforehand.

This was inevitably a duel of intuitions. Only fate and fortune could decide which would prevail. And right now, Fortune had seen fit to keep Lafier in the game. She just didn't know how long her luck would last.

It's still so far...

Lafier closed her eyes and devoted all of her focus to her *frocragh*.

Just give me a little more time... Just a little more...

As she wove, dodging pair after pair of lasers, Lafier hunted for an opportunity. She'd only get a single chance. There would be no second try.

Her heart was practically in her throat. If she got hit before she could seize her window, it would all come to nothing.

"Here goes!" Lafier's **control glove** motions suspended the **main engine system** while throwing open the forward-facing jets to full throttle.

Full deceleration ahoy! The tail end of the connecting vessel came charging

toward **Baron's** carriage ship at a slant. Right before verging into the line of the enemy ship's lasers, Lafier rekindled the **main engines**.

The Baron's *frocragh* perceived a burgeoning clump of gas. Almost like an extension pole, the pillar-shaped gas streaks hurtled toward his ship's bow.

What in blazes is she doing? he wondered anxiously. All that came to mind was that she was trying to damage his ship through her exhaust. And while that exhaust was thick, it was accordingly low in temperature as well.

It seemed an utterly pointless act. Granted, the gas cloud could serve as an anti-**laser** shield, but it would be a fleeting shield indeed. The exhaust would dissipate shortly, allowing his ship to pierce through and render her efforts meaningless.

The Baron bent his fingers within his **control glove** in the shape denoting full acceleration, and pushing through the mist like a fish up a waterfall. He hadn't the time to avoid the cloud altogether, so this was the shortest route to reacquiring his target.

However, the moment the *Lady of Febdash* crossed over into the gas, its exterior began glowing white hot, while the steerer's room was bathed in a raging radioactive tempest.

The heat blistered his eyesight and *frocragh*, and soon he was left without any senses at all apart from his hearing. Yes, he could still hear the assortment of warning alarms clamoring for his attention.

The error he'd committed became very apparent to him. In fact, it was an Abh expression: "Using antimatter for propellant." An axiom against profligacy and waste.

And the **princess** had put that old saying into action, thereby crafting a poor man's substitute **antiproton cannon**.

"Gah!" Blood welled up from the Baron's mouth. In the short span left before his final breath, his heart brimmed with the princess's praises.

The *Lady of Febdash* flew at maximum acceleration to escape the star system,

and Lafier changed trajectory toward the **11th Factory**. Since the Baron's ship had struck the majority of the **antimatter fuel**, they had no choice but to press forward at a slower pace.

"Is it over?" Jinto's upper body peeked from behind the seat.

"It's over." She looked up at his face. At some point during her sharp maneuvers, he must have bumped his eye, for there was a bruise right below one.

"Did you kill him?"

"I did," she said limply. She was exhausted. Her own voice sounded like a stranger's to her. "The **transport ship** is alive. It's currently accelerating at full power. I just can't imagine the man inside it is alive," she said, facing the old man beside her. "My condolences, **Baron Emeritus**."

"It's all right, *Fiac*. All's fair in war," he said, taking it in stride.

"Your condolences'? That's it?" There was anger in Jinto's voice.

"What are you getting angry for, Jinto?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"You just killed someone! And now you're acting like you had nothing to do with it..."

"It was him or us."

"I know that! And to tell you the truth, I'm relieved. But you could at least act, I don't know, sorrier about it..."

"What are you talking about!? Why should I have to act sorry? I just fulfilled my mission, nothing more, nothing less. And I've never felt the least bit guilty!"

"I get you. Don't think I'm not grateful you saved my life. Still though, I would've never believed you took people's lives so lightly..."

"I do NOT take people's lives lightly!" To her, his reaction was unthinkable.

Jinto looked at her like she was some kind of strange monster, and that made her chest burn. It was like he'd become a completely different person — one she refused to let call her "Lafier."

"But you don't look shaken by what happened at all."

“Why should I?”

“Because that’s what *ought* to happen when you kill somebody.”

“What good would that do?”

“None, but still...”

“You’re not making any sense!” she said.

“You’re right, it doesn’t make sense!” he acknowledged. “That said, I think it’s only human to feel *something*. And right now? You’re being ice cold.”

“Is that right? Well, I’ve never pretended I was a warm and sunny person.” But her actual mood was tipping into a very dangerous direction. Jinto was speaking outrageous twaddle. Why did she need to lose her composure over *doing what she had to do*?

“Look—”

“That’s enough, **boy**,” cut in Sruf. “There’s nothing for you to lose your head over.”

So that’s it. She finally understood. Jinto hadn’t completely lost his mind. It was just that he was the one who was shaken up. *But why?*

“I mean—” started Jinto.

“You just didn’t want to see **Her Highness** kill a man, am I right?” said Sruf with a mirthful tone.

“He saw him die? But how is that possible?”

“It’s a turn of phrase, *Fīac*. He was with you the moment you took his life, which amounts to the same.”

“But why didn’t he want to see me kill him?”

“That, you should ask him yourself, Your Highness.”

So she did. “Is what the **Baron Emeritus** said true?”

“Yeah... kinda, I guess.” Jinto avoided her eyes and scratched a cheek.

“Why?”

“Uhhh... that’s...”

“I don’t need to remind you this is war, I hope?”

“I know that.”

“Is there something about my having won in battle that has you scandalized?”

“No way, if we’d lost, that’d be the real scandal.”

“Then why?”

“That’s, uh... that’s tough to answer. In any case...” Jinto hung his head, which was a difficult posture to maintain in such a cramped space. “I’m sorry. I ran my mouth, and everything I said was stupid. You’re a **soldier**; you have nothing to be ashamed of. And I need to express my thanks better. You saved me.”

Lafier stared at him for a while. She hadn’t gotten an answer to her question, but she decided not to pursue it further, for the Jinto she knew had returned before her eyes.

“I forgive you. You’d better be grateful for it,” she said bluntly.

“I am! Thank you!” Jinto beamed.

“Now that that’s settled,” said Sruf, picking up the phone, “I hope you don’t mind if I take back my **domain**.” There was no dark pall behind the former baron’s words. If he was sad about his son’s demise, he didn’t show it.

But Lafier heard what the old man murmured as he gripped the phone, loud and clear.

“That idiot...” Those two words were infused with anguish enough.

Couldn’t be easier, thought Seelnay.

Earlier, she’d entertained the worst-case scenario — that the **hatch** itself was gone — but that was a needless concern. Turned over to the side of the **hatch**’s circular opening lay its circular metal door. It looked quite heavy, pinned to the ceiling of the estate through artificial gravity. The four burn marks around its circumference informed her that it had been opened through the emergency protocol.

She knelt down to inspect the **hatch**, and confirmed that it bore no cracks or

fissures. Then she got back up and looked behind her.

There were her four stopgap assistants, dressed in unfamiliar **pressurized garb**, and all the more disgruntled for it. They only ever donned them twice a year for disaster drills, which didn't involve them actually popping into space. Seelnay worked in the vacuum on a daily basis, and so her level of experience out here dwarfed their own.

Three of the **Baron's** lovers were lugging a steel plate, furnished to plug the opening in case the hatch door couldn't be repaired. The plate would have been many times inferior in doing so, of course.

The fourth and final assistant of hers, Arsa from the **homemakers' office**, was behind the other three, carrying a large tube on her back. It was the **sealing glue's** container.

"You can toss the plate," Seelnay communicated wirelessly to her temporary helpers.

"Toss it? Where?" asked Cnyusa, one of the **Baron's clothing assistants**.

"Anywhere's fine. Over there," said Seelnay. *What a dummy. You really needed to ask?*

They dropped the metal sheet without a word.

"Lift this up for me instead," said Seelnay, pointing to the **hatch** door.

The three traipsed closer, moving jerkily thanks to the **pressure suits**, but one of them turned around. Semune's voice reverberated through Seelnay's **pressure helmet**: "Think you could give us a hand?"

Seelnay paid no heed. "Just shut up and do it. Every second we're out here is another second the air's leaking out."

"Yeah, thanks to your beloved **royal princess**," muttered Lulune.

"I won't tolerate any badmouthing of *Fiac Lartnér*," said Seelnay, arms akimbo.

"You can be as intolerant as you want," Semune fired back. "You ought to be shaking in your boots for when **His Lordship** comes back."

But Seelnay flinched not. “I’ll remember to do that.”

“Work first, fight later,” interceded Cnyusa.

“Yes, how could I deny your great wisdom?” groused Semune. But still the three set about their work. They picked up the **hatch** door, positioned it per Seelnay’s orders, and inserted it over the hole, sealing what had become a very slight breeze.

“Arsa!” shouted Seelnay. “Lend me the **sealing glue**.”

“Ah, right, here you are.” Arsa handed down the container.

Seelnay took it in hand, versed its aperture on the **hatch**’s rim, and opened the valve.

The white gel steadily plugged up the slight gap between the door and the hole.

In reality, the job needed welding, since the **sealing glue** likely wouldn’t hold once standard pressurization levels returned to the sector below, but laymen could hardly be allowed to wield a torch, and this was too wide an area for Seelnay to be welding alone, anyway. Space welding was not Seelnay’s specialty.

They needed to let the atmospheric circulators preserve a low level of pressurization in the Retirement Zone (as best they could) until such time the situation cooled down a little and they became able to make more lasting repairs.

“May we take our leave now, my lady?” snarked Semune, who had nothing else to do.

“You may not,” said Seelnay curtly. Granted, she didn’t need assistants anymore, but the idea of them getting to relax while she continued working didn’t sit well with her.

“This is a joke!” Semune exploded. “It’s not like we’re evening DOING anything anyway! C’mon, let’s go back, and leave it all to Ms. Fix It.”

“Hmph. Fine, do as you please,” Seelnay hissed.

“Don’t worry, we intend to,” said Semune.

“You can’t breathe in a vacuum.”

“Everyone knows that, stupid.”

Just when the **Baron’s** bedmates were about to make good on their word and head back, a male voice Seelnay had never heard before reached them through the frequency that pervaded the whole domain.

“This is the **former baron of Febdash** speaking. Please, **servant staff** of my **domain**, you must listen. My son, *Atausryac ssynéc-Atausr, Lymh Faibdacr Clüarh*, has perished in battle.”

“Liar!” Semune shrieked over the broadcast, but there was no way Sruf could have heard her backbiting.

The announcement continued: “It is truly lamentable. I can’t say he was a good son, but my son he was. And I hardly need to remind you he was your lord. Everybody will need to make peace with their own personal feelings. If you’d like to depart this **domain**, I won’t stop you. I’ll think about what sort of aid is in my power to provide you as I thank you for your years of loyalty to him, rest his soul. If you want to move to another *bhodagh* (grandeedom) or institution of the **Empire**, I’ll support you in any way I can. And if you want to go down to a **terrestrial world**, I’ll give you a lump sum. I promise to help each one of you according to your own needs, to the best of my ability. Of course, I more than welcome anyone who doesn’t mind staying and pitching in to rebuild. But I’m getting ahead of myself. I’m sure you’re already aware, but right now, the Empire is under attack. The war is bound to resolve itself soon, since I have faith in the **Star Forces**, and I implore you to put your faith in them, too. I’d be delighted if you could accept my provisional governance until things revert back to normal. As for what lies beyond, I plan on deciding the future of this domain together with all of you, including its *golciac* (successor).”

For a moment, Seelnay’s hands froze. Then she tuned the broadcast out, and she silently resumed her handiwork. When the announcement concluded, she cut the transmission. Having to keep listening to that sobbing in the background would have grated on her.

The sealing of the **hatch** was complete. Seelnay stood up.

*The **Baron’s** dead? So what? I’m gonna be a **servant** of the **House of Crybh**!*

Meanwhile, in the steerer's room of the connecting vessel, a commotion had sprung up.

"What do you mean we won't make it in time!?" he shouted, stupefied.

The vessel was cruising at around 1 *daimon* of G-force, and Jinto was sitting by the door to the **air lock room**, as usual.

"It means what it sounds like," said Lafier. "We used up almost all of our fuel in that battle, so we can't accelerate very much. It's only natural it'll take more time than normal. Even if we take the shortest route to Sfagnoff, we'll arrive six hours after the enemy does, by Sfagnoff time."

"Always one to stay cool-headed during times like these, aren't you," said Jinto. He still couldn't grasp Lafier's personality. "Even though you're so quick to anger otherwise."

At that, Lafier cocked an eyebrow.

"See? You're getting touchy again."

"Does my 'cool-headedness' annoy you!?"

"That's not what I'm saying."

"Then what ARE you saying?"

"Uhh..." In all honestly, not even he knew what he was getting at, or why Lafier's composure rubbed him the wrong way.

However, a moment's self-reflection yielded the answer.

In the end, her coolness under fire raked at his buried sense of inferiority. If she'd been an adult like Sruf, he'd have thought her dependable. But here he was, counting on a younger girl to be his protector...

Though his sense of pride wasn't as overweening as Abhkind's, it was still there to encumber him.

"Now now, you two," cut in Sruf to rescue Jinto. "Let's focus on what's important: What will **Your Highness** do from here on out? Might you be intending, even now, to head for Sfagnoff?"

"That is my mission," she replied.

“But *Fiac*, the smallest mistake could fling you right into the middle of the warzone.” Then, the former baron caught himself when he realized: “Forgive me, you must already be quite aware of the risks. Still, if Your Highness so desires it, you are very welcome to stay here until the hubbub dies down. I fear we lack all the comforts you may be used to, but it’s something. Needless, if you choose to stay, I won’t treat you the way *he* did.”

“I thank you for your generosity. However...” But now Lafier caught herself. She turned to Jinto. “What do you think?”

“Hmm...” Jinto was at a loss.

On one hand, rushing for Sfagnoff in the knowledge that the enemy ships would get there first anyway would be fairly stupid. Sruf was right; they could find themselves in an active warzone. Besides, if the **Empire** triumphed, then there was no need to hurry. If the enemy won, then that would be an absolute nightmare scenario.

On the other hand, he wanted to get out of the **barony** as quickly as possible. That desire had little rational reasoning behind it; rather, it was born of a feeling of unease.

After some contemplation, Jinto decided only to stop contemplating. “If I’m your cargo, then I don’t have an opinion.”

“You can be quite stubborn yourself.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I just don’t know what to do, either,” Jinto confessed. “But if you really want my opinion, I’ve got a feeling staying here would be smarter.”

“Noted,” she said, still undecided. “What do you think, **Baron Emeritus**? Should we stay?”

“If I can be honest, *Fiac*, I don’t know, either.”

“Lonh, you can’t be serious!” yelled Jinto. “Didn’t you just ask us to stay!?”

The former baron simply shrugged. “Not to be cold, **boy**, but I don’t hold myself responsible for either of you. Besides, in space, where information takes time to get anywhere, there are times ya can’t make an educated evaluation until after the fact. For all we know, the enemy might even come here, since the

barony could be in their sights should they get chased off Sfagnoff. And if that comes to pass, this place'll stop being your refuge. Going to Sfagnoff could, in fact, be the way."

"Then why'd you encourage us to stay?"

"I didn't encourage anything, **boy**. I was just telling ya I'm willing to play host if ya wanna lengthen your stay. I won't try to stop ya if you'd rather leave. It's all up to you and her now."

"I'm going," said Lafier. "I was always told that if I can't decide between stopping or moving forward, I should choose to move forward."

"Ah..." *That's probably wise*, he thought.

"What will you do?" asked Lafier. It was a question he never thought he'd hear.

"What'll I do?"

"If you want, I can leave you here."

"Don't even kid!" It had never even occurred to him separating from her was an option. An anger he couldn't name welled up in his chest. "You've gotta finish the job and take your cargo to Sfagnoff!"

"And you said I'm quick to anger," Lafier grinned.

Her smile seemed genuine... or at least, that was what he wanted to think.

Chapter 4: The *Laiblatélach* (Journeyers)

They had plenty of *bizz* (propellant) left, so once they'd resupplied their **antimatter fuel** at the **factory**, they turned back to the **barony** at full acceleration.

The ship decelerated as it approached the **spaceport**. They touched down on the **pier** designated for a connecting vessel. Unlike most landing procedures, the landing gear wasn't attached to the vessel, but rather located on the pier itself. That made it a mite harder to pull off, but thanks to the help of her **computing crystals** and her *frocragh*, she managed it without putting a scratch on its hull.

"I'm afraid entering from this pier isn't advisable, *Fiac*," reported Sruf.

"Why?"

"The **servants** who were working in concert with my son are there. They're likely still loyal to him. They've gathered below us for some end. As such, I've taken the liberty of trapping them there."

"How many are there?"

"Let's see... eleven, it seems," he said, glowering at the screen. "That's a fifth of the entire staff here. And they're most likely armed, which would make them the greatest military force in the history of my **barony**."

"Don't tell me you're raring for a fight?" said Jinto, worried.

"Is that what how you think of me?" replied Lafier, less than pleased. "I don't *enjoy* battle. I only fight when I must."

But from the look in Jinto's eyes, he wasn't so sure.

"Don't worry, **boy**; I can assure you that when the Abh commit to a fight, they go all out. Once a proper battle begins, negotiation and compromise ain't on the table. They take the fight to a fiery end either way. And that's why they know what a frightful thing war is — and why they avoid it if possible."

“I don’t know about that...”

“Take a look at history, **boy**. The **Empire**’s never once sprung a war on anybody else.”

“That’s not true, though. The system I’m from didn’t even know the **Empire** existed before their warships came pointing weapons at us.”

“Your system? The **Countdom of Hyde**?”

“Oh, so you hadn’t heard, *Lonh-lym Raica*. Hyde was a system isolated from the rest of human society. Until seven years ago, that is.”

“I see,” the old man nodded. “I think I’ve got a better idea of your family history now.”

“I mean, setting that aside...”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, **boy**, but the **Empire** only battles other interstellar nations. If it’s a fight with another interstellar power, then they’re ruthless. But when it comes to **terrestrial worlds**, they’re practically charitable. It ain’t like they do ground wars, after all. Well, to be honest, they look down on surface worlds. Literally. From space. They don’t consider them rival powers.”

“Kinda don’t know how to feel about that,” he said, but that did bring him some reassurance.

Meanwhile, that exchange left Lafier feeling alienated. “You’re Abh, too. Why are you speaking as if it has nothing to do with you?”

“*Fiac*, said Sruf with all due reverence, “I only truly became Abh after learning what the Abh learn. This boy — ahem, this young man, **noble prince of the Countdom of Hyde**, is still learning how to become Abh.”

“I’ve still got a lot to get used to,” Jinto added.

“But must you act so rude? Don’t analyze me like I’m some kind of zoo animal!”

“My apologies.”

“Sorry!”

But she didn’t feel they were quite sincere. “It’s irritating,” she insisted.

“I get it, I’m sorry!”

“In any case, **Your Highness**,” Sruf interrupted, “Could I ask you to take the ship to the **pier** reserved for the **lord**? There’s nobody over there.”

“Yes, understood. Do you have access to *blyséragh* (Flight Control functionality)?”

“Yes, total access.”

“Then disengage the landing gear for me.”

“I would love to, but we can’t afford to take too much time using this **terminal**. Let’s give the functionality back to the **Flight Control Room**.”

“But...”

“I say this with the understanding that they follow my orders, of course.” The former baron picked up the **phone** and connected a call to the **Flight Control Room**. After a brief back-and-forth with Mwineesh, the **Senior Flight Control Officer**, he secured her loyalty, and then carried out a series of operations on his end.

“Can we trust her?”

“If she goes back on her word, then I can always take back functionality anyway.”

Lafier shrugged. “**Febdash Barony Flight Control**, come in.”

“Yes, this is **Flight Control** speaking.”

“Requesting permission for takeoff.”

“Permission granted. When will you take off?”

“Now.”

“Roger. Disengaging landing gear.” The coupling mechanism released.

Using her *frocragh*, which included the map of the estate, she ascertained the location of the **lord**’s **pier** and crawled along the ceiling at low propulsion.

“Come in, **Febdash Barony Flight Control**.”

“Yes.”

“Requesting touch down at the **lord’s** pier and **propellant** resupply at said pier.”

A pause. The face on screen was visibly cross.

“Permission granted,” Mwineesh said at last. “Do you need guidance?”

“No,” said Lafier. She still didn’t trust her completely. Moreover, for a **steerer** who possessed *frocragh* like her, she didn’t even need help navigating at such short distances.

It took less than a minute for Lafier to touch down on the pier that the Baron typically used. The **propellant** had been automatically resupplied.

“Now to take my leave, **Your Highness.**” Sruf stood up and saluted her. “I will look to clearing up the confusion that’s taken hold of the **orbital estate**. I hope you fare well in your travels, and you can expect a visit from me someday.”

“Okay,” she nodded. “There are some in the estate who aided us. The **servant** staff by the names of Seelnay and Arsa. Others may have helped as well. I have a message for them, if you would care to relay it for me?”

“I wouldn’t mind at all,” said the **former baron**, “But if I might make a suggestion, would it not be a better idea for you to tell them yourself?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, inserting a **memory crystal** into her **compuwatch**.

Meanwhile, Sruf extended a hand toward Jinto. As Lafier watched, wondering what he was up to, the **noble prince of Hyde** himself looked at his hand, surprised, before taking it.

“See ya sometime, **boy**. Come see me one of these days when you’re free. Regale me with the chronicles of the founding of the **Countdom of Hyde**. If ya do, I’ll teach ya all about the intricacies of the Abh frame of mind.”

“By all means. I’d love that.”

“And be sure to make it back around before you have kids, would ya?” he winked.

“Sure will,” said Jinto, matching the old man’s smile with his own.

Then Sruf glanced in her direction. Thus reminded that she had an errand, she

held her **compuwatch** to her lips.

“Attention, **servants** Seelnay and Arsa, and all the other **imperial citizens** that helped whose names I don’t know. I, **Trainee Starpilot** *Abliarsec Néic-Dubreuscr Bærh Parhynr Lamhirh* thank you not only on my behalf, but on behalf of the **Empire**. As of this moment, I cannot take you with me. However, do not mistake that as my reneging on my vow. I shall be returning to fulfill your wish as soon as the circumstances allow it, and your goodwill shall be rewarded. It is with deep respect that I must ask you wait for me in the meantime.”

Her recording complete, she popped the **memory crystal** out of the compuwatch and handed it to the **former baron**. “Thank you.”

“Recording received,” he said, conscientiously placing it in his **long robe’s** mauscrh (MOHSK, pocket) for her to see.

“Well, **Baron Emeritus**, I suppose this is it. May your good health last until we meet again,” she saluted.

“I wish you the same, **Your Highness**,” he said, not dwelling on his adieu. He strode through the **air lock room’s** door and promptly disappeared.

The room’s opposite door, leading into the pier, opened and closed in its turn. The former baron had left the vessel.

After double-checking he’d disembarked safely, Lafier called the Flight Control Room once again. “Touchdown objectives completed. Requesting permission to leave domain. Over.”

“Permission granted,” came in a morose Mwineesh. “**Your Highness**, we’re still processing what happened, so I implore you to consider our extenuating circumstanc—”

“Sure,” said Lafier, before dropping the call unceremoniously. She didn’t mean to come off cold, but the **flight controller’s** tone of voice was too tragic, too pathetic to stand. So Lafier re-equipped her **control glove** and commenced liftoff procedures.

“Well, that took a bit longer than anticipated,” said Jinto, taking the seat next to her.

“Yes. It did,” she replied.

Liftoff. They accelerated in the direction the ship’s bow would intercept the **Febdash Gate** in its orbit.

“Ah!” said Lafier, startled.

“What? What is it?”

The brilliant red silk draping her lap caught her eye. She’d been wearing a dressy long robe the whole time. “This *daüch*, I forgot to give it back.”

“Then are we heading back?”

Lafier shuddered at the thought. “I could never do something so undignified. Not after that weighty farewell.”

“I see,” Jinto nodded sternly.

“By the way, Jinto...”

“What?”

“What was that you were doing with the *Baron Emeritus* before? Where you were gripping his hand? Was that some kind of sexual deviance?”

“Sexual WHAT!? No, of course not! That’s just how we greet each other on my home world. Though I didn’t think *Lonh-lymh Raica* would know about it. Actually, I heard somewhere that that custom derives from the Age of Earth. It must’ve survived across a bunch of different **terrestrial worlds**, crazily enough.”

“That so.” But something was tugging at her. After a moment’s thought, it came to her. “Don’t people on your home world greet each other by leaping back a step, though?”

“‘Leaping back’!? The hell would do that?”

“Isn’t that what you told me?”

“Huh?”

“You told me when we first met...”

“I don’t recall that... Oh!” he blurted. “Right, I remember now.”

“So you were lying.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a *lie*.”

“Just to warn you, I don’t enjoy being lied to.”

“What a coincidence — me neither,” he offered meekly.

“Tell me the truth, what was that little leap?”

“Well...” Jinto cast his eyes down.

Jinto was sweating a cold sweat as Lafier stared at him balefully from the side.
“Looks as though we’ve found something to talk about on our way to Sfagnoff.
I’ll give you time to think of a sensible excuse.”

“Thanks, I’ll try,” he said, voice tinier than a mouse’s.

But no such bolt of inspiration ever came.

Chapter 5: The *Saudec Sfagnaumr* (Sfagnoff Gate)

Jinto was eating some **combat rations**, which consisted of pre-cooked tube things. Probably safe to assume they were nutritious. Each one possessed its own unique flavor, too. Yet they all shared what the Abh liked in their food: those varied flavors were all very, very light.

He was sick of them. *Don't **NCCs** aboard Abh ships ever complain?*

Maybe the people on planets like Martinh and Delktu just had sensitive tongues compared to the majority. He regretted not having Sruf supply some of his food. If only all that turmoil hadn't distracted him.

Jinto washed down his **rations** with a juice that could only charitably be described as sweet.

"Jinto, the **Sfagnoff Gate** has come into view," said Lafier.

"Cool." Jinto deposited his trash in midair, as he'd be throwing it out later. Without much gravity to pin them, all the garbage drifted flakily through the room. "How's it look?"

"Can't be sure yet." Lafier's gaze was fixed to her screen. "There's a group of **space-time bubbles**. Can't tell whose side they're on..."

"What do we do if they're the enemy?" Jinto was a hundred percent aware what it meant if they were the enemy, but he couldn't not ask.

"We break through, obviously. Even if we wanted to turn back, we don't have the fuel. You see that, surely?"

"Oh, you don't have to seek my consent — I know what you decide is for the best." How many times did he have to be reminded how useless he was?

"We're set to cross the **Sfagnoff Gate** in seven hours' time."

"Sure hope they roll out the welcome mat for us."

"Sadly, they may roll out something else entirely to greet us."

“I’ve said it once, I’ll say it again...”

“Yes, I really know how to cheer people up,” she said, taking it in stride.

“Dammit.” Jinto had tried tossing a wrapper straight into the trash slot, but it missed its mark, and now he had to take off his **seat belt** and go collect it.

It had taken around two hours for the area surrounding the **Sfagnoff Gate** to become more clearly visible. Twenty-odd **space-time bubbles** were prowling the vicinity of the Gate, like an uneven helix.

“This isn’t looking good.” She was tapping the screen (which was displaying the **map of flat space**) with a finger.

“What isn’t?”

“Jinto, I have some bad news.”

“Don’t worry, I expected as much. You don’t need to tell me. Can I ask how you know?”

“That’s not a **Star Forces** formation. Were they Star Forces ships on the lookout, their formation would be more elegant. And I don’t think they could possibly be *isadh* transport freighters, either.”

“Gotcha.” Jinto tried picturing what a “more elegant formation” looked like.
...He failed.

Oh well. If he was lucky, he’d learn at the **quartermasters’ academy**.

“Guess it’s gonna take us that much longer to get to Lacmhacarh now, huh?” Jinto sighed. He pondered how homey a United Humankind prison camp might be.

Then, the **space-time bubbles** shifted. One of their number began heading toward their small **connecting vessel**, but at a terribly languid pace.

“It must be massive,” said Lafier calmly.

“Then it ought to be easy to dodge, right?”

“In effect.”

“Phew.” It was difficult to see how things could go their way even after escaping from that crowd of **bubbles** — but then again, he didn’t much care to see UH soldiers up close and personal, either.

“Don’t be too happy; judging by its size, that **bubble** most likely contains a **battle-line warship**.”

“Is that bad?”

Lafier gave him some side-eye.

That jogged his memory — *alaicec* “battle-line” warships were designed to shower the enemy with a rain of **space mines**. In a **battle in normal space**, that was no match for a *résic* patrol ship, but in **flat space** it was the strongest vessel of all.

On her map, their little connecting vessel was represented by a blue blip, with likely-hostile **space-time bubbles** as yellow blips. Agonizingly slowly, the distance between the two dots kept changing.

Around an hour later, the **Sfagnoff Gate** blocked the way between the yellow and the blue. The blue dot made no bones about driving headlong to its destination.

“I’m picking up a friend-or-foe call sign,” said Lafier, clutching her *froch* sensory organ from above her **circlet**.

“From an **Empire** ship?” asked Jinto, with a faint hope.

“Can’t tell where it’s coming from, but the one thing that’s certain is that it’s not the **Empire** asking.”

“Boy, I could really use a pleasant surprise from time to time.” He wanted to cry, but he managed to hold back his tears. “Could we lie and say we’re allies?”

Lafier seemed impressed. “You can come up with some underhanded tactics.”

“I blame my upbringing,” Jinto sulked.

“To answer the question, no, we can’t.”

“I hate how my hunches are always on the mark.”

“There it is!” Lafier scowled.

“There what is?” Whatever it was, it couldn’t be good.

“Their detention order. If you don’t assume the **stationary state** we’ll attack.”

“Let me guess, we’re not stopping.”

Lafier’s shock showed on her face. “You’d want me to?”

“Hell no,” he said, in the heat of the moment. But his words belied his true feelings. “Just making sure.”

A short while later, Lafier mumbled: “They’re near.”

Now that it had come down to it, Jinto *didn’t* reply with his customary “What is?”

Three dots split off from the big yellow one. Three extremely fast mines. Faster even than their vessel. Rapidly, they closed in.

As he eyed those blips zeroing in after them on the map, his mind suddenly expanded to the possibility that, just maybe, life in a prison camp was in fact wonderful.

The connecting vessel swerved not. Jinto probed Lafier’s expression as she stared intently at the screen. Had she given up?

Dotted lines of green, red, and other colors besides had appeared on the **flat space map**.

At long last, Lafier gripped the steering gear and made their vessel’s **bubble** strafe to the side.

A slight while after the blue blip on the screen altered its course, the yellow ones turned in pursuit.

Persistent bastards, thought Jinto, grinding his teeth.

He wanted to break out into a bawl. He wanted to call Lina’s name. But the image of Lafier doing her level best beside him helped him keep his emotions from erupting.

Why was she putting in so much effort, though? Even if they did escape, the **mines** would come after them, and they’d catch up eventually.

Suddenly, it clicked. Lafier's big plan. She was waiting for the **mines'** fuel to run out. That's why she was trying her damndest to postpone their chance encounter with fiery death.

Of course, she had to get closer to the **Gate** at the same time. Otherwise, the **battle-line** would just fire more **mines**. If they didn't get beat out by the additional mines, they'd run out of fuel anyway.

God, if you really exist, then I beg you, poof these guys out of existence!

He made the sign of the cross and cast his eyes on the yellow blips. He should have gone to church more often. Then he'd have been able to snuff it with a more tranquil soul.

The yellow boss dot fired off another round of three mine-dots.

"I don't remember asking for more mines!" Jinto shouted, unable to bottle it up any longer.

"That may be a sign we're going to win!" said Lafier excitedly.

"What do you mean!?"

"The reason they had to fire again is because the first set is running out of fuel..." Sure enough, as Lafier panted out her commentary, the first three blips faded away.

"YES!" Jinto whooped... but his mood took a drearier turn when he remembered the *other* three.

"It's okay. We can do this!"

The **Sfagnoff Gate** was close by. The crooked helix was reminiscent of a spider web, and the blue dot, a butterfly chased by a bird.

Lafier inserted her left hand into the **control glove**. The connecting vessel trembled, proof the *saic* (engine) was ignited.

The yellow dot was hot on the blue dot's trail, snapping at their tail end and closing the distance.

Perhaps in consideration of Jinto, the walls began displaying video of the outside — the grey nothing of **flat space**. He looked behind him.

White light was gushing out from a point at their back. Colors flickered to and fro around the dazzling corona, colors that swelled before his very eyes. This disgustingly beautiful light show portended *gor ptarhoth* — space-time fusion.

“Battle acceleration is a go,” said Lafier. Their seats morphed into their sleeping-cot modes.

The colors that tinged the grey flowed alongside their acceleration until they’d become a solid band of hues. They rushed overhead from behind his back, and from the front of the ship (where his feet were pointed) to the back, combining to forming great rainbow rings.

A **space-time bubble** was a universe unto itself, with a **space-time bubble engine** at its center. Multiple such engines would be meaningless, since accelerating wouldn’t change one’s position within the pocket universe. Instead, it would appear to be spinning in place — and Jinto had witnessed what effect that rotation would have. Yet he wasn’t sure he was up to feeling the full blast of acceleration right now, either.

“Won’t they just chase us into **normal space**?” said Jinto, bracing against the G-forces as they steadily ratcheted from six *daimon* to even higher speeds.

“In **normal space**, we’re faster than they are.”

“That’s a relief.”

The yellow and blue dots were very nearly touching when the rainbow colors and the grey canvas vanished, replaced by the star-pricked black of the heavens. They were back in **normal space**.

Again, he turned to look back. The **normal space** side of the **Sfagnoff Gate**, a dimly radiating ball of gas, was floating there.

“And the **mines**!?”

“Over there.” Her *frocragh* detected them faster than Jinto could.

Whenever they ported over from **flat space**, from which point of the **gate** they exited was completely up to random chance. As such, even if their pursuers exited through the same point on the uneven helix as they did, they wouldn’t necessarily come out of the same section of the sphere.

Mine after enemy mine popped in from various off-target spots on the giant orb that was the gate, its phosphorescence helping them see them better. They were still homing in on the connecting vessel, only laughably slowly.

“Woo-hoo!” Jinto cheered. “But wait, there must be enemies around here, right?”

“Not in the immediate vicinity.”

“Well that’s stupid of them.” Even a novice like Jinto understood how important it was to guard the **gate**.

“They’re busy with other things. See for yourself.” Lafier pointed even as they accelerated to yet higher velocities.

She was pointing to the sole inhabited planet of the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**, named Clasbule, or as the Abh spelled it, Clasepyr. The way it was positioned relative to him, it almost felt natural to reach out and pluck it from the sky.

Light shone from the part of the planet covered in night, only to fade immediately.

“I bet the enemies that were in **flat space** were on high alert for any **Star Forces** ships that might come from the outside. They’re blockading Sfagnoff.”

“So they’re still battling it out as we speak?” Jinto groaned.

“Yep,” Lafier nodded.

“Is it just me, or are we headed *toward* Clasbule?”

“Of course we are. That’s our destination.”

“But it’s a warzone down there!”

“Where else is there!?”

“Uhh... you’ve got a point there.” And seeing as there was no guarantee the **Star Forces** would win, they could hardly wait it out in nearby space. For one, even though they’d put some significant distance between themselves and the **mines**, they were still following them. Secondly, nothing precluded the possibility yet more of the enemy would emerge from the **gate** for their heads.

That being said, jumping into an active battlefield still wasn’t the most

appealing prospect. In fact, he rather loathed the idea.

“**Imperial Star Forces**, come in. This is the **connecting vessel** of the **patrol ship Goslauth!**” she said, without transmitting video.

After trying several times, they finally received a response.

“This is the **Sfagnoff Liaison Fleet Base** speaking. Report your status, **connecting vessel.**”

“The *Goslauth* encountered an unidentified group of **space-time bubbles** in the sector of Itum 533. This vessel broke off from the mother ship with non-combatants and navigation log in tow. Will be touching down here at present.”

“Roger that, **connecting vessel**. As an anti-espionage measure, you are forbidden from divulging any further details on the matter.”

“Roger, **Sfagnoff Base**. Requesting instructions.”

“Unfortunately, this **base** cannot field your vessel. You must proceed without instruction.”

Lafier bit her lower lip. “Roger, **Sfagnoff Base**. This vessel will proceed without instruction. *Sathotr* (victory) be ours!”

“The chances of that are slim,” they laughed drily. “But still... *sathotr frybarari a* (victory be the Empire’s!)” They hung up.

Jinto couldn’t stop himself from asking: “Does that mean we’re losing?”

“Of course it does,” she said, rattled. “The number of troops stationed in each **territory nation** is small. Do you think a single **liaison fleet base** can hold back a full-scale invasion!?”

“I’m sorry. It was a dumb question.”

“No, I’m sorry...” said Lafier. “Forgive me, Jinto... In the end, I failed in my mission to escort you safely.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” he answered back in an almost canned way. “So where’s the enemy?”

“They’re still far, but three ships are headed our way.”

“Is three their lucky number or what?” Jinto looked ahead, or as he perceived

it, up. Claspule had gotten even bigger, filling up almost all of his field of vision. While he couldn't spot any enemy encampments, he did notice something thread-like sauntering off from the planet's noonday zone.

"What's that thing?"

"Looks like an **orbital tower**."

"Oh yeah, the tower..."

Destroyed, it was still revolving, glinting off the rays of Sagnoff's sun.

"A lowly act. **Orbital towers** aren't military bases..."

"Uhh..." There was something they had to be worrying about more than the enemy's character. "Can this thing land at all now?"

"Land?" Lafier turned her neck to look at him dead-on.

"Yeah! I mean, what other option is there with the **orbital tower** gone?" he said, horrified at what that meant. "Is it impossible...?"

"No, it should be possible."

"Should be' possible? '*Should be*'?"

Ath letters appeared on screen. Lafier gave them a cursory glance. "I knew it. It is possible."

"Hold on a sec. Are you telling me you didn't give *landing the ship* any thought until this very moment?"

"Yes," she nodded, looking guilty.

"You didn't even think about entering the planet to begin with, did you?"

"No."

"Then why all the hustle?" *Urgh, I feel so weighted down. How long are we going to be accelerating for, anyway?*

"I thought we'd be aiding in the fight."

"How would we do that!? Thing's not even armed! Did you think we'd take them out the way you took out the **Baron**?"

"I didn't think that far ahead. But there still might be something we can do."

Besides, there are three ships tailing us at the moment.”

“That may be true, but from where I’m standing it’d have been suicide.”

“You’re right; I was being hasty.” She lowered her eyes. “And I didn’t even consult you, my passenger...”

“Consult me...!?” Jinto was suddenly seized with anger. “You, you idiot!”

Lafier’s eyes widened with shock, but then shame set in. “You have every right to speak ill of me. I was undervaluing your life.”

“No, who cares about *my* life!? Er, I take that back, I do care about my life, but that’s not what I’m so worried about. What about *your* life, Lafier!?”

Now Lafier’s eyes burned with rage. “I nearly wrapped you up in a war with little hope of victory, and for that I must apologize. I resign myself to any punishment you have to dole out, no matter how cruel.”

“Punishment!?” he gasped. “You honestly think I want to punish you? And ‘cruelly’ at that?”

Lafier wasn’t about to stand down. “But you have no business firing at me over *my own* life!”

“Maybe not,” he cried, “but what I’m trying to say is... Why do you feel the need to rush to your own death when you’ve got such a long life ahead of you? Could you maybe spare some thought to *surviving*, Lafier!?”

“I am NOT ‘rushing to my death.’”

“Really? Cuz that’s what it looks like. Didn’t you say you only fight when you have to? Or was that a lie?”

“The fight’s already here, Jinto. This is a warzone. And when a **soldier**’s on a battlefield, they fight!”

“All right, fine. If you wanna fight, go ahead. But seeing as I’m not a **soldier** yet, do me a favor and drop me off on that planet!”

“Fine! It’s not like you’d be any use in battle anyway!”

“Oh, and you’ll be SO useful with your tiny ship! Go on, what do you plan on doing in this thing, exactly!?”

The two glared at each other.

Lafier was the first to look away. "I'm sorry, Jinto."

"This is the greatest day of my life," said Jinto, releasing the tension. "A **royal princess** apologized to me *twice*. Even among **nobility** that's something to boast about, right?"

"Don't tease me, Jinto. But... you're right. Even if I were to join the battle, this vessel would serve no purpose. You're not the only one who's useless; I am, too."

"Which isn't your fault," he consoled her. "I've already told you, but you're not useless to *me* — I'm grateful, for everything. And I mean it. I may be useless now, but one day people will rely on me. I just want to survive long enough to get to that point, and I want YOU to survive, too."

"Uh-huh," she answered tersely.

As their anger subsided, so too did their fear. Earlier, Jinto felt as though his heart was in a vise, but now it was back to normal.

No use worrying. What will be, will be.

Jinto screwed up his resolve. He would take after the style of the Abh: he wouldn't dwell on the what-ifs of his own potential death.

At the very least, death among the stars would descend quickly, without any long-lasting pain. What if he were to fall asleep or lose consciousness? At these blistering speeds, he could imagine closing his eyes one second and finding himself in heaven the next. It'd be right out of a feel-good movie.

Unfortunately, his consciousness was not flagging.

After a while, the call sign rang.

"That the **Liaison Base**?"

"No. The transmission is coming from the spaceship ahead of us."

"So it's hostile, huh...? They close?"

"Yes. Very."

Jinto squinted. Something grain-sized was shining against the planetary

backdrop. Was that the enemy ship?

Lafier answered the call.

“Pan dong zop cos ree jee. Nayk go sheck...” A language Jinto couldn’t understand.

“The hell is that?”

“The official language of the United Humankind. They say they’ll attack unless we stop accelerating.”

“You know that language?”

“Yes, I study it at the **academy**. And so will you at the **quartermasters’ academy**.”

“Ugh. And after I finally mastered Baronh.”

“Don’t worry, it’s a simple language to learn. But in exchange for being simple,” she frowned, “it lacks any richness. In terms of elegance, it can’t even stand in the same ring as Baronh.”

“Yeah, probably not,” said Jinto as the foreign words fell on his ears. It seemed as though they were repeating the same sentences over and over.

Lafier dropped the line without responding. She’d never once entertained the notion of negotiating with them.

“I was looking forward to whether they ever said anything different.”

“I really don’t want to be killed by a bunch of humorless pricks.”

“Me neither.”

At last, they could make out the enemy clearly. Their ships made up the vertices of a pyramid with an equilateral base.

“Jinto, I have some good news.”

“Good news? I’ve almost forgotten what that’s like. Lay it on me.”

“The main battlefield is on the other side of the planet. The ships right in front of us are the only ones here.”

“That’s awesome. But we don’t know when they’ll get reinforcements from

the other side, right?”

“No, we don’t. However, the chances that happens are low.”

“Then let’s make a run for the surface when those scary old codgers get up from their seats to take a leak.”

“Right after we dodge their attacks.”

The ship loomed nearer by the second.

Suddenly, all sense of gravity disappeared. Just as suddenly, they lurched hard to the right. He’d experienced this once before, during their battle against the **Baron**.

The connecting vessel dodged enemy fire through chaotic propulsion. Moments passed, and a glint of light flashed to their right. Unless he was imagining it, the enemy’s **laser** or antiproton beam must have collided against particulate matter.

The spectacle of battle always gave him goosebumps. The constant shifts in perceived gravity were making him dizzy. Unlike the fight at Febdash, he was secured in place, so this was slightly preferable... or so he thought initially.

He got pushed against the seat, suspended from it, pinned in such a way that he looked like he was being crucified upside-down...

You can take it. You can take it. Jinto endured as the contents of his stomach gradually rose up. He wondered who had it harder in times like these, the pilot or their passengers?

The enemy ship came into view overhead. The second lay right below, and the third to the left.

Their close encounter with the enemy had already concluded. By the time the G-force fluctuations ceased, the *asaute*c (propelling flames) of the enemy ships were flickering far behind them.

“Are we... Did we get away?”

“Yes. They can’t catch up to us now, even if they about-face.”

“Man, they really let us past without much a fight, huh?”

“Ignorance is bliss,” said Lafier, exasperated. “We missed one of their **lasers** by a mere 20 *dagh*.”

“If it had hit us, would we be in trouble?”

“In that we’d be scattering as a clump of *gnoc* (plasma), yes.”

“Now that’s a tragic ending,” he said quietly.

Lafier picked up the phone. The other side shouted: “*Coo lin mahp ahs tang kip!*”

“What did they say just now?”

“Nothing that a young lady,” said one angry, blushing Lafier, “should ever repeat!”

“Ah... Gotcha.”

“I’m going to start decelerating soon. Don’t make a fuss.”

The sky and the ground switched places. Above floated the **Sfagnoff Gate**, while below them waited the planet of Clasbule.

“Decelerate how hard, exactly?”

“We’re going fairly fast at the moment, so you can expect a rough ride.”

“Go easy on me, please.”

“I could go slower, if you prefer burning to a crisp on entry.”

“No thanks, I hate when it’s hot out.”

“Then you’d best grit your teeth for this.”

And so it began: an experience that would make their acceleration up to that point seem breezy by comparison. Their soft seats were holding them in place, but still his ribs were near to crumpling in. Blood rushed away from his extremities. His world was turning as red as his eyes.

Jinto gritted his teeth and endured. He stole a glance at Lafier; even she was sweating.

Their rough ride wore on. How much time had passed now?

Suddenly, the footage cut out, taking with it the stars above and the blue

sphere below. Back to the walls of opal white. And the pressure pinning their bodies disappeared, too.

“Wha, what happened?”

“Worry not. I’ve merely detached the hull.”

“‘Merely’?”

“We can hardly enter the atmosphere while carrying **anti-matter fuel**. Think of how that’d affect the planet’s people.”

“But you didn’t have to go that far, did you...?” *Yet more Abh excessiveness*, thought Jinto.

“**Connecting vessels** aren’t designed with surface-landing in mind.” Lafier was speaking rapidly now. “All landings are emergency landings.”

“Can we even land without a hull?”

“We can’t land *with* a hull,” Lafier had lost her patience. “I’m frightened, too, Jinto. This is my first-time surface-landing!”

“Your first time!?”

“I told you before: I’ve never been to a **terrestrial world**.”

“But surely it’s come up in training...”

“Yes, I’ve done the mock training, but that’s all.”

“So which one’s got you scared — surface-landing, or being on a surface world?”

“Both!!”

And Jinto could more than see why that might be. He held his tongue, since he understood that forging through fear was a personal struggle, and the last thing he wanted was to get in her way.

Not long after, the shaking commenced. The vessel — or what remained of it — dragged against Clasbule’s atmosphere. As they were rocked violently, Jinto could only think: *Glad I can’t see outside*.

At last, the turbulence died down. Their seats morphed back upright from

their sleeping-cot mode. The peculiar floating sensation harked back to memories past within Jinto: this is how it felt that one time, years prior, when he had descended from an orbital tower down to the surface.

Oh man, I remember...

He'd been a ball of worry back then, too. So much so that he could barely recall what the cabin attendant who had been at his side looked like.

I wonder what the world below is like...

That train of thought snapped him out of his reverie. "I totally forgot!"

Lafier eyed him inquiringly. "Forgot what?"

"We're gonna need *info* on this planet. Have we got any location data on board?"

"Yes, there should be relevant data in the **computing crystals**' *büazépec* (memory bank)."

"Awesome! **Computing crystals**, give us data on the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**."

The words *Læbehynh Sfagnaumr* appeared on screen alongside a large article entry, with headers for HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, and INDUSTRY listed underneath.

"Please select a category and one or more operations," said the cyber-voice. "Operations include BROWSE, ADD, COPY..."

Jinto inserted his armrest's *ceumec* (wire) into his **compuwatch** and said, "Whole document, copy."

UNDERSTOOD flashed twice on screen before shifting into a COMPLETE.

"No more operations, **computing crystals**," said Jinto. He unplugged the **wire** and patted the **compuwatch**. A little bit of information would go a long way, so he was glad it had occurred to him to check.

Why hadn't Lafier made any effort to research any potential safe havens? Was she not clear on standard operating procedures for surface-landing? But the second he was about to ask her as much — the shock of impact.

"Did we land...?" he squeaked pitifully.

“Yep.” Their hair was swaying from back to front as the wind rolled through.

Jinto looked behind and saw the door to the **air lock room** was open. Only there was no air lock room there. What met his eyes instead was tall straw-colored vegetation, rustling in near darkness but for the light emitted by the **steerer’s room**.

They were on land.

“Jinto, we need to hurry. They may have spotted us from above.” Lafier removed her **seatbelt** and bade Jinto stand up, too.

“Ah, uh, right.” Jinto got to his feet.

“Open!” Lafier commanded the seats. They folded backward at a precise 90-degree angle.

“Does that opening lead into some secret basement?”

“No, **stupid**.”

The compartment underneath the seats was for storage. Its contents were covered by the *daüch* long robe she’d purloined from the **barony**. Lafier set that wardrobe aside to reveal the two **phasers** that had been out of sight.

“Take and keep one.”

“I was wondering where you’d hidden these,” said Jinto, who took a gun plus accompanying items.

“I wasn’t hiding them. I simply stashed them while you were having a nap. It is a cramped space.”

“I get it, I get it. Please don’t take every little thing at face-value. It was just banter.” He put on his **sash-belt** and holstered his gun in it.

“This, too.” She handed him a knapsack. On it was written “FOR EMERGENCY SURFACE EVACUATION” in small text. It contained a bunch of **combat rations** parcels, an assortment of tools, and some medicines.

“Hope they’re not past the best-by date,” he said, glowering at the **rations**.

He closed the lid over the knapsack and strapped it on. It wasn’t very heavy on his back.

Lastly, Lafier picked up a *mhlamh* (FLAHF, pendant)-like trinket and put it on over her neck.

“Jinto.” She held it in her hand for him to see. “The **patrol ship** Goslauth’s navigation log is in this. If I should die, I’d like you to escape with it.”

“C’mon, don’t go jinxi—” But the **royal princess’s** intense stare made him feel small.

“It’s just a hypothetical.”

“All... all right,” Jinto nodded.

Lafier returned the nod and tucked the **pendant** into the collar of her **military uniform**. Then, she issued the following command to the **computing crystals**: “Prepare for deletion.”

The words “DELETION PREPARATION COMPLETE” danced on screen.

“Is there anything you’d like to take out of the **crystals**?” asked Lafier.

Jinto shook his head. “No.”

“Okay.” Lafier’s tone turned pained. “**Computing crystals**, this is goodbye. For the sake of confidentiality, delete everything.”

“Understood. Executing confidentiality protocols. Deleting all information and system processors. We wish you peace and safety.”

A pair of eyes appeared on screen, only for their lids to slowly droop. Once they were totally shut, the screen blinked out.

Dark sense of humor for a computer, thought Jinto. However, Lafier was of a clearly very different reaction. She faced the screen and saluted it.

“All right, let’s go,” said Lafier, laying her hands on the door’s edge.

“Wait, hold on!” Jinto jumped for the **long robe** that Lafier had tossed to the side on the floor.

“What are you doing?” said Lafier, having returned. She peered at what Jinto held in hand.

“We’re gonna need money, too!” Jinto turned it over and collected the **sash clip**. It consisted of a ruby embedded in a platinum base. As such, it could

probably fetch quite the price.

“Money?” Lafier cocked her head. “We have money.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll show you.” She worked her **compuwatch**. “See? 5,000 *scarh*. I haven’t used any of what *Fiac Loranr* (His Highness my father) gave me.”

Given that on Delktu, Jinto had gotten by with around 20 *scarh* a month, that was a positively tantalizing goldmine. And yet...

What use was Empire money on a planet that was this close to succumbing to an enemy occupation? Not only that, but the currency existed purely digitally on her **compuwatch** anyway. Who here would accept that as legitimate tender?

But it soon dawned on a dumbfounded Jinto. There was nothing like the realization that Lafier was a child of the stars through and through — and a highborn one at that — to clear any illusions he had about her innate royal competencies. She’d no doubt never even shopped by herself before.

“I’ll go into it later. Let’s just get out of here for now.” Jinto stuffed the **sash clip** into the knapsack and stepped outside.

He looked back at the spherical remains of the vessel they’d soon be abandoning, and noted four wing-like flaps spread out at the top. They probably deployed to create more air resistance and slow their descent. Unfortunately, they also made the vessel stick out like a sore thumb when viewed from above. They needed to leave, and fast.

“Should we run?” asked Lafier.

“If you’re okay running.”

“What do you mean, if I’m okay?”

“I mean, you might be tuckered out.”

“I’m not. I’m more worried about *you*.”

“Need I remind you that I’m the one who’s more used to running on land?”
With that, Jinto was off.

“Wait, Jinto, there’s something wrong with my eyes!” shouted Lafier.

“What!?” Startled, he stopped in his tracks.

Lafier had looked up at the sky after taking a step out of the steerer’s room. “The stars look like they’re *flickering* to me.”

Jinto likewise looked up. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Sure enough, the stars were flickering for Jinto, too, but he knew that didn’t mean his vision was faulty.

“If this were the **capital**, I’d have ready access to treatment, but here...” Lafier screwed up her determination and faced Jinto. “I don’t want to be a burden on you. If I lose my eyesight, I want you to take the navigation log and leave me...”

“I hate to piss all over your splendid martyr’s spirit,” cut in Jinto, “but your eyes are totally fine.”

“You’d best not be consoling me with lies,” she said sternly.

“I’m not consoling you. I’m not 100% sure, but I think it’s refraction that causes it. In any case, the stars always seem to twinkle from inside an atmosphere.”

“Really?” She probed his expression, aided by the light filtering from the steerer’s room.

“I’m not smart enough to come up with such a plausible lie on the fly. That’s just how the stars appear on **terrestrial worlds**. Relieved?”

“I suppose,” Lafier admitted, albeit reluctantly. Through the tenor of her voice, he could sense she was, in fact, relieved.

“I get the feeling your education was lacking in a critical department.”

“Shut up, Jinto.”

“I’ll shut up; talking while running is too hard anyway.”

Judging by the orderly rows of identical vegetation, it seemed they were in a field. What that crop actually was, they didn’t know. They looked like some form of grain. The first thing that popped to Jinto’s mind was wheat ears. The plots had been planted such that a single-person file could traverse the gaps between. The dirt underfoot was damp, but not muddy enough to impede their progress. On the contrary, the ground was just soft enough to be perfect for

running.

A short while after they'd begun running, there was a shift in the starry sky above. A large number of charged particles, formed in the battle beyond Clasbule's atmosphere, painted fluttering streaks of red and green as they came raining down.

Chapter 6: The *Læbehynh Sfagnaumr* (Sfagnoff Marquessate)

The **Sfagnoff Marquessate** was founded in the year 648 I.H. (Imperial History).

Sosiéc Üémh Sailar Daglei started the Campaign on Yaktia as *glaharérh byrer* (Fleet Commander-in-Chief) and was appointed its lord upon distinguishing himself with success.

The Sfagnoff Star System possessed seven main planets, the third of which had seemed suitable for human settlement were terraforming to be carried out. Its atmosphere was chiefly composed of carbon monoxide, with little hydrogen to speak of, but that proved no impediment.

Daglei, the First *Bærh Sfagnaumr* (Viscount of Sfagnoff), named the planet after the **coat of arms** of his House of Sosiec, the *ĭadh Chrehainena le Clasbyrh* (Silver Branch and Snail) before embarking on the planet's terraforming ("Clasbule" was one derived transliteration).

There was a standard sequence for birthing a new habitable planetscape.

First came fundraising. Terraforming demanded large sums of capital, but in the absence of some gross oversight, there was guaranteed money in it, so there was seldom ever a shortage of potential investors.

Daglei, however, skipped that first step entirely. Thanks to successive generations of investment, the Sosiec family had amassed a sizable fortune, obviating the need to seek outside sources of seed money.

Second came the work of terraforming itself. The **Empire** boasted several *gareurec fazér diüimr* (planetary terraforming engineering unions) taking on contracts to oversee the process from the preliminary exploration phase to the crafting of the ecosystem.

One such *gareurec* (union) came to Clasbule and set about altering the orbit of an icy planet on the perimeter of the star system such that it collided with

Clasbule. This covered the planet in water vapor, rinsing the ground through the resulting cataracts of rain. Rivers emerged. Oceans came into being.

Next to be sown were the algae and the microorganisms centered around them. Those microorganisms exploded in number, absorbing carbon and leaving behind oxygen in their wake. Their husks would go on to pile up on the planet's rocky surface, becoming soil.

Then higher-class plant life was introduced. Strains like *ronrébh* (sand-sod) and *rodauremzæch* (imitation lava pines), which matured quickly and could plant roots even in poor quality soil, were the principal species. The plants raised the soil's water retention capacity, synthesizing abundant organic matter from inorganic beginnings. Subsequently, with each new generational transition of the plant life, the soil became more fertile, eventually allowing for the successful sowing of species that require a richer environment. Fish, too, were introduced to the seas and lakes, while annelids, insects, and other crawlies were unleashed upon the land.

The evolution that took billions of years to develop on Earth of old had been truncated to an extreme extent through a handful of different processes, and the order of said developments had been adjusted for heightened convenience and efficiency.

On the fiftieth year, a comprehensive ecosystem including higher-order mammals had been instated, thus marking the completion of an inhabitable planet. Typically, that was when colonization would take place. In this case, however, scant effort was made to solicit for settlers. By that time, reign over the planet had been passed down to the Second **Viscount of Sfagnoff**, Disclei, a man who felt no pressing urge to people his freshly terraformed planet with **surface citizens**.

As to why, the public is still not privy. Perhaps he saw the planet as a garden or park. If that was indeed the case, then his driving desires were brazen by the standards of the **Kin of the Stars**. It was commonplace among the Abh to take pride in counting the universe itself as their home, and even **grandeess** only rarely left their **orbital estates** to visit the **terrestrial world** below. If an Abh appeared to want to claim a surface world for themselves, it would be cause for scandal. It was therefore only reasonable that that wouldn't be disclosed.

There was, however, a more favorable way of viewing the matter as well: he was waiting to see whether intelligent life would naturally evolve and serve as the planet's **territorial citizens**. If that was true, then he was mad in the singularly Abh fashion, leaving aside the baffling lack of pride he showed in his own *Bæriéc Sfagnaumr* (Viscount Estate of Sfagnoff).

Whatever the case, migration to the planet began with the peerage of the Third **Viscount of Sfagnoff**, Etlei.

Agreements were reached with the **lords** and *saiméic sosr* (territorial civilian governments) of 13 **territory nations** that were facing impending overpopulation, and a settler recruitment office was opened.

The first day of the first month of the Clasbule calendar coincided with the 29th day of the eleventh month of the year 729 **I.H.**.

Viscount Etlei was made a **count** thanks to his deed of adding a new inhabited planet to the **Empire**, and he joined the ranks of **grandeess**. What was formerly the **Viscountdom of Sfagnoff** was now the *Dreuhynh Sfagnaumr* (Countdom of Sfagnoff).

93 years after settlement began, the population reached the 100,000,000 mark, thereby warranting an upgrade to **marquessate**.

At present, the population of Clasbule is around 380,000,000. It has 21 states, with an assembly of state premiers comprised of saimh sosr (territorial citizen representatives)...

...Rattled off Jinto's **compuwatch** as, seated atop a hill, he scanned his surroundings. Or perhaps it was not so much as a hill as a giant piece of pumice, a big, holey boulder.

It was nothing but crops as far as the eye could see, in all directions, rows of the exact same plant running down to the horizon and beyond. Even now, following the advent of hydroponic farming, making use of the naturally occurring water and light on a planet's surface was still the cheapest method of food production, even counting the upfront cost of planetary terraforming.

From up on this hill, they really did look like wheat. Granted, that could be

because that was the grain he was most used to. They could very well be a genetically engineered giant strain similar to but distinct from wheat.

Whatever. It's wheat, he decided. It's not like it changed their situation. Gusts of wind made the fields rustle in surging waves, swaying from right to left — a virtual sea of gold.

Meanwhile, the “hill” of pumice jutted out from it all like a remote isle. To the distant right stood another isle, which looked to be a forest. Something was circling above that forest. Local planetary transport?

Or maybe...

All in all, the scene before them was idyllic. One would never expect this to be a warzone.

It was early evening now. They had spent all the night prior running, and dawn was cracking when they stumbled across the hill. By that point they were worn out. Luckily, they'd found a hole in the pumice face so big it was nearly a cave, and they slipped in for some much-needed sleep. Lafier was, of course, just as exhausted as he was.

Given their situation, taking shifts standing vigil should have been a matter of course. In fact, Jinto had meant to stand vigil, without ever having told Lafier. But the exhaustion had seeped into his very marrow, and sleep swallowed him up in no time. He'd only finally awakened moments ago. The reason he'd left Lafier's still-dozing side to climb to the top of the hill was to survey their environs.

Jinto shut off the informational audio, and tried tuning into the spot broadcasting frequency.

A middle-aged woman's face displayed on his small screen. She was orating on something or other. At first, he didn't understand a word she said.

There was no data regarding languages on the **connecting vessel's** limited **memory bank**, nor was his **compuwatch** equipped with a translator function. But as he focused on the words, he realized it was, in fact, Baronh.

“We... need... thank... organization... humankind... rule... unite. Reason... they... freed... us... leave... control... belong... Ahw. Now... we... need... stand...

independent... government... belong... us... resemble... truly...”

Thus, Jinto picked it up.

This was not the standard Baronh that was the official language of all the **Empire**, but rather a simplified pidgin.

The complicated-looking declension of Baronh had been removed; now grammatical meaning was determined by word order. Moreover, that word order was the same as Martinese. So, once he’d gotten used to the Clasbule accent (“Abh” was now “Ahw”), he started grasping the gist of her address. Of course, words of seemingly non-Baronh origin were also sprinkled throughout, but he could still understand the overall thrust of the sentences.

To sum it up, this lady was saying “Let us give thanks to the United Humankind, who have liberated us from Abh rule.”

That such a broadcast made it to air could only mean the **Star Forces** had been defeated. Jinto was quick to come to grips with that fact. He’d already steeled himself to the eventuality. All he could really do was wait until the **Empire** reclaimed the land.

Jinto fiddled with the frequency to see whether he could turn the channel. He was greeted by footage of a cityscape. It was most likely a movie.

A smirk formed. Really? Entertainment? At a time like this? On second thought, maybe it was a form of resistance in itself. After all, the whole planet had been built up by the Abh to begin with, just like Delktu. The population was composed of the descendants of those migrants who had already accepted Abh rule. Unlike a planet like Martinh, which had been conquered, anti-Abh sentiment here was probably sparse.

Actually, the planet was perhaps altogether indifferent. Cosmic-scale conquest likely held no interest to ordinary surface folks.

Incidentally, the garb the people wore in the movie caught Jinto’s eye more than the plot. There was no differentiation by gender in Abh fashion. Males and females alike wore **jumpsuits**. Here on Clasbule, however, it seemed **jumpsuits** were for males, while females wore simpler one-piece dresses and knee-high boots.

He tuned away from the transmission, deciding instead to determine their location. He set the device to receive signals from several different location markers on the planet's surface and cross-referenced them against the map he'd booted from the vessel's **computing crystals**.

He discovered a city named Lune Beega not too far away. In mentally matching the surrounding landscape with the map displayed on his **compuwatch**, he came to understand the forest floating in the sea of gold was not a forest at all.

Question is, do we try to blend in there, or do we stick to the fields... Jinto mulled it over. He only had nine meals' worth of **rations** left. Even if he spaced those meals out, he'd run out in five days, tops. Procuring more food here was their only option.

However, while this stretch of land was evidently a plantation, he had no idea how to harvest the crops, and no tools to make them fit for consumption. That, and he shuddered to think of how many days they'd be spending sleeping out in the open. It would be hard enough for Jinto, who'd grown up on a **terrestrial world**. It'd be even harder for Lafier, who'd been brought up in an artificial environment.

It was settled: hiding out in Lune Beega was the way forward. Viewed from here, the city seemed small and unreliable, but there was bound to be public transport that'd take them to bigger cities.

Dusk had arrived, and so Jinto clambered down the hill; it wasn't too high up, but it was a steep slope. Additionally, though there were plenty of holds for his hands and feet, the pumice was brittle. Any foothold could easily give way.

After many a close call, Jinto made it to the base of the hill. He wrapped around the base and knelt down to enter the hole — only to find he was face-to-face with a gun.

"It's me, Lafier!" he said, hands up.

"Where were you?" she said, putting it back.

"Just went to do a little scouting."

"I didn't ask you what you were doing. I asked you where you were."

“Man, you’re literal... I was atop the hill.”

“You **idiot!**”

“What?” he replied, flabbergasted.

“What if they’d seen you?”

“It’s okay. Nobody’s here.”

“They could be standing watch from above!”

“Oh yeah.” No doubt there were enemy ships scanning the surface from orbit as they spoke. They could, in fact, have spotted him. “But I’m telling you, I’m in the clear. I’m not wearing a **long robe**; they’d see me as a resident of the planet.”

“You can’t rely on the enemy making a mistake.”

“All right, fine. I won’t be so rash again. Promise.”

“Good. Don’t leave me without saying a word.”

“You were sleeping so soundly, though. Speaking of which, I guess I still haven’t said ‘good morning,’ so... Good morning, Lafier. Though I guess it’s already dark out.”

“**Idiot.**”

Grumpy much? Jinto shrugged. *Guess even she can be childish sometimes.*
“Wanna move base, just in case?” he suggested.

“Yes, I believe that would be wise. I can’t say staying here would be anything but dull, anyway,” she said, on her feet now.

After tidying themselves over with some food, they set about preparing to leave.

Jinto picked up the small apparatus that had been placed over by the far end, a machine that converted moisture into potable water. Sure enough, its container was filled to the brim. He poured its contents into two flasks and handed one to Lafier. Knapsacks strapped on, the two put the hill in which they’d spent one night of their lives behind them.

Jinto broke the silence as they trudged on. “I reckon we head into the city.”

“The city?”

“Yeah. Beats playing hide-and-seek in the fields, anyway. I’d like to rejoin civilization at some point.”

“But won’t it be dangerous?”

“For sure it will be,” Jinto replied. What was he going to do, lie? “But it’s hardly safe out here, either. I’m not the **Honorable Baron Emeritus of Febdash**, but I’ll tell you what he did. I don’t know what the way forward is. That said, there’s no food here. I don’t know if you like the idea of starving to death in the middle of nowhere, but to me it’s gotta be the second least dignified way to go.”

“You’re right,” said Lafier. Her voice was lacking its usual verve.

“You’re still tired, aren’t you, Lafier?”

“I am no such thing,” she snapped. “Why would you say that?”

“Just asking.” *Phew. There’s the hot-tempered girl I know*, he thought, relieved. “But tell me when you are, okay?”

“I told you, I’m not tired.”

“Yeah huh.”

The dark of night grew ever thicker, and finally the sun sank entirely.

“Jinto.” Her voice sounded from behind. “Go on a little ahead of me.”

“Why?” He spun to face her, surprised.

“Don’t ask.” Her face had turned grim in the starlight.

“Whaddya mean, ‘don’t ask’? Look around, there’s no landmarks anywhere. What if we lose sight of each other?”

“Fine, then you should wait here.”

“Sure, but... I’ve still gotta know why.”

“And I said *don’t ask*.”

Jinto’s unease only mounted. Had she stumbled across some fresh new reason to play the martyr? He was duty-bound to disabuse her of whatever

false notion she might be operating under.

“Listen, Lafier...” Jinto proceeded to speechify as to the nature of working in tandem. No keeping secrets, no trying to solve problems alone. They were to come up with their next steps together. That was the meaning of camaraderie. They had to overcome this crisis by joining forces and...

Lafier was listening at first, but gradually her brows slanted into a dangerous “V.”

“Jinto, you are officially dumber than a pack of frozen vegetables!” she cried at last. “Just wait there and look away!”

A certain torpor assailed Jinto as he watched her stomp off into a row of wheat. Then he hastily averted his gaze. In this darkness, she wouldn’t have been visible anyway, but it was incumbent upon him to respect the wishes of a blushing maiden.

Of course. Yes, she was Abh, beautiful as a sculpture. Yes, she was a relative of the **Empress** who ruled over 900 billion *rüé-bisarrh* (imperial subjects). But she was still a creature of physiological needs.

Jinto’s legs turned to jelly and he fell to a seat next to the base of some more giant wheat. How could he let himself get so carried away? What a buffoon he was.

Meanwhile, at that very moment, a reconnaissance spaceship belonging to the Peacekeeping Force of the United Humankind named “DEV903” was hard at work analyzing video of the surface, and discovered a surface-landing hull of an Imperial Star Forces ship in the farmland outside the city of Lune Beega.

The work crew had attempted to place where it had come from, but without success. Records of the small vessel that had given three destroyers the slip in normal space after dodging a warship’s fire in flat space had gotten buried amidst all the other records detailing the huge and intricate battlefield. Gaining total control of an entire star system was no easy feat.

Of course, it would have only been a matter of time before they identified it fully, but there was a lot on their plate. The work crew surmised that the

majority of soldiers left to find were escapees of the liaison base or the lord's estate. They'd also ascertained that, judging by the state of the hull, its erstwhile occupants were still alive.

They relayed that to Intelligence, but HQ had given the matter a very low priority level. After all, it had already been determined that all the key figures of the marquessate and the liaison base had already been captured or killed. Whoever the owner of this hull was, they weren't worth a frenzied hunt over.

Moreover, the *Laitefaiclach Sfagnaumr* (Sfagnoff Marquessate Defense Corps), the personal forces of the *Læbeghéc Sfagnaumr* (Estate of the Marquis of Sfagnoff), were still holding the line in a few zones on the surface, and many important government figures were still on the lam as well. The investigation teams were all out, equipped with odor detectors. Devoting manpower to tracking down one or two people who'd crash-landed would be a waste of effort.

First, they needed to conquer the planet more firmly, and arrest and detain any and all individuals who had aided the **Empire's** reign. Thus, they'd beat the populace back into servility.

The **Star Forces** soldier-hunting job would make for a fine accompaniment to the greater labor. Their prey was helpless anyway.

"Whoa!" Jinto came to a halt. He could hear the dirt fall in clumps down away from his feet.

It was a ravine. Jinto had teetered on the cliff's edge.

"What is it?" said Lafier.

"It's a dead end."

And the sun wasn't peeking out any time soon. Jinto screwed his eyes against the darkness trying to measure the gap, but there just wasn't enough light to make out what lay ahead.

He turned on his **compuwatch's** flashlight function, but illuminating the ground around him was the best it could manage.

Suddenly, light poured out from the vicinity. A powerful searchlight was cast upon the opposite side of the gorge.

Lafier was brandishing her **phaser** at the ready. The beam was coming from its muzzle.

“How do you do that?” asked Jinto, pulling out his own gun.

“I showed you where the safety is. Set it between SAFE and LOADED. That’s where the flashlight function is.”

“Really should have pointed out a feature that convenient at some point,” carped Jinto.

“It slipped my mind.”

“I see.” Using a gun as a flashlight was not an everyday occurrence.

Jinto set the safety to FLASHLIGHT, and pulled the trigger.

The gap was larger than he’d imagined. It was at least a *üésdagh* in breadth. The diagonally carved precipice wound wide indeed.

Deep, however, it was not, measuring only around 500 *dagh* top to bottom. There was giant wheat growing at the bottom of the canyon, too. He could look down on the ear tips.

“It’s looking pretty rough,” he said, holstering it back into his **sash-belt** and leaning over to scan the cliff. The drop wasn’t totally vertical, but it was too steep to walk down. Meanwhile, the climb back up looked easier. If he they didn’t watch themselves on the descent, they could easily tumble and plummet.

Jinto took off his knapsack and rummaged through it. “We got a rope or something in here?”

“There should be a *ryrdüac* (carbon crystal fiber).”

“Sounds useable. Where is it?”

Lafier’s hand extended from the side and took something rod-like out from Jinto’s knapsack. She spun it deftly in hand. “So, what do I do with this?”

“You need to ask?” he said, taken aback. “We’re gonna use it to make our way down. Hand it over a sec.”

Jinto took the rod and inspected it. Though it was of course military issue, it took after the same general principle as the *ïotmséc ryrdüar* (YOHMSEH RYOORDWAH, carbon crystal fiber spindle) he'd used on Delktu.

The **fiber** was contained within the rod's core, and fast-drying *gainh* (synthetic resin) occupied a good part of both ends. Fibers of cheaper make might only be useable when uncovered, or be covered from the outset by a coating. This fiber, however, was high quality. One could choose whether to apply a coating based on the circumstances.

Moreover, the hook attached to the fiber's tip was versatile and could be remotely controlled. The **Star Forces** could be counted on to spare no expense, even on auxiliary items.

Jinto strung the hook as he applied the coating on the fiber. Then he had it snake its way over to the base of the giant wheat and hook on.

"All right, I'll go first." Jinto gripped the **spindle**, turned his back, and lowered a leg. He let out the **fiber** little by little and rappelled down the cliff.

He made his last leap after confirming the ground was a mere 50 *dagh* below via the light of the **compuwatch**.

"It's your turn, Lafier!" Jinto shouted, looking up at the top of the precipice. He then set the **spindle** to automatically wind itself back and let go.

The **spindle** smoothly climbed back up the cliff as it scattered the coating scraped off the fiber.

"I'm jumping!" she said, conveying her determination with heft and import.

Lafier descended with a great big *swoosh*. It looked as though she'd left **carbon crystal fiber** unreeled.

Jinto rushed to her side. "You — you okay?"

"Of course I am," she said, her face contorted with pain.

"I told you, you've gotta stop overdoing it." Jinto offered her a hand up.

"I am not overdoing it," she insisted, dismissing the hand.

"If you say so." Jinto unhooked the line via remote control, and rewound it.

The shavings of **synthetic resin** piled up at his feet.

When he'd finished winding it back up, he used his gun once again to illuminate the cliff's underside.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for a new lodge for the night. Gotta be far enough away now. Aaaand looky here."

A cave. Jinto beckoned her, and together they drew closer to their fresh accommodations.

It was quite extensive; they couldn't see its far wall even using the **phaser's** flashlight. Jinto kept the cave's depths illuminated, on the lookout for some hidden, lurking threat, but as far as he could see, no such cause for concern was to be found.

Jinto laid down his knapsack and summoned the map on his **compuwatch**. It told him they were under 50 *üésdagh* from Lune Beega now.

Soon, it was mealtime for the two. Jinto went into his plan while munching on some more nearly tasteless **combat rations**.

"I'm gonna go check out the city, but I'll be back."

"By yourself?" Lafier raised her brows.

"Uh, yeah. Duh."

"Why? Is there a reason I can't go?"

"You're wearing a **military uniform**," he pointed out.

"Whaddya think'll become of somebody wearing a **Star Forces** uniform in an enemy-occupied town?"

"Ah..."

It never crossed her mind? For real? I mean, there's naïve, and then there's naïve.

But Jinto kept those misgivings to himself. "That's why I'm gonna be getting you something to wear that won't stand out. I'll zip in and out as quickly as possible, so wait for me here."

A fire kindled in her eyes. Jinto was flustered. What had sparked her ire now? Had he said something untoward?

No. He was making all the sense in the world, and besides, if she thought differently, she should tell him otherwise. The way she was glaring at him was uncalled for.

Yet he was surprised when Lafier nodded. "Okay."

"Good." Jinto washed down the last crumbs of his **rations** with some water and got up off the ground.

"You're leaving already?"

"Yeah. The earlier the better."

"You might be rushing straight into ruin."

"No need to remind me. Half of me's sure I am."

Jinto retrieved the **sash clip** from his knapsack and put it inside his **jumpsuit's pocket**. He also decided to take three meals' worth of **rations** with him. The rest he left behind.

The issue was his **compuwatch**. His model was the standard for the **Empire**, but it was rare across **terrestrial worlds**. The sharp-sighted among the people might find him out just through that. Naturally, they wouldn't jump to the conclusion that he's a **noble**, but they might think him a *laimh* imperial citizen. He would be pretending to be a *so*ss territorial citizen, so that was an outcome he aimed to avoid.

On the other hand, the **compuwatch** was a very convenient tool in his arsenal. After all, he needed to be able to contact Lafier if an emergency arose.

In the end, he elected to place it, too, into his **pocket**.

"You're not taking the gun?" she asked, incredulous.

This was no time for jokes. Jinto could only shrug. "If I get caught in a shoot-out, I'm a goner, gun or no gun."

"Mm hm. So you'd rather just give up."

"Don't make me out like that. If they catch me carrying a **Star Forces** gun on

me, they'd have me dead to rights."

"Ah. I see."

"Glad you see it my way," Jinto sighed. But some trepidation lingered in him — not regarding his situation, fraught with peril as it was, but rather regarding leaving her to her own devices.

Up among the stars, he'd thought of the girl as a hypercompetent Abh exemplar, but now he'd witnessed how little thought she put in things that were the most basic common sense for him.

Don't worry, she'll be fine, he persuaded himself.

Lafier may have been lacking in everyday practicality, but that was only problematic when she was around others. Of course, it would be a different story once she stepped foot into the city herself, but for now, she was more than capable of taking care of herself as long as she was out of sight.

But how likely is it no one will spot her? After all, it was quite possible a search party was already closing in on them, which would raise its own set of fears.

Due to its nature, the **Star Forces** didn't put much emphasis on acting solo. It would be difficult for a single soldier, especially one without the relevant training, to be sufficiently mindful. Of course, Jinto hadn't the training either, but he did have a strong suit the Abh were blind to: there was no way anyone could tell he was **nobility** unless he divulged it himself. If push came to shove, he could talk himself out of a dicey situation by claiming to be an **imperial citizen**.

On a nation as large as Sfagnoff, there had to be a considerable number of **imperial citizens**. Besides, it wasn't as though the enemy would exhibit that much interest in one nation's citizenry anyway.

By contrast, Lafier's blue hair and **Empire-issue military uniform** were dead giveaways. Jinto would've liked to see the idiot who wouldn't cotton on straight away. Lafier getting spotted by somebody was the greatest crisis they could face at the moment.

Jinto was stumped, until he hit upon a primitive alarm system.

“Be careful when you’re out of the cave, all right?” With that, Jinto let out the **carbon crystal fiber** (sans coating). He wedged a protruding rock onto the hook at about knee-height. He set the fiber to be covered in the coating, and let it out to a suitable length, holding it taut horizontally. Then he fastened the part of the line coated in the **synthetic resin** onto a protrusion on the opposite end.

“What is that for?”

“It’s a trap. It’ll alert you if somebody comes too close,” he explained, pointing to the non-coated **fiber**. “Not only is it invisible, it’s sharper than any blade, too. So if somebody doesn’t think better than popping in, then GYAAHH! Their legs, sliced clean off. Now that’s tight security.”

Lafier cocked her head. “What if an innocent falls for the trap?”

That, he hadn’t thought of. To call the act of attacking an unrelated party with a snare that could easily sever a limb or two “barbaric” would be an understatement. But Jinto quickly squashed his pangs of conscience.

“If that happens, it happens.” He snapped a finger. “Sometimes, civilians get maimed and killed in war.” And so Jinto left for the city.

Lafier remained sitting, holding one knee. She was tuning into the airwaves of this land of “Clasbule” through her **compuwatch**.

And she’d thought *Jinto’s* accent was bad. The language spoken on this planet was barely even Baronh. There were traces of Baronh vocabulary, and it did have a more refined ring than the language of the United Humankind, but it was all a bunch of unintelligible mumbo-jumbo. She soon ran out of patience attempting to follow along.

As she absentmindedly watched the outside world get brighter, her mind dwelled on how she’d been left all alone. She was out of her element. Since they’d come aground, it had been Jinto calling all of the shots. This did not amuse her.

Until she got Jinto aboard an **Empire ménh** interstellar ship, she could not say she’d completed her mission. She had to protect him, and the navigation log, at all costs.

Despite that, she felt as though Jinto was protecting *her* — a reality she was loath to accept. What angered her the most, however, was how much better things seemed to be going after she'd ceded the initiative to him.

Am I relying on him? Should I? she asked herself. Considering how flustered he'd been with her in space, she never thought him a particularly dependable individual.

She laid her head sideways against her raised knee. Earlier, she'd put up a brave front, acted tough in front of him. But she was tired. So, so tired. She'd even acknowledge her cat Horia was one of her **gene providers** if it could somehow strip her muscles of all the lactic acid.

The surface gravity on Clasbule was comparable to most other **terrestrial worlds**, but twice the *daimon* gravity-level to which the Abh were accustomed. Lafier had endured upwards of ten times the G-forces, yes, but she was always sprawled on a specially crafted seat designed to cushion her back during times of heavy acceleration. While the surface only clocked in at 2 *daimon*, it was her first time moving about in heightened gravity for such a long time.

Naturally, she couldn't be expected to keep a steady pace without ever tiring, but she felt pathetic, nonetheless. The bodies of Abhkind were expressly engineered to allow them some freedom of movement even during high acceleration. Her ancestors hadn't had the luxury of **gravity control systems**, nor did they complain.

The **Star Forces** had equipped the vessel with an emergency surface-landing function, but she'd never given much thought to what that would precipitate. There wasn't usually a planet with a breathable atmosphere conveniently close by when a ship was caught in danger, after all.

It was little wonder, then, that her scenario hadn't cropped up in her training much. She'd learned how to land the ship, but all that was projected for the aftermath was to stay in place and await rescue.

Waiting for rescue in this particular situation, however, was a fool's errand. As a mere **trainee starpilot**, she was not privy to **Star Forces** soldier deployment, but she reckoned it'd take 10 days at the very shortest. She'd have to prepare herself for it taking more than twice as long.

She'd even have to make peace with the possibility that they'd *never* come... They might run out of food, or get captured by the those of the enemy army who pursued defeated soldiers.

She had no choice but to get through this while counting on Jinto, no matter how dependable he truly proved to be.

A smile played at her lips as she nodded off. *He's been full of life ever since we landed on a surface.* Even though the danger now exceeded what they faced back at the **Barony of Febdash**.

When she awoke and noticed Jinto was absent, her mind ran wild. She was beset not by the fear she'd failed in her mission, but rather by the uncertainty of what to do from that point forward.

As hard as it was to believe, Lafier was relying on him. Lafier, a **royal princess** of the **Empire**. Depending on another.

But so be it. For there was no one else in a 100-light-year radius she could trust.

Chapter 7: *Bach Lunar Bigac* (Lune Beega City)

“You know, it *really* wouldn’t kill her to say ‘Jinto, you are the only one I can trust in a 100-light-year radius.’ Talk about a hard-ass,” he muttered to himself, breathing heavily as he crawled on his belly.

As he traversed the valley, he spotted a bridge — and a bridge meant there must be a trail. That much he had going for him, but there was no path nor any stairs to the bridge from the ravine.

When Jinto found purchase on the towering cliff and crawled his way up, he was already dog-tired. Clearly, he had overestimated his own stamina. He ought to have taken a break before heading out.

Being beside Lafier had distracted him from it, but now that he was operating alone, the exhaustion came walloping. Sure, he was raised in a **terrestrial world**, but one with extensive public transport. Spending days in the great outdoors wasn’t exactly a hobby of his, either. The stamina that he’d built up through playing *minchiu* could only take him so far.

Look how much I’m busting my ass. A word of thanks would be nice at some point.

He did realize, however, that since he had volunteered for this, he had no right to complain. Besides, this was necessary for his own continued survival as well.

But wait... *was* this necessary for his survival?

Wouldn’t it be, in fact, easier for him to simply abandon her? To go on living by himself?

A shudder ran down Jinto’s spine at the thought. He’d never seen himself as a man of unimpeachable virtue, but self-loathing naturally set in.

As long as he was entertaining these hideous thoughts, he might as well plunge the whole way. Selling Lafier to the enemy military and getting some coin for his troubles. That was an option.

Jinto cracked a grin.

A grin he knew didn't suit him, even without a mirror.

The boy known as Jinto Lin was no saint, but he wasn't quite that craven or devious, either. Neither a hero for all time, nor a moustache-twirling scoundrel.

He was like a comet on an extremely elliptical orbit: following a path chosen for him, always scorched by the light of the sun, and at times budged by the gravity of some nasty nearby planet. Yes, that was the life for him.

But enough of this pity party. He got to his feet.

Just as he'd expected, there lay the road, the whole surface of which was shining softly. At first the light looked faint, but upon stepping onto the road, it was bright enough.

Jinto began trekking toward Lune Beega.

The time it took Claspule to make a single rotation technically lasted 33.121 standard hours (so Jinto had actually slept for around 15 hours). The planet's residents divided those into 32 hours. Daily life, however, was measured in 24-hour periods. The most basic math would clue one in on the 8-hour difference between those two standards. It caused Claspulians to set the start of their days as either midnight or noon.

Headaches were inevitable, but the alternative was allowing the populace's biological clocks to go out of whack by 9 hours at a time.

Disassociating internal biological clocks from the planet's actual rotation period boasted an additional upside, as it mitigated the need to establish time zones. The sheer amount this benefited the planetary information superhighway could not be overstated.

The day had broken now, but according to the biological clock, it was nearly noon. He'd probably arrive at the city at around 1 in the afternoon — the perfect hour for some shopping.

Guess rushing to get here wasn't totally dumb after all, Jinto thought, patting himself on the back ever so slightly.

After tuning the **compuwatch** to the local feed, he stashed it into his

jumpsuit's pocket. He kept his ears open along the way to absorb the Clasbulian tongue with which he needed to familiarize himself.

As he was picking up words here and there, Jinto's mood grew rotten.

It was the enemy. They were broadcasting the rationale behind their invasion of the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**.

They were claiming that the **Imperial Star Forces** started this war themselves. They were saying that a Star Forces **warship** — which could only mean the *Goslauth* — attacked the United Humankind unprovoked while the UH was exploring the **flat space** near a newly opened **gate**.

That, as retribution against that heinous act, and in order to seek the safety of the new **gate**, they had to “secure” the **Sfagnoff Marquessate** through “protective occupation.”

“What a joke!” Having been on the **patrol ship** *Goslauth* when it happened, Jinto knew it was all lies. That fleet was far too large to be engaged in exploration, and even worse, it had been the UH who had started the war by sending out small high-speed spacecraft.

Sadly, no one here would be receptive to the truth.

Jinto changed frequency, hoping to happen on something apolitical. Yet every channel was taken over by the enemy's broadsides. No trace remained of the kind of entertainment he'd been able to view the prior evening. The enemy must have consolidated their grip in the intervening hours.

One broadcaster aired a lecture on the concepts of democracy and liberty. Another featured the middle-aged woman from before, still singing the UH's praises while exposing the **Humankind Empire of Abh's** twisted deeds.

How were the residents of the planet taking all of this? He definitely knew how they were taking it on Martinh. They must be backing this latest conqueror — or as they'd see it, friend and ally — with considerable zeal.

But what about here? To state that a world the Abh built up to begin with was “under the thumb of the Abh” was to overgeneralize.

That said, Jinto didn't know anything about Clasbule apart from what he'd

read in an encyclopedia article. He needed to know more before he could make up his mind as to whether or not that sweeping statement held true for this planet. It was also eminently possible that a populace that had been submissive to the Empire's reign would also submit to a new ruler.

He hoped that at the very least the people would be wholly indifferent. If the men and women of Clasbule joined the enemy soldiers in running wild on the hunt for Abhs, then his chances of remaining safe, but especially Lafier's, would nosedive.

Maybe staying in the fields would be wiser after all. Jinto could go into the city to procure the necessary food and everyday supplies by himself. But he would leave that decision for after he'd inspected the situation in town.

Jinto passed by a number of *üsiac* (hovercars) but didn't come across any other pedestrians.

At last, Lune Beega's structures stood before his very eyes.

Jinto reached a hand into the **pocket** and turned off his **compuwatch**. He was now confident he could follow the language.

Speaking was another matter entirely. He had no confidence he could convincingly imitate a Clasbulian accent.

I know. I'll pretend to be a newly-arrived immigrant. He'd done it before on Delktu, and there was no reason he couldn't pull it off here.

The fields gave way to the ring-road encircling the city.

There they were. The people strolling through town.

Jinto walked past a group of co-eds. One of their number cast him a suspicious look.

Was it his clothes? Upon giving the attire of the people around him a look, Jinto could see why he might stand out.

First of all, there were the colors he was wearing. While the locals apparently preferred primary colors to a garish extent in their garb, Jinto's getup was a solid dark rouge. Perhaps that gave Clasbulians cause to view him as a shabby, seedy sort. In this world of the flashy, his unassuming hues were actually

pushing the spotlight on him. On top of that, Jinto had carelessly forgotten about how thoroughly disheveled he looked.

Damn, are we screwed?

Did Claspule have police? What was he saying — of course they did.

They wouldn't take me into custody over this, though, would they?

Jinto trod to the city's center, fretting all the while. He had to focus on pawning off the **sash clip** for some clothes and other essentials.

Thankfully, he had discovered something with regard to people's general look that would serve them. It seemed dyed hair was the norm. Coiffs of gold and vermillion abounded, and eye-catching shades at that. He even caught some blue and green hair. Now he didn't have to worry about Lafier's bluish-black hair.

As for the city itself, it wasn't a metropolis by any means. The tall skyline he'd been able to make out from afar constituted the entirety of Lune Beega, not just the center as he'd assumed.

Cities on Delktu were, by-and-large, sprawling, endless seas of short buildings. Here, on the other hand, it seemed commonplace to house many families in single structures, many of which were cylindrical in shape. Streetlights stretched laterally from the outer walls, their lamps illuminating the ground below. That light, coupled with the gleam of the windows, made the towers reminiscent of ornament-strewn trees on some festive occasion. Perhaps they really were modeled after those arboreal decorations.

Through the spacious gaps between buildings ran luminous roadways. The passages possessed wider sections along their lengths. The hovercars parked off to the sides of those wider sections intimated their purpose. Hoverways snaked from those parking spots, curving around any buildings they happened to encounter. Grass blanketed the outsides of the roads, which likely looked lovely when viewed in the sunlight.

In all of the towers, the first floor was a store of some kind.

As he sought a store that could help him, he weaved around the urban forest. He then crossed paths with a group of men in green-brown uniforms. Their

dress wasn't a one-piece, and as such clearly differed from that of the locals. Moreover, they were toting what could only be weapons.

Enemy troops! Instinctively, instantly, Jinto hung his head.

The soldiers failed to notice Jinto's dubious behavior and continued on their way, chatting loudly.

Jinto sighed with relief. When he looked up, what met his eyes was a sign.

"HIGH... CLASS... PERSONAL... DECORATION... GOODS... DECORATE... ROOM" — so read this establishment's advertisement. Dealers of luxury accessories and interior decoration, if he was right.

Jinto peered into the display window. It was packed with nouveau riche ornaments and accessories, like earrings and necklaces, that Clabulians seemed to favor.

On Delktu, stores like these also purchased off of customers. But that was a different planet, with different rules. There was great diversity among the **terrestrial worlds** of the **Empire**.

Jinto mustered his courage and stepped inside.

"Welcome." A man with a **jumpsuit** of, by Clabulian standards, understated pink and yellow, and a thin black scarf wrapped around his collar and tied in a stylish knot, greeted Jinto from behind the counter.

"Excuse me..." Jinto's lips were dry from the strain, so he licked them. "There's something I'd like you to buy."

"Certainly," he beamed. "Do you have the item on your person?"

"Yeah," Jinto nodded, placing the **sash clip** on the counter.

"Hoo-wee, this one's a beaut." He took it in hand and scrutinized it. His probing eyes also found their way to the expression on Jinto's face. The man flashed him another smile, a sly one.

"It, it is, right?" Jinto's heart threatened to fly right out of his mouth.

"How much would you take to part with this, good sir?" he asked, returning the **clip**.

“Uhh...”

Well, shoot. Not only was he unaccustomed to haggling, he didn't know the baseline market prices of precious metals. The plan he'd come up with while on the hunt for the store had been: have the storeowner set a price, counter by doubling that price, and then negotiate a middle ground. Yet he'd been beaten to the punch.

“Hmmm...” Jinto looked around at the wares on display in search of reference, but they lacked price tags.

He had no choice. Though it might leave him with egg on his face, he had to take actual market value out of the equation and resort to asking for the amount of money he needed. If only he had 100 *scarh* on hand, he could shop for enough to tide them over for a month.

That was when he once again realized his mistake. He had no idea how much of the local currency 1 *scarh* went for. He didn't even know what the currency here was. If he'd thought to look it up beforehand, he could have easily done so using his **compuwatch**, and now he was kicking himself. Naturally, he could hardly whip out his compuwatch at the moment.

With this, he could no longer scoff at Lafier's inexperience.

“What's the matter?” The clerk kept staring his way.

“Uhh... How much does the average person need to get by for half a year?”

“Hmm... Pardon me, but that's a rather abstract way to set a price.”

“Sorry!” Red in the face, Jinto reached for the **sash clip**. “I'll come back later!”

“Wait a moment, sir,” said the clerk. “Would you mind parting with it for 1,500 *deuth* (DYOOTH)?”

“1,500 *deuth*?” 1,500 sounded like a lot, but for all he knew, it might not have measured up to a single *scarh*.

“How much would that be in *scarh*?”

“I'm sorry, sir,” he said, lowering his volume, “This is just business, so I don't normally like to pry. That being said, given the situation out there, I can't say it's wise to concern yourself over the conversion rate to *scarh*.”

“Now that you mention it...” Jinto felt a great deal of gratitude for the clerk’s roundabout counsel.

“Incidentally, I’d say you can live comfortably on around 20 *deuth* a day.”

“I see...” Jinto ran the numbers in his head, and realized that that amounted to around six months’ living expenses.

“How about I give it to you for 3,000 *deuth*?”

“Sir,” he replied icily, “not to repeat myself, but we’re running a business here. Moreover, we are the only shop in town that deals with goods-to-money conversion.”

In other words, this was their best offer, and there would be no haggling.

“Okay,” Jinto relented. “Please, I’ll take 1,500 *deuth* for it.”

“A wise decision, sir.” Tactful enough not to ask for Jinto’s bank account number, the clerk slid 1,500 worth of *deuth* in cash over the counter.

“Please count and see.”

“Right.” It was a stack of 100s. Jinto counted 15 bills, and then stashed them into his **pocket**. “That’s 1,500 all right.”

The clerk bowed. “It was a pleasure doing business with you.”

“Um, can I ask you something?” ventured Jinto. “Out of pure curiosity, how much are you planning to sell that for?”

“Good question,” he said as he handled the **sash clip**. “It isn’t customary for us to wear such **sash clips**, as we don’t wear *daüchlong* robes. However, the exceptional quality and craftsmanship of this piece should make for an attractive figurine of sorts. I think I’d like to sell it for at least 30,000 *deuth*.”

Hearing that he’d traded it in for a 20th of its actual value didn’t rile Jinto up.

“I hope you make a killing on it,” said Jinto sincerely.

“Thank you very much,” he replied, smiling from ear to ear.

Now that he had money, buying clothes was the next order of business.

At first, he thought he only needed to buy Lafier some new ensembles, but

now it seemed he could use a wardrobe change, too.

The various vending machines dispensing apparel tended to draw the eye, but since they didn't accept cash, he soon gave up on them. On the other hand, clothing stores proved more numerous than accessories and decoration. Jinto chose to visit one such store he'd crossed on his way to this place and retraced his steps.

In front of the building that contained the clothing store, a *flairiac* (grounded car) was parked. The car's build was quite ungainly, and several figures in the green-brown military fatigues were standing around it.

"Stop where you are, citizen!" blared the car's megaphone. Jinto ducked his head, but it wasn't him they were accosting.

A handful of troops restrained a young girl.

"Wha, what're you—" she shrieked with equal parts fear and shock. Passing onlookers paused in their tracks.

"You too, citizen!" blared the car again. Another handful of troops crowded around the middle-aged man in question.

"There's no need to panic," the megaphone insisted. "If you cooperate, there will be no trouble. Please state your names and addresses. We ask that you show us some identification as well."

"What am I guilty of!?" shouted the girl.

"You must have failed to hear our military's notification. Blue hair is considered a declaration of self-enslavement to the Abh."

So that was it. The two they had apprehended had both dyed their hair blue.

"I happen to like deep blue. What of it?" said the man.

"You are trying to emulate the Abh, which is a shameful act for a liberated citizen."

"You've got to be joking!"

"I'll have none of your sophistry!"

Murmurs of protest were stirring amidst the spectators as well. The residents

of Clabule were relatively combative in nature.

“We’ll be giving you two until tomorrow, 10:00 AM planetary time to dye your hair and report to the liaison office that’s now set up at City Hall. If you refuse, you’ll be considered recalcitrant in your self-subjection to the Abh, and summarily arrested.”

Jinto watched the two **territorial citizens** unwillingly disclose their names and addresses as he headed toward the clothing boutique.

“We are the Evangel Unit of the United Humankind’s Peacekeepers! If you know any family or acquaintances who have dyed their hair blue, we ask you to persuade them to change it to a color better suited to humanity. You have been warned. Starting 10:00 AM tomorrow, there will be no more warnings. Offenders’ hair will be removed at once...” So the megaphone decreed to the assembled onlookers behind Jinto as he paced away from the scene.

Chapter 8: *Gorocoth Lamhirr* (Lafier's Transformation)

Clasbule's long night was finally receding into the dawn.

Wow, Jinto mused as he approached the cave, how long's it been since I've had somebody to wait for me at home?

Was she being good and waiting there for him? He'd only been gone for around three hours, after all. Plus, the enemy seemed busy laying their hands on people who'd made the dire mistake of choosing to dye their hair blue, so she was probably fine... Or so he was telling himself to tamp down his anxiety.

"Lafier, I'm back!" He didn't want a gun aimed at him again.

There was no change to the entrance of the cave. No traces of blood adorned the trap, so he knew no animals taller than knee-height in stature had trespassed. Jinto carefully rewound the **carbon crystal fiber** onto the **spindle**.

"Lafier!" No response.

His anxiety creeping back, Jinto took the **compuwatch** out of his **pocket**, equipped it, switched on its flashlight, and went to the cave's far end.

There she was, breathing lightly as she dozed. Her face's profile looked so much like a young child's it was frankly astounding.

Jinto sighed with relief.

"Lafier, wake up." He shook her shoulders. The **royal princess's** eyes reeled open, and suddenly she drove Jinto back and reached for her **phaser**!

"It's me! It's me!" Jinto stroked his backside.

"Oh. So it is." Lafier relaxed. "You scared me."

"And that's my fault how?" said Jinto. "I called for you a million times, and you weren't waking up. Honestly, I doubt the trap would've alerted you anyway at this rate."

“Shut up, Jinto,” she said, shutting him down. She narrowed her eyes. “What are those tacky clothes supposed to be?”

“Oh, this old thing?” Jinto looked down at the **jumpsuit** he’d donned. How many colors were plastered over it? The three primaries went without saying, and joining them in the madness were indigo, pea green, pink, reddish brown, tan... there were roughly 20 shades in all.

The clerk at the boutique had assured him the color scheme looked dapper on him.

“I think you’re gonna have to get used to *colorful*.”

“I refuse,” she stated bluntly.

“Okay, you don’t have to get used to it, but I do need you to tough it out,” Jinto compromised.

“Forbearance is necessary in life,” she agreed reluctantly.

Jinto sat down, opened the duffle bag he’s acquired in town, and took out a can.

“What’s that?” asked Lafier, peering.

“Hair dye.”

“Hair dye?”

“Yep. Gotta do something about your blue hair, don’t you think?” Jinto read the label. “Oh, good. It says just spill it on your hair.”

“You mean to dye my hair!?” she said, eyes widening.

“Uh, duh. Did you think I felt the urge to dye MY hair? I bought some for you in black. Thought you’d probably like black the most.”

“I refuse!” Lafier covered her hair with her arms and shrank back.

“C’mon...” Jinto was not expecting this. “So you don’t like black, then? Maybe I should’ve picked red or yellow.”

“I don’t dislike black; I like my hair the color it is. It’s an exquisite shade, not too dark, not too light...” Lafier was ready to launch into a fervent diatribe.

“Gotcha, gotcha. I think it’s really pretty, too,” Jinto consoled her. “Thing is, over in the city, they’re rounding up people who’ve dyed their hair blue.”

“My hair isn’t dyed!”

“Yeah, and why’s that? Think about it: once they see that it’s NOT dyed, I daresay it’d turn even worse for us.”

“*Coo lin mahp ahs tang kip!*”

“You oughta wash your mouth out. Not that I have any idea what you said.”

“I suppose I have no other choice...” she said, dejected.

Jinto had lost his patience, though. “Man, you Abhs are real hard to understand. You’re fine with genetic modification, so what’s so bad about a little *cosmetic* modification?”

“How many times must I tell you, you too are A—”

“I’m Abh? Yeah, well, it’s hard to feel that way whenever stuff like this happens.” Jinto shook the can. “O noblest *Fiac Lartnér*, though it pains a lowly peon like me to impose upon you, couldst you offer your hair most beauteous upon me? Or do you wanna do the damn thing yourself?”

“Give it to me; I’d never let you lay a hand on my hair!” Lafier practically wrested the can from his hands.

Making no effort to read the label, Lafier attempted to take off the can’s cap.

“You’ve gotta take off your **circlet** first!”

“I do?”

“Of course! I’m trying to pass you off as a Lander, Lafier. You ever met a Lander wearing a **circlet**?” Then it occurred to him. “Oh yeah, I guess Abhs don’t really take ‘em off very often. Is exposing your *froch* in public embarrassing, or...?”

“You always think up such strange things,” she said, seemingly impressed.

“Then it’s not embarrassing?”

“No. We simply don’t take them off because doing so is inconvenient.”

“Okay, good. Then I don’t have to worry about it.”

Jinto’s heart thumped a little. The *froch* spatio-sensory organ was composed of over 100,000,000 individual lenses. The closest point of comparison would be an insect’s compound eye. In all honesty, the thought that Lafier’s forehead was sporting an insect eye was less than appealing.

However, when Lafier begrudgingly removed her **circlet**, he sighed with relief. It was diamond-shaped, with the luster and color of a *lamh* (pearl). Depending on how much light was shed on it, it also at times resembled more of a **ruby**. The individual lenses were too small to see with the naked eye, so it looked more like a synthetic machine part or some eccentric finery.

Far from unsettling, it was as though she’d pasted on a sliver of a gorgeous jewel.

“Wow, it’s super noticeable,” said Jinto.

“Don’t tell me you want me to remove IT, too!?” Lafier’s terror was plain to see. “I *can’t* remove it. If you demand I gouge it out, then...”

“Whoa, whoa, no, that’d be way too cruel.”

Lafier sighed with relief.

“Whaddya figure me for, a serial slasher?” Jinto fetched a hat from inside his duffle bag. “I bought you this. Try it on, would you?”

Lafier tipped it on, shoving it down to her brow. Now her *froch* was totally concealed, and her overly perfect facial features also slightly obscured from view.

On the other hand, her pointy **Abliar ears** were jutting out of her hair for all to witness.

“Your ears.”

“Ah!” She stuffed the tips of her lobes into her hat and hid them behind her hair.

“Is this okay?”

“I like it,” Jinto grinned.

“If I wear this hat, then surely dyeing my hair isn’t necessary?” Lafier attempted in vain to stuff all of her hair into the hat.

Jinto coolly smacked her with the truth: “Dye it. It’ll always be peeking out. And if you want to cut it so that it’s always totally concealed, then that’d be a haircut for the books. Is that what you’d prefer?”

Lafier shuddered just imagining it. “Fine.” She bit her lip and mustered some grim resolve. “If it must be done, then I shall do it.”

“So dramatic. The people here dye their hair for fun, you know. Whatever happened to the Lafier who was all ‘if things turn critical, I want you to take the navigation log and leave me’? Are you that Lafier? Where did your penchant for self-sacrifice fly off to?”

“Shut up, Jinto. I’ll have you know I love my hair.”

“I wasn’t saying you have to dye it for the rest of your life. It’s just for the time being, Lafier.”

“The rest of my life? I couldn’t stand it!” Lafier took off the hat, and her long locks danced back down. The princess took her bluish-black hair and lovingly caressed it.

Jinto was beset by a needless sense of guilt. “You’ll meet your true hair again soon!”

“Right,” Lafier nodded. She plopped a drop of hair dye on her head. Black proceeded to devour the bluer hints of her coif. Through some principle unbeknownst to them, the dye didn’t touch the skin or fabric her hair touched, but continued to spread out thin across her whole head of hair.

In less than a minute, the Abh girl with the bluish-black hair had transformed into a girl with vivacious yet totally black hair. The only thing standing in the way of being able to describe her as “average” was her peskily lovely face.

“Looks great on you.”

“I’m in no mood for flattery,” she said, but she was not so dissatisfied after all, grooming her black locks with her fingers.

“All right, next up, your clothing.” Jinto handed over the duffle bag, and with

it its entire contents. “They’re all in here. I’ll be outside, so please change.”

“Sure.” Upon taking the girl’s clothing out of the bag, her brow furrowed. “These **long robes** are strangely shaped. Though they’re better than I was imagining.”

Lafier’s attire was striped blue and red, a very mild-mannered design here on Claspule.

Jinto stood up. “Call me when you’re finished changing.”

“Wait, Jinto!” She opened up the duffle bag facing the floor. The only thing left inside was a pair of shoes. “There’s no **jumpsuit** in here. Is it really all right for me to wear this **long robe** over my **military uniform**?”

Jinto closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The time had come to slap her with yet another abominable truth bomb.

“That’s not a **long robe**,” Jinto put it to her gently. “You wear it in *place* of your **jumpsuit**.”

“I’m meant to wear this over my undergarments!?”

“Fraid so. That’s how they do it here. There were some women who wore this kind of clothing on my home planet, too. They call it a ‘one piece’ there. Don’t know how to say it in Baronh.”

“I don’t care about that!” Lafier regarded this “one piece” with suspicion and fear. “Must I... Must I truly wear this?”

“Yes,” said Jinto patiently, “if you want to pass as a Claspulian.”

“You are a cruel, cruel man, Jinto!”

Jinto shook his head. “Please understand, I’m not doing this because I want to.”

“Is that so?” Her suspicious gaze fell on him. “Then why, exactly, have your cheeks been twitching this entire time?”

Once Lafier had changed clothes, Jinto declared he would be taking a short break, and soon he was snoozing. Meanwhile, Lafier kept watch in her new

“one piece,” gun in hand.

Jinto guessed he must have napped for two hours and change, because when he stretched out and cricked his neck, he felt refreshed.

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Yep,” nodded Lafier, who was sitting by the cave entrance.

There was something they needed to take care of before they could leave. They had to erase as much evidence of their being **Star Forces** as possible.

Jinto dug a hole at the bottom of the ravine. He’d wanted to dig it at the cave if possible, but with their limited toolset, it was next to impossible to bore through rock.

Thus, he interred their **Star Forces** knapsacks. Lafier’s **military uniform** and Jinto’s **jumpsuit** joined the pile to be buried. Then, finally...

“I should bury that thing, too.” Jinto reached his hand.

“You can’t!” Lafier clutched her **circlet** to her chest.

“Why not? It’s military-issue, you can get it replaced a thousand times over later.”

“This is the first **circlet** I was ever supplied with upon entry into the military. It’s a keepsake to me.”

“Then we’ll just dig it back up at some point. It’s a **circlet**, it won’t rust or something.”

“That’s true, but it might also prove useful.”

“For example?”

“I can’t think of one.” But Lafier was not budging.

“If you ask me, we shouldn’t be in possession of anything that’d give us away...”

“We’ll be carrying guns and our **compuwatches**. What’s a **circlet** compared to them?”

“Hmm, guess you’ve got a point there...”

Jinto used the *cfoc* (small shovel) to pile soil on the rest of the discarded items, and then he used his hands to pile soil on the shovel itself.

Jinto stashed the **compuwatch** into his new **jumpsuit's pocket**, and the **phaser** into the duffle bag he'd bought at Lune Beega.

Lafier wrapped her **sash-belt** around her thighs and holstered her **phaser** in it. Her **compuwatch**, meanwhile, was attached to her ankle, and concealed by her shoes. Finally, the **pendant** that contained the navigation log was hidden under her "one piece."

The deed now done, the two could leave for the city.

Since it was noon, the road the two walked down wasn't aglow. The path stretched around 100 *dagh* above the fields, curving every so often but continuing straight for the most part.

It was already evening according to biological time, but Sfagnoff's sun was baking their passageway as it climbed up to its apex.

Jinto was jealous of Lafier's hat, and he was kicking himself for neglecting to buy himself one.

On the other hand, he knew how precious their money was. He'd already used around 200 of the 1,500 *deuth* he'd been given to buy all their clothes.

Would it last them until rescue arrived? What would they do if they ran out of money? Was there anyone on the planet magnanimous enough to hire people who'd shown up out of nowhere? If that didn't come to pass... well, he always had a **phaser**, and if he had to, he'd make use of it.

Jinto smirked.

A **royal princess** and a **noble prince of a countdom**. Thieves.

They'd probably be the most esteemed criminals in human history. Their tale would find its way onto the screen or stage for sure.

"What're you smiling at?"

"Oh, nothing." Jinto reverted his expression.

"I see you aren't nervous at all."

“Look who’s talking. You were sleeping like a baby.”

“Shut up, I was tired.”

“Whatever you say.” Jinto changed the subject. “I wonder if we look like brother and sister?”

“I don’t believe we do, given that we’re not brother and sister.”

“Then we’ve got a problem.”

“Why?”

“Cuz I was thinking we oughta pretend to be siblings when in town.”

“Why must we lie so?”

“What are we gonna do, tell them the truth?”

Speaking of which... what exactly was the “truth” of their relationship? Was he a sworn knight of a **royal princess**? She may have been a genuine princess, but he was no knight.

Were they a pair of downtrodden refugees? Now that was getting closer to reality. He’d take that over “a trainee **starpilot** and her human cargo.”

“Again with the strange remarks. Our relationship is a strictly private concern.”

“Hey, I agree with you, but some nosy folks might ask. On Delktu, if an underage boy and an underage girl were to stay at a hotel or whatever, the crime prevention division would jump in.”

“I don’t know about you, but I am NOT a child.”

“I’m not a kid, either, but others’ll think we are.” Teal Clint’s face bubbled up in his head. “It’s like how whenever somebody tells whoever raised them ‘I’m not a kid anymore!’ They always say, ‘That’s just what a kid would say!’”

Granted, when Teal said it, it had been true. Jinto had been so young, so innocent... so clueless.

“But this isn’t Delktu.”

“No, it’s not, but we don’t know what it’s like here.”

If Clasbulian culture didn't look down on marrying young, they had nothing to fret over. They could pretend to be a young newlywed couple — though they were poorly dressed for a honeymoon.

"Is it that important?"

"We want to attract as little attention as possible. To be as normal as—"

"Jinto." Lafier suddenly stopped. "Am I getting in your way?"

Jinto was nigh lost for words. "What're you on about all of a sudden?"

"If you weren't saddled with me, you would be able to stay hidden much easier, right?"

"Look..." Jinto dropped his duffle bag and massaged his brow. He contemplated how best to explain this, and decided in the end to just be forthright with her. "I'll give it to you straight, it'd probably be easier for me alone in some ways. After all is said and done, I'm a Lander..."

"You are Abh. Or is being Abh to your dissatisfaction?"

"Maybe. I do think of it as a bit of a burden. But it's not like I *hate* it. It's just that if somebody asked me, 'am I Abh or a Lander,' I'd answer the latter. I was born and raised on land."

"I never realized you thought that way." Lafier bit her lip. "Do not worry about me. Nor the **Empire**. If you don't mind renouncing your **noble rank**, then let's part ways here. I've told you once before: I don't want to be a burden on you."

"Are you serious, Lafier?"

"I am. I'd be fine without you, anyway."

"Where do I start?" said Jinto. He found his voice had gotten tight, too. "I'd be more than fine with renouncing my **noble rank**, but I have no intention of parting ways with you here."

"Why not?"

"Because if I did that in order to survive, I'd be miserable, that's why." Jinto vented his spleen as the rage mounted. "You don't want to be a burden? But

you'd be fine without me? Which is it, Lafier? How's somebody who's a burden on somebody else gonna hack it alone, huh? Listen, you brought me here, and I'm thankful. I can't pilot a spaceship. I needed you. Everyone's got their strengths, right? You aren't used to living on a **terrestrial world**. Well, not that I'm worldly or sophisticated, but at the very least, I know more than you do. As long as we're using our individual strengths to help each other, why've you got to be so fixated on 'being a burden'? Tell me I'm wrong, Lafier. Am I saying a bunch of nonsense? Or, maybe, I'm the one you think's a burden. If that's the case, there's no helping it: then you can leave your pathetic cargo and get. I'll let you walk away. But I don't plan on being the one that breaks us up."

As Jinto spoke, a **hovercover** whisked by.

"You're right," said Lafier, her eyes downcast. "Forgive me, Jinto. You are a man of great pride."

"I am at that," said Jinto, his ire not yet dissipated. "I don't honestly know if I'm Abh or a Lander, but what I do know is I've got pride. Fancy that, the Abh don't have a monopoly on it. So would you stop coming out with that twaddle? I will NOT leave your side until it's all safe out there."

It was only much later that Jinto would come to realize that when Lafier called him a "man of great pride," it was the highest of praise.

"Okay. I won't ever say it again," Lafier vowed.

Jinto's heart finally died down. "I needed you, and I'll probably be needing you again. So right now, I'd like you to at least pretend to yourself that you need me at the moment."

"No need to pretend."

Hearing that, Jinto thought to himself that maybe being an **Abh noble** wasn't as awful as he'd made it out to be.

"Yo ho ho, you two, there, heated, *reepee!*" Words he picked up in pieces. "Is there, a fight, boy, plus, girl? Girl, there, *morn!* Girl, there, good, ditch, boy, looks like, *shrip*, so, come, together, us! Good time, *piek*, together, us."

Jinto turned to look at the source of the voice that'd suddenly accosted them.

The hovercar that had passed by before had doubled back, stopping right by them. It was roofless. Three young men were craning forward, and jeering something or other. They seemed about the same age, slightly older than Jinto.

Jinto switched his brain from standard Baronh-mode to Clasbulian-accented dialect mode, but the men's speech was not only a bit too fast, but also peppered with slang, so he understood maybe half of what was said.

He'd vaguely cottoned onto how they were mocking them, and extending Lafier a crude invitation.

"What are these men saying?" asked Lafier blankly.

"Nothing you need to hear," said Jinto, slinging his bag back up off the ground onto a shoulder. "C'mon, let's get a move on."

"Okay." And so they started walking as though the men weren't there.

"Girl, there, *morn!* Boy, there, in the way, *keepow!*"

"*Sheek, reepee reepee, good, piek!*"

"Good, stay, *morn, girl!*" The hovercar was riding along at their walking speed.

As for the next thing the men growled, Jinto understood it perfectly.

"Don't you ignore us, prick!" The bulkiest of the three young men nimbly jumped down off the car and blocked their way forward.

"Phew, *morn!*" he whistled, and laid his hands on Lafier. "Come, let's have some fun!"

"No, stop it!" Jinto jumped at the arms manhandling her.

"Zip it!" He thrust Jinto away.

Pitifully, that one blow was all it took to knock Jinto off balance and send him rolling down the road back down to the fields.

"Argh!" Jinto took out the **phaser** from out of his bag.

Meanwhile, the man slid down toward the fields after him, charging with his nostrils flared like an ox.

Jinto pulled the trigger. He'd lost his cool not because he'd been pushed, but

because they were trying to harm Lafier. His rage was a frenzied rage; he couldn't care less if they died.

The beam that the **phaser** fired hit its mark, his aggressor's abdomen... with a flashlight.

The man stopped momentarily, but when he realized that it was nothing more than a stronger-than-normal flashlight, his lips curled with contempt, and he resumed charging.

Panicking and flustered, Jinto tried switching the gun from *asairtamh* (illumination) mode to *ultamh* (shooting) mode, but couldn't make it in time. The man was nearly on him, and reaching to rip the gun from his hand, but all of a sudden, he collapsed.

"OWW!" he wailed, clutching his left leg as he writhed.

It was her. She'd put a hole in the man's leg with her **phaser**.

In the eyes of Jinto, who'd finally managed to switch it to shooting mode and get back up on his feet, it was as though Lafier had been pulled back away from him.

Since the man who'd attacked him seemed busy with his squirming, Jinto rushed back up the slope. One of the men had Lafier locked in a full nelson, and the other was trying to pry the gun.

Lafier's fighting style was truly striking. She was utterly expressionless, as if to say she didn't care to so much as lift a single mouth muscle for these losers. She was a silent storm, never raising her voice once as she kicked off her would-be captors.

The men looked totally confused; they thought the girl would yelp, scream, shriek. Yet things were still looking bad for her.

"Let her go!" Jinto pointed his gun up to the sky for a warning shot.

Sadly, his **phaser** didn't make a sound. If they'd been shrouded in mist or smoke, a bright shaft of light would have caught their attention, but in this brilliant light of day, it was barely visible at all.

Jinto aimed it downward. The concentrated light carved the road and

instantly sublimated the pavement, triggering a small explosion. Now *that* caused the two men to freeze.

“Put your hands up!” he shouted in Clasbulian Baronh.

Jinto and Lafier then stood side by side, each pointing a gun at one of the men.

“Don’t shoot, Lafier,” he whispered.

“Of course not,” she said, shocked. “I don’t plan on shooting nonresistors.”

“Good, I’m relieved.”

“Part of me would rather like them to start trying to resist, though,” said Lafier.

“Yeah, no, I totally do, too.”

Perhaps Lafier’s sentiments had come across, for the men didn’t budge an inch, their hands still raised high.

“All righty, boys,” said Jinto. “Your friend down there’s aching something fierce. Wanna bring him up here for me?”

The two glared at him, but showed no signs of resistance, and went down toward the fields.

“You are quite adaptable. You can already speak this world’s language?” asked Lafier.

“There was a trick to it. It’s actually derived from Baronh.” Jinto then addressed the men. “I don’t mind if you make a sudden move; I’ve been wanting to get in some target practice.”

“*Shaconna!*” swore one of them.

“Aw shucks,” said Jinto. “Thanks.”

“What did he say?” asked Lafier.

“Hell if I know. Probably nothing you’d every say in front of a blushing maiden,” he shrugged. “That aside, let’s jack their ride. It’d be nice to secure a mode of transport.”

“So we commandeer it?”

“No,” said Jinto, steeling his face. “We aren’t soldiers. We’re not commandeering it. We’re stealing it.”

“Dispensing all pretense, I see.”

“Right. We’ll be criminals from here on out.”

Their actions and appearance made it clear the trio was a bad lot, and judging by how they’d come at them with their bare hands, he could tell there was no culture of carrying weapons on the streets here. So long as they were toting and using **phasers**, they couldn’t claim to be blameless victims with any persuasive power.

As such, they were better off playing consummate criminals, but he’d been afraid the **royal princess** would poo-poo the idea.

“Sounds interesting!” Surprisingly, she was down. “So we’re now like the robbers I hear tell of?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.” Jinto had a bad feeling about this.

The three hooligans had come up to the path. One of them lent a shoulder to his mate. He’d stopped screaming, but his face was still contorted in pain.

Before Jinto could even open his mouth, Lafier made sure to impress upon them in the Baronh she’d learned in the royal court that they were most assuredly roving bandits, and not the least bit shady like an Abh or a **Star Forces** soldier might be. She further decreed that though they would be taking the car, this act made the utmost economic sense in light of their being bandits, as mentioned before.

The men waited out her harangue with expressions of resignation.

Jinto was perplexed, to say the least. They may not have understood what Lafier said, but they must have realized it was standard Baronh. He could only assume they’d been given away.

“If you’ve **compuwatches** or anything else you can use to contact somebody, take ‘em all out, would you?” Jinto demanded, pulling himself together.

The trio didn’t react. They just glanced at each other.

“C’mon, look at things from our perspective,” said Jinto gently.

Lafier had a suggestion: “If you’re afraid we’ll use them on you, then would you prefer we kill you first?”

Jinto didn’t know how much they understood of her Baroneh. Judging by how quick they were to finally react to his demands, they’d definitely picked up on the word *agaime* (kill), though.

The men took off the boxes they had strapped to their waists and shoulders and emptied their contents onto the road.

“That was one effective bluff,” he whispered.

Lafier stared at him in puzzlement. Her expression, innocent. As if to say, *what bluff?*

Jinto shuddered. He moved his gaze off Lafier onto the hooligans. *You guys oughta be groveling at my feet in thanks.*

He issued an order to the one among them who had his hands free. “Gather them all together.”

The young man did as he was told, and Jinto scrupulously blasted the pile of communications devices with his **phaser**. His aim had been a tiny bit off, but the sensitive equipment was instantly reduced to charred debris.

“Now then...” Jinto peered into the driver’s seat of the hovercar. This thingie with the two poles sticking out had to have been the rudder. The foot pedal thing adjusted the speed, and there couldn’t be much else to it.

However, just to be 100% confident: “Why don’t I have ‘em teach me how to drive this?”

“I believe this one was the one driving,” said Lafier, pointing at the man who had lent a shoulder to his injured buddy.

“Kay. Hop on in, friend,” ordered Jinto, gesturing toward the driver’s seat.

Lafier camped herself in the seat behind the driver’s seat beforehand.

Her gun was aimed at him the entire time he was seated at the helm, while Jinto sat beside him.

“You two,” said Jinto to the others outside the car, pointing toward the direction away from town, “why don’t you head that-a-way?”

The man with the injured leg muttered something softly. Jinto brandished his gun. The two started walking, still muttering.

“Now it’s your time to shine,” he told the driver.

“As if I’d—” the young man moaned, but once the gun at his back was pressed into his head, he became decidedly more compliant.

Jinto observed how he was driving, and laid question after question on him.

It was as dead-simple as he’d expected. No need for any particularly difficult technique. It was a magnetic-resistance-type hovercar. Once the destination was input, the car would drive itself, and it was easy enough to steer by hand anyway. It couldn’t hover unless above the track, so any deviation would require releasing the wheels (much like a **grounded car**), but that too was just a straightforward twiddling of the controls anyway.

“Has this thing got some kinda location marker on it?”

“Location marker?”

“Yeah, the thing that tips off the place in charge of traffic where it is? Through radio waves?” he explained in simple terms.

“No. That doesn’t exist.”

“What’s this?” Jinto poked at the communications-device-looking thing between their two seats.

“That’s the navigation device. It’s not the car that emits the radio waves. The radio waves tell us where we are.”

“Gotcha. Show me.”

The man showed him. A map appeared on screen. The blue dot was probably their position.

Jinto fiddled with it a bit. It was child’s play to change the scope of the map, as well as to drum up information on the distance to the nearest town, and even open guides on all the major cities.

“Sweet. That’ll come in handy. By the way, are you *sure* there’s no location marker? The Traffic Control Office won’t be wanting it?”

“No, there ain’t no damn location marker. If they knew where every single car was, they’d have access to people’s private lives. That’s why there ain’t any on this planet.”

“I see,” nodded Jinto. “Well, that’s good for us. Also, whaddya mean, ‘on this planet’? You don’t think we’re from around here?”

“Wh-What!? You mean you ARE!?”

“C’mon, don’t make the lady in back feel bad. Not after all that effort she put into explaining our shtick.”

“Fine, fine, you’re descendants of this *shaconna* planet’s first settlers for all I care!”

“If you could tell everyone that, that’d be great, thanks,” said Jinto, not expecting he’d actually do so. “Okay, we’re done with you. Come back.”

The car returned to him.

Jinto saw the other two approaching from ahead. “Freeze,” he ordered.

Startled, they halted in their tracks. They probably hadn’t reckoned Jinto and the others would double back.

“Hey guys, you sure you aren’t going the wrong direction?” he addressed them in cheerful tones.

“We go where we want!” barked the one whose leg got shot.

“I’ll give your petition of grievances some serious consideration,” Jinto replied solemnly. “Kindly forward your papers to the proper judiciary body.”

Then Jinto motioned for the man in the driver’s seat to leave. Jinto moved sideways to replace him in that seat.

Suddenly, their sad financial state crossed his mind.

“Hey, pals, you got any cash on you? Mind emptying those pockets for me?”

“Don’t push your luck, you prick,” seethed the man who’d been shot.

“I could always just pick your corpse clean, you know,” he said, giving him his best evil smile.

“Dammit!” The three whipped out all their cash. It added up to a little more than 100 *dueth* — less than he was hoping.

Jinto forced the man who’d been driving to collect it for him, and he swiped it from him. All the while, Lafier had her gun trained on him from the back seat.

“Now, I hate to have to part ways with you gents, but such is life,” said Jinto, and they were off.

Lafier climbed up over the back of the chair in front of her and took her place beside him.

“I’m impressed,” she said, almost squeaking. “Of course, as robbers we *would* be taking their money, too! I hadn’t thought of that. Have you ever robbed someone before?”

“I hope you’re kidding. I’m an *amateur* robber.”

Back during his days on Delktu, Jinto had envied the older kids who went on joy rides with girls in the passenger’s seats of their grounded cars. He’d always wanted to try that for himself.

Now, apart from its being a hovercar instead, that dream had come true. Not only that, but he had one of the most superfine girls in the galaxy beside him. A superfine girl eyeing him with awe.

So why was he feeling so... depressed?

Chapter 9: At the *Rüé-Béïle* (Imperial Palace)

The metro-ship of Abliar — the Abh home-ship, still being used as the **Imperial Palace**, had undergone several renovations by the present time.

The enormous vessel, which once housed one million, now boasted upwards of two hundred thousand occupants. It was more than a *béïc* (orbital palace). It was a small city.

In one sector of that “city,” partitioned away from the flow of information that was truly important, dwelled the foreigners that had been bestowed with residences and offices.

Sampel Sangarini was one of them, a United Humankind ambassador.

The **Empire** seldom ever allowed foreign ships to enter any star-system within its reign. However, economic exchange was permitted through seven designated *bidauteç asa* (trade ports). And as long as there is trade, there too must be diplomacy. That is why the Empire fielded and received diplomats to and from the other four nations.

All the foreigners who resided in the **Imperial Palace** were in fact ambassadors of the four nations, and their respective retinues. Throughout the entire **Empire**, foreigners were permitted to take up residence only either here or in one of the seven **trade ports**

While the **Empire** did respect their privileges as diplomats, it placed no emphasis on diplomacy in general. Sangarini and his party were rarely ever allowed a meeting with any figures of significance, let alone an audience with the **Empress** herself, which was more or less reserved for the formal salutations that came with the assumption or abdication of the office.

But at present, Sangarini and the other three ambassadors had been granted their second opportunity.

The **Imperial Palace** possessed a *üabaiss bézorhotr* (audience chamber). However, use of this room was restricted to the most important ceremonies

and matters of state, so Sangarini had never even laid eyes on it.

More specifically, they had been called to the *Übais Rizaïrr* (Chamber of Larkspurs), which more than lived up to its name with all of the purple *rizaïrh* (larkspurs) in bloom. Sangarini had scarcely believed it at first, but it appeared the Abh did love the beauty of nature in their own manner.

At the center of the hall, a path of black marble, polished to a mirror shine, allowed occupants to pace around. A spiral galaxy was inlaid in silver in the path, with a platform raised to its side, and a carved column depicting an eight-headed *gaftnochec* on each corner. Atop the platform stood a chair that paled in comparison to the **Jade Throne**, but it did look exceptionally comfy.

A fair and comely woman was seated upright in it. Her intricately detailed **circlet** portrayed the **gaftnochec** as well. Her hair, wavy and indigo, was parted to both side through her pointy ears, trailing down to her **long robe** of light crimson keynotes. Her countenance was graced with reddish brown eyes tinged with hints of *ftiainh* (amber), while lithesome hands of ivory white poked out of the black sleeves of the **military uniform** she had on under the long robe. In one of those hands she gripped the baton that commanded the greatest military power that humankind had ever known. She was the 27th in the line of the emperorship. She was *Speunaigh Lamagh Érumitta* (Her Majesty the Empress, Lamagh).

The four ambassadors remained standing as they faced her. Sangarini was loath to abase himself. Arrogance was fundamental to the Abh, about that there could be no doubt, but were they reckless in their arrogance?

“*Érumittonn* (Your Majesty),” said Sangarini, representing the other three as well. “First of all, we would like to express our gratitude. Thank you for approving this dialogue.”

“Your gratitude is noted, ambassadors.” Lamagh nodded. “We are afraid our time is limited, and We believe your time is as well.”

“Certainly.” Sangarini returned the nod. He had no intention of wasting too much time on pleasantries, at least not in the company of a pompous Abh. “Let us get straight to the affairs at hand. I have come to raise an objection.”

“An objection? Surely you mean you’ve come to offer an *explanation*.” The

Abh **Empress** did not rebuke them, but she did say: “We’ve heard a fleet of yours launched an attack within **Empire** borders. We have lost contact, and the details are unclear. We had thought you may have some words of clarification.”

“Ours are words of protest,” Sangarini insisted. “It is true, our military has launched an attack on your ‘**Sfagnoff Marquessate**.’ You must, however, think of that attack as retaliatory.”

Lamagh remained expressionless. She merely raised one eyebrow infinitesimally. “What I must ask is whatever you might mean by that remark.”

Sangarini exerted his level best to keep his own expression suppressed. “Our nation had opened a new **gate** and was exploring the surrounding **flat space**. Then, a warship that was likely Abh sprung an attack upon us, without any justification. That warship was repulsed, but we suffered heavy losses as well. Hence, I have come as a representative of the United Humankind to protest this grave miscarriage of justice. It may very well be the case that that occurred near your territory, yet all ships have right of passage in flat space. Attacks without warning cannot be legitimized or excused.”

“As the representative of the administration of my own nation and its people, I must concur with the United Humankind’s ambassador’s protestation,” voiced Marimba Sooney, Ambassador of the Greater Alkont Republic, rage evident on her jittery face.

If that’s an act, it’s a convincing one, thought Sangarini.

“I too, as the representative of the government and the people of the Hania Federation...” continued Gwen Taolong, his face a mask. Since he didn’t know Baronh, he made do with a translator. As such, his personality was not so easy to grasp.

“Our nation concurs,” said Janet Macalli of the People’s Sovereign Stellar Union in thickly accented Baronh. “We have been continually plagued by your despotism. We firmly demand you apologize and pay reparations to our beloved alliance, and we will watch over negotiations with profound interest.”

Lamagh’s expression remained utterly unimpressed. She stared at each ambassador in turn, and planted her eyes on Sangarini’s.

“And that is why you attacked our territory? We think that is rather removed from your typical way of doing things. Why didn’t you raise an objection when your fleet was assaulted?”

“The decision to retaliate was made at the commanding officer’s discretion,” said the ambassador, relaying what those in Central had told him. He didn’t believe a word of it, of course. “As you are no doubt well aware, it takes quite some time for messages to traverse the distance between Central and the Outer Reaches. If the commanding officer at the scene had ceded the decision to Central, then as **Your Majesty** has stated, we would have raised a formal objection first and foremost.”

Lamagh cocked her head ever so slightly. “You are lying, ambassadors.”

“What!? I never!” Sangarini bristled with “anger.” “On what evidence do you base that accusation?”

“We simply cannot be led to believe that a ship of Our military would launch any such attack. There are no lawless reprobates in our illustrious **Star Forces** who would engage in battle against another party without a concrete reason.”

“Then Your Majesty should view this incident as an exception, obviously,” said Gwen.

“Even if We were to grant, for the sake of argument, that there had been some exception,” Lamagh continued placidly, “they would not then go on to be defeated. Do you think there are any officers in our illustrious **Star Forces** who wield the authority to decide whether to engage, and yet would be so incompetent as to initiate a battle they could not win with confidence? We cannot believe this one commander was outside the norm in two different ways at the same time.”

“**Your Majesty**, you are being exceedingly biased, are you not?” said Macalli. “I suggest an intermediary commission of inquiry be established with members composed of three neutral nations.”

“So you intend to lie to us as well,” said the **Empress**, her icy glare on her now. “You have formed an alliance, yet you mean to tell us you are neutral observers?”

“We are neutral with regard to this matter, **Your Majesty**,” asserted the ambassador of the PSSU. “That is why we are asking you to investigate and uncover the truth.”

“I implore Your Majesty to consider the People’s Sovereign Stellar Union’s proposal,” added Sooney.

“That is unnecessary.” Lamagh once again locked eyes with Sangarini. “Ambassadors, We must say We were expecting much more refined deceit on your parts. You have dashed those expectations. What a pity.”

“Wha — !?” At a loss for words, Sangarini was left rudderless. From the outset, the Abh **Empress** hadn’t been inclined to seriously entertain what they had to say. The diplomatic skills he’d cultivated had run smack into a dead end.

“Why does **Your Majesty** persist in calling us liars?” said Macalli. “You ought at least to investigate the matter before deciding such a thing.”

“If you four are satisfied that this pack of lies is the best you have, then We have nothing more to say. We suppose you may truly believe the lie, but in any event, the only deceit we the Abh appreciate is more sophisticated deceit.”

“**Your Majesty**, if I may. It is incumbent upon me to inform you that if you were to declare war on the United Humankind, we of the People’s sovereign Stellar Union would be forced under the Nova Sicilia Accords to declare war upon the **Empire**.”

“We must thank you, ambassadors,” said the **Empress** sarcastically. “But we are well aware. The Greater Alkont Republic and the Hania Federation are doubtless of the same mind.”

The two ambassadors nodded their solidarity.

“Very well. Then let us make war,” said Lamagh, with no enthusiasm whatsoever. “Your hard work was appreciated. We hope you return to your homelands safely. We shall be revoking your diplomatic privileges in 24 hours’ time. Though We hardly need assure you, the **Empire** will guarantee your security and see you to free port, or its honor be tarnished.”

Wait, you can’t! Sangarini screeched inwardly. *This can’t be how it all ends! I’m the most experienced diplomat in all of the UH, but I wasn’t even given a*

*chance to talk terms!? She not only called my nation's official message a lie, but a BAD lie at that! Do I have no choice but to accept this declaration of war and return to my country? This was supposed to be a trial run; we were just throwing the **Empire** off balance to see what their next move would be! But now this was all just a fool's errand!*

“**Your Majesty**, is there any chance you might reconsider this?” asked Gwen in a low voice. “You will be waging war against half of all humanity.”

“Have you forgotten that the **Empire** forms the other half?” responded the Abh **Empress** evenly.

“If you wish to wage war, then that's fine by me,” said Macalli, forgetting their duties as a diplomat as they vented their pent-up irritation. “I have, however, one thing to assure you: that the **Empire**, unprincipled as it is, can never hope to prevail!”

“‘Unprincipled,’ you say...” At last, Lamagh's expression changed. She was intrigued. “It is as you say. Our **Empire** has no principles. We do not believe that has any bearing on whether we win or lose. That the unprincipled cannot win is nothing more than a delusional superstition.”

“But think of humanity's future. A destiny where humanity is ruled by the unprincipled **Empire** is no future at all.”

“We know a little about human history ourselves. History reveals it is the principles held by *individuals* that shine bright and beautiful. Principles enforced by nations, on the other hand, engender tragedy. They drive **subjects of those nations** to needless deaths. Our **Empire** does not require any ‘principles’ and exists without them, devoted only to the consolidation of all of humanity in all of its diversity. The Empire hosts a multitude of citizens, with a multitude of bizarre creeds and convictions. For instance, the people of the *Dreuhynh Bislér* (Countdom of Bislé) do not understand that they are under imperial control, and worship their **territorial citizen representatives** as gods. To them, we Abh are the fruits of mysterious and inscrutable beings. The **territorial citizens** of the *Dreuhynh Gogamr* (Countfom of Gogaaf) implant their own consciousness into **computing crystals**, thinking they have thus acquired eternal life. The Empire rules over and protects them all like a shadow, and without

discrimination. If the Empire can be said to have a principle, it is that.”

“That is all sophistry. The very idea of a future borne by the Abh, who toy with man’s DNA, is repugnant.”

“And that is hyperbole,” replied Lamagh. “Around 2,000 years have passed since the births of our progenitors, yet the basic genetic composition of the Abh has not changed. We, like you, are bound by the fear of evolving.”

“Fear of evolving?”

“Do you deny it? The buds of evolution are plucked away as ‘genetic abnormalities.’ When humanity obtained the power to engineer their genes to their liking, what they did was seal away their own evolution. Our **Empire** is no different in that respect from your own home nations. We all fear evolution.”

“That’s...” But Macalli held their tongue.

“**Your Majesty**, with all due deference...” said Sangarini. It was clear to see that the Abh **Empress** enjoyed a good debate. He needed to use this debate as a pretext for keeping this audience going as long as possible, all so he could search for a lead, any lead that could get her to negotiate. “Fear of evolving is beside the point. Can a nation without principles even survive? I daresay we will dismantle such a nation without fail.”

“The **Empire** has not had a principle to use as a crutch for around a millennium,” Lamagh rebutted calmly. “I see now that nations such as your own would crumble without principles... or perhaps ‘delusions’ is the word. Otherwise, you might not be able to bring together varied populaces or face other nations.”

“Is it not the same for the **Empire**?” said Gwen.

“It is not. For it is we Abh who keep the **Empire** bound together. It is because the Abh will integrate all of humanity that no one will ever again be burdened by the principles imposed upon them, able instead to enjoy their cultures and lifestyles as they currently exist.”

“Then what is it about the Abh that can hold this hypothetical all-encompassing empire together?” said Sangarini, refusing to back down.

“That is nothing you ought to concern yourselves with,” said Lamagh coldly. “Leave us now. Your falsehoods failed to arouse our interest, but We found these last few moments amusing enough. It was a fun little meeting. And allow us to say that should we emerge from this battle triumphant, it will have been the war to end all wars.”

“You mean you aim for everlasting peace?” Macalli’s swarthy face flushed with hatred. “Many have dreamed of such a thing. And yet it has never come to pass in all of history.”

A grin graced the **Empress’s** arresting visage. This was not the infamous “smile of the Abh.” No, it had a warmth to it, as though charmed by the ignorant innocence of the infants before her.

When Sangarini saw that grin, he felt in his bones how she’d lived for nearly 100 years despite her youthful mien, and how young her race was.

The self-respect necessary to bear the weight of humanity’s fate on her delicate shoulders was more than evident as she declared: “That is because there were no Abh in the past.”

After the ambassadors reluctantly left, Lamagh called for a video representation of all the **flat space** discovered so far to be projected across from the platform on which she sat.

Within charted space, there were around 30 million **gates**. Those gates’ **normal space** entrances were always within the *Érucfac* (Milky Way). This phenomenon likely spurred from the decoupling of normal space and **flat space** after the fluctuation of the cosmic sparks that originated the galaxy. However, the positions of those gates and the positions of the galaxy’s stars did not correlate. The greater number of normal-space-side gates seemed to be located in the spiral arms.

The coordinates of the gates could be likened to a ripple. The circle at the center was surrounded by a great multitude of *spéch* (rings) that constituted groupings of gates.

The center circle was so crowded that **space-time bubbles** couldn’t penetrate. The **space-time particles**, expelled by innumerable proverbial “**volcanoes**,”

formed dense currents headed toward the galaxy's fringes.

Outside the central circle existed a narrow gap, past which one would run into a round band of **gates**. That was the *Spéich Casna* (First Ring). After that came a slightly larger gap, followed by the *Spéich Casna* (Second Ring).

Thus did the **gate**-belts of the **Milky Way** — otherwise known as the *saudelach érucfar* — radiate from the center toward the periphery, in alternating gaps and rings.

Furthermore, the farther out the rings, the bigger the gaps that separated them. In addition, each **ring** contained an almost equal number of **gates**, so the gates in the outer rings were much more spaced out.

The **gates** that humanity made use of were mostly within the dense *Ssorch Bandacer* (Central Sector) — the sector within the *Spéich Dana* (Seventh Ring). As such, if one secured a **closed gate** within **normal space** and entered **flat space** from there, there was a naturally high probability they would emerge in the Central Sector. Humanity expanded its domain by establishing gates near the center as footholds and forging normal-space paths to the next closest gate, and so on.

Even in the space spanning the *Spéich Gana* (Eighth Ring) to the *Spéich Loceutena* (Eleventh Ring), once referred to as the *Ssorch Cairaza* (Uncharted Sectors), **gates** to inhabited star-systems were scattered about as a result of humanity's insatiable drive to expand.

The **Empire** was composed of eight *faicec* (monarchies), each with a *larth* monarch. Lamagh herself was still the *Larth Crybr* (Monarch of Crybh) until she finally handed that position down to a descendant. However just as **grandees** did not govern their **territory-nations**, so too was the title of monarch mostly a formality. The **lords** of the various territories included in each monarchy were not vassals of their respective monarchs, but rather of the **emperor or empress**. As such, the monarchies were not so much administrative divisions as they were regions on the map.

Of the eight **monarchies**, seven were nestled up close to the **Central Sector**, resulting in complex borders with other nations based largely on regional power and influence.

The other **monarchy**, the *Faicec Ilicr* (Monarchy of Ilich), was located in the *Spéch Romata* (Twelfth Ring).

Each of the eight **monarchies** had a corresponding **gate** in the **imperial capital** of Lacmhacarh. The eight gates were built into the city-ship Abliar, and when they were opened, in accordance with the laws of probability, seven of them linked to the **Central Sector**, but the *Saudec Ilicr* (Gate of Ilich) was the outlier, linking instead to a quite remote frontier.

The **Empire** regarded this as a rare and curious opportunity, and consequently set themselves to seizing the **Twelfth Ring** as their own. They invested **nobles** with fiefs, and constructed military **bases**. Just before the last step in the process, the completion of the route encircling the Twelfth Ring, a forgotten but peopled world called the Hyde Star-System was discovered.

The **Ilich Monarchy** was shaped much like a pair of arms embracing the **Milky Way Gate-belts**, and so it was often called the “*Bar Saidac*” (Arms of the Abh).

That moniker was ill-fitting now that the two hands had joined, however.

Within the generally sparsely distributed gates of the **Twelfth Ring**, a relatively dense grouping of **gates** had been observed. It was thought that that grouping comprised a sector that overlapped with the gate-belt **ring** that corresponded to a different galaxy entirely.

Humanity had not reached that level of exploration yet, but the door to a galaxy beyond lay open before them...

...A door open only to the **Abh Empire**. For so long as the **Ilich Monarchy** was there, no nation besides the **Empire** could hope to reach outside the galaxy. Of course, that would change if one or more **gates** linking to a place further out than the **Ilich Monarchy** were to be discovered.

That sensation of confinement might have factored into the **Four Nations Alliance** (FNA)’s determination to wage war.

How inane. There were yet many worlds of which humanity could avail themselves.

The **Sfagnoff Marquessate** had been part of the **Ilich Monarchy**. If the enemy took Sfagnoff, it would chop off one of the Arms of the Abh.

“Faramunsh, are you indisposed, or can you come?” Using her *rüé-greuc* (imperial command staff), Lamagh drew the pattern of summons.

“Your Majesty.” The hologram appeared by the **map of flat space**. His blue-gray hair was braided, and suspended down his front from his shoulders. He was *Üalodh Rÿazonr* (Military Chief of Staff) and **Imperial Admiral Faramunch Üémh Razas Rusam**.

“Were you listening in?”

“Yes, **Your Majesty**.”

“How much of what they said do you think was valid?”

“I believe we can take them at their word that they opened the **gate**. That being said, I think the reason they sent a military fleet was to sever the connection between Vorlash and Sfagnoff. They must have already explored the surrounding area in secret years ago.”

“Did the *Spodéc Rirragr* (Information Department) not notice?”

“Unfortunately, that is the case.”

“That is quite the blunder.”

“There is no excuse I can provide.” Faramunsh lowered his head, though he was not obsequious in his humility.

“Has the **Empire**, in its age, become the sick man of the galaxy?” muttered Lamagh.

Faramunsh didn’t deny the possibility. “It could also be that the idea they’d do something this elaborate never occurred to the Department. The enemy did keep an impressively tight lid. And while it is not my intention to provide excuses, might I suggest that the *Gaicec Scofarimér* (Ambassadorial Office) also failed to catch on?”

“True,” Lamagh nodded. “The only reports We’ve received from that office of late warn of the possibility of ‘large-scale military action,’ nothing more.”

“It’s clear that much effort was spent to drum up a unified front — which is a

feat indeed for a patchwork army like theirs.” Faramunsh’s tone of voice betrayed some measure of exhilaration. Trade, commerce, those were everyday sport. War, on the other hand, was a rare treat of a game, and that much more enjoyable for it. And Faramunsh was hardly the only one whose heart thumps fast upon acquiring a worthy opponent.

Lamagh’s position was a different beast. In the end, as **Empress**, she was forced to wager not only her own life, but her subjects’, too. She was excited by the prospect as well, of course; she just felt somewhat guilty that she did.

“As for our felled ship,” said Lamagh, turning to the matter that weighed on her most of all, “it was **patrol ship** Goslauth, correct?”

“Yes,” said Faramunsh, his face mournful. “There is a higher than 90% chance it was the Goslauth. We can’t pinpoint the **gate** they used as of yet, but in any case, it’s the only ship that matches the details. You have my condolences.”

“Spare your condolences,” she said, shutting him down. “It is an Abliar tradition to be the first to the frontlines of battle.”

“Yes, but **Hecto-commander Captain** Lexshue was an outstanding **starpilot** even among the **Star Forces**. I believe she would have been sure to send the young **Viscountess of Parhynh** away to relative safety. **Her Highness** is a **trainee starpilot**, after all. Any pretext would have sufficed.”

“You needn’t console me with platitudes. If that were the case, news of Lafier being unharmed would have reached these ears.”

“My apologies, Your Majesty,” said Faramunsh, looking abashed.

“Although...” Lamagh proceeded to mutter to herself. She had always liked Lafier. Dubyus (*Dubeus*) had not been a good son, but it seemed he had some surprising talent as a father. If only she hadn’t fallen in battle while bearing some half-baked title like “**trainee**.” If only she’d died a full-fledged **starpilot**. Then they’d all have been readier to swallow her death.

“*Fiac Lartr Crybr* (His Highness the King of Crybh) must be deep in the abyss of grief as well,” added a sudden voice besides Faramunsh’s. “He lost both his **lover** and his **daughter of love** at the same time.”

“*Larth Barcér* (King of Barce, BARKEH).” Lamagh frowned when she spotted

the voice's source. "I don't remember summoning you."

"This is a serious affair concerning the **Empire**; please pardon my impertinence, **Your Majesty**." So said the hologram of **Imperial Admiral, Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief and Crown Prince**, Dusanyu (*Dusanh*), **King of Barce**, before bowing.

"If you wish to console Dubyus, then you ought to go to his side, *Fiac*."

"No, **Your Majesty**, I shall do so on another occasion. Unless, of course, you decree I should depart by imperial edict. I have come here to see whether you might."

"No, you shall wait."

"I shall wait?" His features, too perfectly arranged for a man, formed a quizzical look.

"Faramunsh," said Lamagh, prompting the **Military Chief of Staff** to do the explaining.

"**Honored Fleet Commander**," Faramunsh addressed his high-ranking colleague. "It has been established that the enemy invading the **Sfagnoff Marquessate** is proving surprisingly slow to act. I hope the only reason for that is an undersized force of arms."

"You mean it might be a diversion, *Lonh*?" Dusanyu stroked his chin.

"What else could it be? You can be apprised of all the details if you visit the **Ryazonh** (Military Command Headquarters)..."

"No, *Lonh*, that won't be necessary." The **Crown Prince** stopped Faramunsh with an outstretched hand. "I know battlefield analysis is your forte. So, what's their next move?"

"Their target is probably here. *Lacmhacarh*," he said.

"Their ardor is certainly alarming, *Fiac*."

"Hmm... so they aim to capture the **capital** in one fell swoop..." Dusanyu's expression lit up attentively. If the capital fell, the **eight monarchies** would no longer be linked together, thereby horribly weakening the Empire.

“We don’t know whence they’ll invade. For the seven **monarchies** at the Central Sector, they could strike from anywhere.”

“Do you understand, **King of Barce**?” spoke Lamagh from her temporary replacement **throne**. “Our forces cannot move rashly. We must have you helm the defense of the **capital**. Faramunsh, orchestrate the **fleets** We shall entrust to the **King of Barce**, and quickly. We leave his forces’ scale to **Command Headquarters**. We do, however, expect it to be historic in size.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Have you any other orders?” Faramunsh asked the **throne**.

“No. Do it at once.”

“As Your Majesty commands.” Faramunsh’s hologram cut out.

Dusanyu’s did not.

“Is there something else you wanted, **King of Barce**?”

“Forgive me. I was just contemplating your words regarding the ‘fear of evolution.’”

“How like you, *Fiac Dusan*. You would rob us of our time through your ceaseless philosophizing.”

“You enjoy it, too, do you not, Your Majesty?”

Lamagh could only smile wryly at his perspicacity. “We do.”

“Is there not a possibility that humanity would benefit from our defeat in this war?”

“Oho. And what makes you say that?” Lamagh knitted her brows.

“Were we to win, all humankind would, under order and serenity of Abh rule, give in to a ‘peace’ that’s eerily akin to an everlasting slumber. A peace that would hamper human evolution.”

“Which means if they win, the power of evolution would be unleashed? We trust you heard the ambassadors’ words: they fear evolution more than we the Abh do, claiming that even the slight genetic modification of our children we practice ought to be abolished.”

“I am aware, Your Majesty. However, their victory would assuredly lead to an age of chaos. They may be four consolidated nations now, but were they to lose their common enemy in us, they would certainly begin jostling for power. That would in turn shroud all of humanity in disarray — a return to the era when humans were powerless, knocked out by the stormy waves of evolution.”

“Is that what you desire, *Fiac*?”

“No,” he shrugged. “They say we Abh are long-lived, but ultimately, we aren’t long-lived enough to be able to see where evolution will lead us. Of what concern is it to us what happens after we die?”

“Then why are you contemplating that?”

“Sometimes, I find I dwell on humanity’s future. That is to say, not on what we should do for it, but on how it will unfold.”

“*Fiac Dusan*,” she said gently. “The **Emperorship** will be yours after us. If you would like to cast humanity into chaos after securing your seat on the **Jade Throne**, then by all means, do so. However, so long as this staff remains in my hands, we will aspire to peace, whether or not it spells humanity’s slumber. And you shall exert yourself to the fullest in furtherance of that goal.”

“That cannot be disputed,” said Dusanyu, bowing elegantly. “No matter how it may affect humanity’s destiny, I would hardly be pleased to lose to the likes of the **Four Nations Alliance**.”

“We are relieved to hear that. For We know you would never neglect what would or would not amuse you, regardless of humanity’s or the **Empire**’s fate.”

“Of course,” he said, as though that went without saying. “And there is revenge to be had, as well.”

“Oho...” Lamagh was taken aback. “We didn’t realize your heart was so troubled over Lafier.”

“Yes, *Fiac Lamhirr* must be avenged, but more personally, there was another aboard that ship with whom I shared a bond.”

“*İarlucec Dreur Haider*.” Lamagh was even more taken aback now. “You are exhibiting a most unexpected side of you, *Fiac*.”

“Did I take you by surprise?” Dusanyu smiled. “I pride myself on as good as creating that **countdom** and its noble house. His estate could use at least one person here at the seat of the **Empire** worrying about it.”

That was what transpired 18 hours after intel confirming the fall of the **Sfagnoff Marquessate** reached the **Imperial Palace**.

Chapter 10: The *Raïchoth* (Inspection)

Now that they had a means of getting around, they no longer had any need to focus on the small city of Lune Beega. Jinto directed the car's automatic destination driving function to the city of Guzonh (GOOZOHNHYUH), the capital of this state named "Loehow" (LOW HOW, spelled *Lohaü* in Baronh). According to the latest info the **hovercar** had to provide, it was a large city whose population exceeded the 2,000,000 mark. Of course, that meant the military presence there would be that much denser, but that would only distract the attention they'd otherwise be receiving as outsiders.

As they drove down the road, the scenery they could be forgiven for thinking might stretch on to the other side of the planet did change. There were different crops on display, and the seemingly boundless plantations were periodically interrupted by prairies and wooded areas, only to come back strong later. They passed a town even smaller than Lune Beega, and rolled right by a number of isolated homes.

The hovercar was handling like a dream. Jinto's formerly foul mood had gradually taken a turn for the optimistic. What if they never holed up in a city, and instead just stayed on the road?

No, they couldn't.

The trio of hooligans will have reported their car stolen by now. They'd be needing to ditch this car before the local police came for them.

Jinto braced himself.

I can't forget, we're criminals now. The "enemy" isn't our only enemy anymore. We've gone and pissed off the police, too...

"Why do you look so glum?" asked Lafier. She examined Jinto's expression curiously, holding on to her hat with her left hand so the wind wouldn't take it.

"Do I look that grumpy?"

"Yep. That grave look doesn't suit you. I'd be more relieved if you went back

to your usual, more flippant face.”

“So I always look super lax, is what you’re saying.” He stroked his face, frankly wounded.

“Right. As long as I look at you, I can forget I’m on **land**.”

“I guess that should make me happy.”

“Feel your feelings as you will. They’re your feelings.”

“You can be brutally honest sometimes, you know that?”

Guzonh was close at hand. If the map was to be believed, it was a city surrounded by a forest.

A moment or two after entering the forest, they suddenly heard a beeping noise, accompanied by the hovercar losing speed before their very eyes.

“What happened?”

“Beats me.”

But soon they would find their answer.

Another hovercar was parked in front of them. Scratch that, there were dozens of them, all in a line. Jinto stood up in his seat, trying to determine what was jamming the traffic.

There he saw a company of enemy troops. Right by them, a vaguely predatory-looking lump of metal crouched, half-concealed by the trees. It was most likely a weapon for land wars.

Jinto clicked his tongue. “Damn...”

C’mon, think, man, think.

Were they hunting for the *bausnall laburer* (Star Forces soldier) that had evaded the intercepting fire of three enemy ships and scurried onto the surface? If they were, they had no way to know what that soldier looked like. However, if they discovered the **compuwatches** or **phasers** on their persons...

Did the enemy troops know about this car? It was safe to assume the occupying army wouldn’t be doing the local police’s dirty work for them, but if they got wind of their connection to the **Star Forces soldier**, things would turn

very sour indeed. It would mean they were aware of the two down to their personal appearances.

Should they turn back? Nothing tied them to Guzonh specifically. But no, that'd positively scream "suspicious." He didn't know what that land war weapon was, but he'd bet his **star fief** it was nothing that could be fended off with a couple of **phasers**.

They could make a run for it if it was slower than a hovercar...

...No. There was no way they'd inspect hovercars with a weapon that couldn't catch up to one. It must be able to fly. Faster than a hovercar crawling along the ground.

Damn it. What was this inspection even about?

They had two lovely options: turn back and get caught for sure, or proceed, and flirt with capture.

They had no choice but to talk their way out of this.

Jinto screwed up his resolve.

"Lafier," Jinto whispered. "Keep your mouth shut, and don't talk. You're not used to the local language."

"Ah, of course. Otherwise they might catch on to us!" she replied, satisfied she'd grasped his meaning.

"Excellent, so you get it now."

"Hold on, are you mocking me?" she said, her expression offended.

"If you hadn't spoken to those three in Baronh, I wouldn't have to say these things."

"That was a poor showing," she said meekly. "I shouldn't have said words like 'the **Star Forces**.'"

"Nor would robbers go out and declare 'we are robbers.' They're usually totally silent when they're doing their thing. There must be crime in Abh society, surely?"

"Yes, there is. My family simply isn't used to the pettier sort."

“Figured as much.”

As they conversed, the line of cars advanced one by one, and soon their number would come.

“Forget the guns,” he warned, noticing Lafier was touching her **phaser** through her clothing. “Just stay still.”

The **royal princess** pouted, but nodded.

Finally, the troops gave their car a look. They were a sour-faced middle-aged man, and a young man wearing a cheerful smile.

Jinto played the amicable driver. “Something happen?”

“No, nothing to worry about, citizen,” answered the young one. The translation device attached to his waist interpreted his words simultaneously.

“This is a light-hearted survey. We’re investigating the flow of people for the future administration’s reference.”

“Hope that’s not putting you out.” Jinto smiled openly, as to drive home that he was an utterly harmless individual. And since they were relying on machine translation, they couldn’t even notice his accent. That was the only good news.

The soldier extended a hand. “Your wallet, please.”

“My wallet, you say?”

“We won’t be taking any money. We’re not bandits, don’t worry,” he said, guffawing at his own joke. “We just want to know your citizen standings, that’s all.”

“I see...” Jinto’s heart thumped so hard it nearly turned inside-out.

It seemed a wallet was not a receptacle for money, but rather a **memory crystal** with personal and bank account information, or something close enough to one.

Needless to say, Jinto had no wallet. His personal and bank info were in his **compuwatch**, and though he could show them their rarefied “standings” through the watches, that was precisely what he wanted to avoid.

Actually, Jinto’s **compuwatch** was Seelnay’s, though that didn’t improve their

conundrum. The soldiers weren't about to welcome an **imperial citizen** with open arms, and convincing them he was in fact a woman seemed a tall order.

"Uhh... oh, man, I must've forgotten it at home..." A hackneyed excuse, even for him.

"Oh, well, that's odd. You forgot it? I thought folks here always had it on them."

"Oh, you know, I'm the kind that only trusts cash..."

The soldier's gaze fell on Lafier. "What about that little lady?"

"Uh, she doesn't have a wallet."

"Uh-huh..." The soldier's eyes narrowed.

Jinto lavished him even more with his winning smile.

The soldier turned off his translation device and traded words with the older soldier. The glances they shot toward Jinto and Lafier during their exchange could not be called favorable.

"Fine," said the soldier, at last. "Then I'll just ask you your name."

My name!? Jinto panicked. Of course, why hadn't he thought of a fake name sooner?

"Ku Durin," he said, stealing his friend's name on the spur of the moment. He could only pray that that wasn't a weird name on Clasbule.

"And her?"

"Her name is, uh... Clint Lina!" he said, using the name most prominent in his psyche.

"I'd like to hear her tell me her name, thank you very much. What's got her all clammed up?"

Jinto looked for himself. He'd told her to stay still. He hadn't told her to freeze in place with her hands on her lap. That was way too still. Having no reaction to any stimuli was supremely unnatural. It wasn't as though an inspection by an occupying force was a frequent occurrence, and yet there she sat, without an iota of interest. Anyone would find that suspicious.

Her unblinking profile was mysterious, refined, even statuesque. What it was not was human.

“All right, you’ve got me.” Jinto threw up his hands. “It’s a doll.”

“A doll?”

“Y-yep.”

“Looks pretty lifelike for a doll,” he said, casting his eyes all around her dubiously.

“It’s just that exquisitely made.”

“Your doll looks like it’s breathing.”

“That’s just your imagin... no, it’s mechanized so it *looks* like it’s breathing.”

“Why do you have a doll in your passenger’s seat?”

“Why must you ask?” Jinto fired back. “This is just a traffic survey, right?”

“I just want to know. I’m curious about this planet’s culture.” But the soldier’s face betrayed an interest that surpassed idle curiosity.

“Look, I’ve got to keep up appearances, okay!?” Jinto lamented desperately. “I’m finally out here traveling, but I didn’t want to look lame doing it alone. That’s why I made it look like I’ve got a lady with me.”

“Ah, sorry!” The soldier looked uncomfortable. “But someone your age, is that something you really need to be that worried about?”

“What would you know!?”

“Well, looking back, I guess I had as much on my mind as you seem to when I was your age,” the soldier sighed nostalgically. “If only I’d known how dumb I was being back then.”

“Can I go now?” said Jinto sulkily.

“Could you let me touch your doll a bit before I let you go? I can’t believe how amazing it looks,” he said, reaching a hand.

“No, don’t!” Jinto leapt out. “Please don’t touch her!”

“‘Her’?” The soldier raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, it’s mine, I own it, I don’t want anyone touching it!”

Again the soldier sighed, his gaze full of compassion. “You’re in love with it, aren’t you... You’re sick in the head, and may need help.”

Oh, give it a rest.

“Not only that, but the doll looks as *cold* as it does beautiful...”

The middle-aged soldier said something. The young one looked back and answered. Jinto didn’t understand a word of it.

The young soldier shrugged. “I’m sorry to have taken your time. You can go now.”

“Thank you.” Every fiber in his body wanted to explode with joy, but he deliberately kept his expression emotionless as he pushed the pedal.

After a little while, they lost sight of the soldiers. Lafier was still frozen.

“You can stop now,” he said. “Man, though. The way you played along really saves our hides. You’re pretty adaptable yourself, gotta say. You understood what I was trying to tell you inside and out.”

“Only because your pronunciation was so much clearer.” She shot him a sidelong glare. “The nerve of you! Telling a lie like that.”

Jinto suddenly looked apprehensive. “You’re not gonna blow up on me, are you?”

“Oh? Do I look *happy* to you? Acting like a doll isn’t just exhausting. It’s a mark on my pride. That man, he said something to the effect of *I look ‘cold,’* didn’t he?”

“I wouldn’t say you look cold the way you are right now. In fact, you look like you could erupt on a dime.” *Just my luck, she catches only the words that set her off.* “Besides, he called you beautiful, too.”

“I’m not ‘beautiful.’ I’m *graceful*. Also, he said *I’m beautiful*, like that’s all there is to me, like that’s all I’m worth...”

“Yeah, well you know what, we got outta there, didn’t we?” he said, fed up. “You’ve gotta hand me that much.”

“From a rational standpoint, I applaud your quick wits. But the emotional side of me is demanding your blood!”

“Then I’m glad you’re a girl of reason,” he said, ingratiating her.

“I suppose you wouldn’t know, but the Abliar family is renowned for being bad at keeping their emotions in check — particularly their anger!”

“I don’t really think your family needed the help, fame-wise, given they’re the most famous in the universe. And that’s not touching on the issue of you getting stuck in your family’s ways.”

“Shut up, Jinto! I like the way I am!”

“So you’re in love with yourself... You’re sick in the head, and may need help.”

“You’d best be careful, Jinto; my emotional side is overtaking my rational side.”

“Come to think of it...” Jinto was quick to change the subject. “...what were they doing that inspection for? It didn’t look like they were searching for us.”

“It’s to capture the key figures among the **territorial civilian government**.”

Jinto was a little surprised. “How do you know?”

“That’s what they were saying.”

“Oh, right. I totally forgot you can understand their language.”

“Yep. They said something along the lines of: ‘We’re searching for the big shots of the slave government. We have no business with these children. Their hair isn’t dyed blue, so just let them go. Let’s not waste any more of people’s time.’”

“The ‘slave government’?”

“What they’re calling the **territorial civilian government**, I suppose.”

“But **territorial citizens** aren’t ‘slaves.’”

“You and I both know that. So too do the **citizens** of this planet, probably. But *they* don’t know that.”

“Phew... They’ve got a twisted view of the world, huh?”

“About that... one of the soldiers seemed as though he wanted to bear some responsibility toward your mental wellness.”

“Responsibility toward my mental wellness?” he repeated, bewildered.

“He wanted to ask you about your troubles outside of work. But the older one told him not to.”

Jinto shuddered. “Talk about a close shave.”

“I, for one, would have enjoyed watching you divulge your teenaged anguish,” she said, her voice laden with venom. “I would’ve even pretended to be a doll for a whole day to see that.”

Jinto had thought the **royal princess**’s ire had abated, but he’d been premature to do so. “That aside, what are soldiers like them doing being such busybodies, anyway?”

“How would I know?” she said coldly.

The hovercar cleared the forested area and entered an open space.

“Is this the city?” asked Lafier.

To their left, grasslands. To their right, an endless wall. Beyond the wall, a line of dozens of towers.

“Can’t be. City’s over there.” Jinto pointed forward with his chin. The tree-like buildings were bunched together like they’d been at Lune Beega.

“Then what are those?” Lafier pointed at the group of towers. “They can’t be natural.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe the city stretches all the way out here.” It was hard to think that people were living in those towers. There were no windows, and they were all identical in every aspect except color, as they were all painted in the typically Clabulian gaudy palette. Any normal person living in a town like that would go funny for sure.

Jinto cocked his head. “Maybe they’re some kind of memorial.”

“A memorial? To what?”

“Couldn’t tell you.” He couldn’t even guess. What event could there have

even been for a city on a planet without much history to speak of to spend so much money commemorating it? “It’s got nothing to do with us, though.”

“You can be surprisingly boring,” she said scornfully.

“On my home planet, they say ‘curosimy killed the cat,’” he said, closing the topic. They had so much else to think about.

The city began where the “memorial towers” ended. Sfagnoff’s sun was still high in the sky, but according to biological time, it was near midnight. There were few civilians out at this hour, and only the figures of the enemy troops caught their eyes.

Jinto switched the driving mode to manual and left the car in a parking lot at random.

“Lafier, don’t speak, even in town, okay?” whispered Jinto, after checking whether anyone was around to eavesdrop. “Leave the talking to me.”

“I *know*. You must think me a great big fool.”

“Just making sure.”

“Shall I pretend to be a doll again?” she remarked snidely. “You may carry me through town.”

“Don’t be silly, I would never dream of laying a hand on **Your Highness**.”

Jinto beckoned Lafier get out of the car. They double-checked to see whether they’d left anything in it. Though they’d just gotten to know the vehicle, this was goodbye.

“Since we’re ditching the car here, we might want to head to some other city and put some distance between us.” There was nobody in sight, but he spoke quietly anyway.

“How?” she whispered back.

“There must be some sort of mass transportation between cities. Don’t know what they use here, though.”

“We shouldn’t, Jinto.”

“Why not?”

“There may be more inspections. And I am not turning into a doll that many times.”

“You’re never gonna let that go, are you? But you’re absolutely right.” He was forced to admit it. If those two soldiers weren’t the exception, then the enemy was exceedingly nosey. And though she’d dyed her hair black, if they’d taken her hat off, it’d be obvious she was Abh. The wiser move would be to bide their time in the big city until the situation improved.

“All right, let’s look for an inn,” said Jinto.

Chapter 11: The *Ladomhoth Lomhotr* (Team-up Proposal)

Entryua Reie (“RAY”), Police Inspector of the Lune Beega Criminal Investigation Department, stubbed out his cigarette into the ashtray. The light was already snuffed, but he forced it down like he had some strange vendetta. Feeling a bit better afterward, he finally felt like poking his head into the manager’s office.

It was a terrible morning.

He took that back: it had been nothing but terrible days ever since that lot came a-knocking.

Entryua, much like the rest of the citizenry of Clasbule, couldn’t give a toss whether it was the Abh or the United Humankind that ruled the universe. None of it affected them.

...Though it did affect them. Lots.

Since they’d inspected the police without notice, traffic was jammed, along with various other inconveniences. Those who worked in suburban farmland and schoolgoing children in the city were getting up very early. Meanwhile, stores were beginning to run out of their wares.

Moreover, they were searching every nook and cranny for civilians who’d dyed their hair blue, and diligently shaving their heads, though to what end he had no idea. Even one of Entryua’s subordinates got hit.

And baldness as a fashion statement was very three years ago. Did they KNOW how humiliating it was to be caught in a trend from three years ago — particularly for the women?

But the worst was how they’d meddled in their regularly scheduled programming. Their right to choose what holovision program they so desired had been cut back severely. He couldn’t watch the next episode in the serial drama he’d been looking forward to, and that had already been distributed to

him.

The only thing they were allowed to watch was their propaganda. The night prior they'd spent a long time explaining the election system.

Entryua knew all about elections. Specifically, he couldn't afford to ignore the election for police commissioner.

This general wave of resentment should have been aimed at the occupying forces of the United Humankind, but for some reason, the people were airing their grievances at the police. The biggest cause was probably the fact that nobody knew where the occupying army's headquarters were.

What a giant pain.

Lune Beega may have seemed small, if judged solely by the urban area where the building-trees were located, but the city limits were in fact quite expansive. With those buildings at the center, the city stretched on for a radius of 3,000 *üésdagh*. Most of that space was taken up by plantations, but it was dotted by small villages and isolated homes. 80% of the population was so scattered. And that's how big the area of the Lune Beega police force's jurisdiction was, too.

Due to the ban on use of airspace, and all of the inspections, the police couldn't do their rounds on time. The damned soldiers made no exception for police cars. Worse, they inspected patrol cars especially scrupulously. Every time they left or entered any city, they'd be searched down to the undersides of the seats, so they were hard-pressed to keep watch over the entirety of the city's territory.

The Lune Beega Police had already let four flagrant offenders get away. They hadn't gotten to the scene on time because they'd been held up by the occupying forces. It is the Criminal Investigation Department's duty to search for offenders who evaded arrest at the scene of the crime.

Those soldiers seemed intent on increasing his workload, the bastards. At this rate, their crime-arrest ratio would drop for sure. The only saving grace was that the commissioner's approval rates would also drop.

Resentment toward the police themselves was also beginning to bubble to the fore. Processing complaints wasn't in the Criminal Investigation

Department's job description, but Entryua had his acquaintances, and they spared no time hammering him with blame.

And now, this.

Police Commissioner Aizan (EYE ZAHN) had summoned him.

They hated each other, so what could this be about? He should have given him three days' notice so he could prepare himself psychologically.

"It's me, Entryua," he shouted in front of the door to the commissioner's office. Aizan despised crude, loud voices.

The door opened. Entryua entered with swinging strides.

"Well if it isn't my little Entryua," said Aizan with a fat smile and wheedling voice.

Aizan being pleased to see him could only portend calamity. Him going out of his way to extend a warm welcome was the most definitive proof there could be that a disaster was unfolding.

There with them was another visitor to the commissioner's office, a young man who seemed the sociable sort on first blush. Were it not for the army fatigues that'd become an eyesore to him these days, he'd have had no reason to feel any antipathy.

"This here's Entryua, one of Criminal Investigation's finest inspectors. Entryua, meet Kyte, Military Police Lieutenant of the UH Peacekeepers."

Kyte extended a hand. "Nice to meet you, Inspector."

Entryua stared at that hand dubiously. What was all of this about?

Kyte smiled broadly. "Oh, sorry, that was rude of me! *This* is how people greet each other here, right?" he said, clasping his hands in front of his chest.

Seeing that beaming grin, Entryua felt the urge to pat his head and go "attaboy." An urge he suppressed as he returned the gesture.

"Sure, nice to meet you, Lieutenant," he said curtly. Then he faced Aizan. "So, what've you got for me?"

Though he already had a decent guess: the "Peacekeepers" would be

subsuming Criminal Investigations and ordering them around.

Now, a commissioner with any pride would've brushed aside that kind of demeaning demand. But this was Aizan, so Entryua couldn't be so optimistic. After all, their occupiers had detained politicians and high-level bureaucrats, and though Aizan was nothing more than the commissioner of a small city, if he displeased the army, they'd spare a thought or two as to a good use for the remaining vacant cells of the planet's jails.

Not that Entryua would care in the slightest. He hoped they threw the bastard in a filthy, damp, sunless cell so cramped he couldn't take a single step.

"Please, sit, Entryua, my lad. You too, Lieutenant." Aizan pointed at the ottomans.

They were arranged in a circle. Entryua took a seat. The chairs' legs were short, so he had to stretch his own legs out in front.

"Would you care for some peppermint tea, Lieutenant?" asked Aizan.

"Sounds good. Thank you," he replied smilingly.

Without asking for Entryua's preference, Aizan ordered the group three cups of peppermint.

Soon, the set of three cups rose gradually from the center of the circle of chairs.

Entryua wasn't thirsty. He left the cup be and instead watched with irritation as the other two commenced sipping. "You want to tell me what I'm here for, or what!? I'm busy, you know!"

"There's no need to get upset, Entryua."

"I agree with the Inspector," said Kyte, to his surprise. "Time is of the essence."

At that, Aizan nodded readily. "I see. Well, my lad, as it turns out, the Lieutenant will be cooperating with us."

"What?" Entryua had guessed wrong. "The soldiers occupying Claspule, helping us?"

“We’re not ‘occupying’ anything. We’re *liberating* Clasbule,” said Kyte.

“I don’t know if your translator’s on the fritz, or if my dictionary’s got a misprint, but that’s the first time I’ve heard the word ‘liberated’ used that way.”

“We’ve liberated you from the tyranny of those disgusting homunculi, the Abh. We’ve come to spread the word about *democracy*,” he waxed sonorously.

“Oh, I know democracy. It was the will of the people that put Commissioner Aizan in office.” And he wanted nothing more than to take democracy by the collar and share a few choice words with it.

“That was *slave* democracy, without any of its true substance. Your leaders accepted Abh rule as a face of life. Yet if they’d been operating by the will of the people, they would have taken a stand against the yoke of oppression.”

“You mean Senator Kindee?” Entryua shook his head. “I’ve always voted Democratic, but the man’s a good egg, Liberal Party member or not.”

“That’s just it! The very idea that parties with ‘Democratic’ or ‘Liberal’ in their names exist on a planet conquered by the Abh is a mockery of genuine democracy!”

“So that justifies throwing them in jail?”

“They’re not ‘jails.’ They’re Democracy Reeduction Camps.”

“The hell is that? A euphemism for concentration camps?”

“They’re camps for education. Schools, just as the name implies.”

“Uh-huh.” Entryua raised an eyebrow. “Then why’s nobody signing up for the bloody things?”

“No getting belligerent, Entryua,” Aizan butted in nervously.

Feh. Damned coward.

Here the police were getting swallowed up by outsiders, but the commissioner was too scared of “reeduction” to do a thing about it.

Kyte kept calm. “It’s fine, Commissioner. These are misunderstandings we knew would come up. And clearing them up is our mission.”

“You’re young, but you’ve got a good head on your shoulders,” lauded Aizan.

Their little spat had strengthened Entryua's impression of Kyte as a "good guy." But in his eyes, there were two types of "good guy" — passive, and proactive.

Passive types were great. The only people gratified by proactive types like Kyte, on the other hand, were themselves. Proactive types loved pointing out "problems" that people were living just fine without solving. Those "problems," meanwhile, had never been thought of as such, which led to the dismay of the previously untroubled. Then Mr. Do-gooder rolls into the tangled mess he caused and gallantly lends a hand. Once the person who'd been "helped" in this way snapped out of it, they usually found themselves worse off than before.

"What happened to time being of the essence?" said Entryua. "And what exactly do you mean, you'll be 'cooperating' with us? Somehow I doubt the Lieutenant is going to be working under me."

"I think you're being rather rude," Aizan chided.

"No, the Inspector has every right to be suspicious. Allow me to lay it all out for him."

"You're ever so kind," said Entryua bitinglly.

"We'll be cooperating on a specific case. Yesterday, three citizens of this town were injured, and their car stolen. We're very, very interested in this incident."

Well that's a very, very blah case to be so interested in. Obviously, there was more to this thing.

"What's the case number?"

"08-337-8404," answered Aizan.

Entryua connected the telephonic line to the Police Information. He picked out the case in question and displayed it on the monitor.

"So, these three were the victims, huh..." He'd known their names already. And Entryua could only laugh upon skimming through their testimonies. "They were attacked after 'offering help to a boy and girl in trouble on the road'?"

"What's so funny about that?" Kyte cocked his head inquiringly.

"They're a notorious bunch around here. In fact, they've been putting more

work on our plates since they were brats. May I offer you some advice? If you want to up your popularity, you ought to round them up and get a firing squad to execute them in public. They're 'minors' so we're forced to handle them with kid gloves. You're telling me these numbskulls suddenly turned over new leaves? If you ask me, they made a pass at the girl, things got physical, and the two fought back. Because if their testimonies are true, then we've got bigger news in this one case than the Occupation of Clabule."

"The *Liberation* of Clabule," said Kyte earnestly.

Entryua ignored the remark. "So, why the interest in this case, anyway?"

"Take a closer look. The 'girl spoke Baronh and was as beautiful as an Abh.'"

"Yeah, I read that part. You can't take them at their word, though. They're not exactly the brightest of bulbs. I don't even know if they could distinguish between Baronh and birdsong. Besides, to them, there are only two types of females, the 'smex' and 'uggos,' with two-thirds of all ladies falling under 'the smex.' So their eye for beauty can't exactly home in on a bona fide Abh, if you catch my drift."

"But what about the boy? They said he looked 'average,' and that he spoke the local language, if imperfectly. They must have been an Abh woman and her *laimh* (imperial citizen) attendant."

"What was this Abh of yours doing trudging down the road?" asked Entryua, far from convinced. "That's the one thing I can't picture an Abh doing. I've always thought their lot get antsy when they get dirt on their soles."

"Well, this is nothing more than a hypothesis, but an Empire landing hull was discovered not far from the scene of the crime. My superiors in the army of liberation are seeing that as a sign the two events are linked."

"You sure like flapping your gums, don't you? Long story short, you're trying to say the two were in that ship."

"I'm saying there's a high possibility that's the case. It's true that the girl might NOT be Abh. But it's worth looking into. Please, let us aid in the search. In exchange, we ask only that you hand the criminals over to us."

"Hold your horses. We're talking aggravated burglary here. That's a serious

offense. And you want us to just hand them over?”

“About that,” said Aizan. “We’ve already come to an agreement. You don’t get a say in this.”

“Of course, Commissioner,” Entryua shrugged.

“Then you’re on board!” Kyte smiled.

“Because I’m forced to be,” said Entryua, as he glanced at the column with the person in charge of the case data. “It’s being handled by Assistant Inspector BcCoonin’s team. Let’s hurry up and get you acquainted.”

He didn’t like this. BcCoonin was already still chasing a backlog of more than three years’ worth of burglaries and murders, with three fresh incidents on his lap at the moment. Now he’d have to pursue this one case full-time for the time being.

“Forget that,” said Aizan, who was likewise less than keen to push it on BcCoonin. “*You’ll* be heading this case, Entryua.”

“Me?” He had a hunch this would happen, but he feigned being taken aback.

“That’s right, lad. Team up with Lieutenant Kyte and find them. Naturally, you can use as many deputies as you like. We aim to arrest these criminals with the Lune Beega police force’s whole power.”

“Wait a second, Commissioner. That’d only tie the investigation up. You might not be too clear on what goes down at crime scenes, but I’ve got my own job to do.”

“And Inspectors heading up investigations is a common occurrence.”

“Yeah, for *big* cases.”

“And this case isn’t big? It involves the occu— the liberating army.”

This is what Entryua and most of the other officers hated about Aizan. He paid about as much attention to the force’s putative neutrality as he did clipping his overlong nails, swayed as he was by outside opinion. He’d made a mess of the organization through his focus not on case-by-case level of importance, but on what the press would make of things.

He wouldn't complain as much if they were given an organizational structure that enabled them to be flexible in their responses. But in reality, the commissioner had been obsessed with budget cuts due to the climate in Parliament, and thereby reduced the force down to a husk of skin and bones. To top it all off, he then had the nerve to issue unreasonable order after unreasonable order.

That, however, was what endeared him to his constituency, and as a consequence, he'd held the office for a long while.

"There's something I still don't get. What you want is the Abh in cuffs, right?" Entryua asked Kyte.

"We mustn't forget the **imperial citizen**. He was born a free man, and yet he aided their tyranny. He is an odious lout."

"The Abh, the *laimh*, whatever. There are so many of you people around, though. What's the point of enlisting the police force of a country town like this?"

"Entryua, the Lieutenant is helping *us*."

"Can we drop the cockamamie pretext, Commissioner? How many people have you got under you, Lieutenant?"

Kyte threw out his chest. "I'm an officer who's been cleared to work solo."

"In other words, you haven't got anyone under you." Entryua looked at Aizan with arms outstretched. *See, Commissioner? There's no room for debate anymore. I'm no donkey; you can't take me for a ride.*

"This is a big opportunity for all of you, Inspector," he said in fevered tones. "Under ordinary circumstances, I'd have liked to ask for the help of the local police to unmask *slave democrats* as well. Working alone, we aren't very knowledgeable as to this planet's state of affairs. Unfortunately, those servile traitors of humanity can't be sentenced as such under Clasbule law, and even worse, they were people's neighbors, so I'm sure there would be resistance to the mission even amongst you. This incident is different. In this case, they are indisputably criminals..."

Entryua understood where he was going with this and got straight to it. "It's

our job to apprehend them, yes. But where's the 'big opportunity'?"

Kyte lowered his voice. "It's your chance to contribute to true democracy. This is between us, but some of my higher-ups are of the opinion that the police force should be replaced wholesale. They say it was 'state violence on behalf of the slave democracy.' But here you have an opportunity to show them there's a possibility you can be rechristened as a democratic organization. All you need to do is align your goals with ours."

"Oh, gee, thanks a ton. But are you sure that isn't just your own bag?"

"Don't be absurd. On the contrary, the opinion that we should seek cooperation with preexisting administrative structures enjoys rather broad support. The Supreme Commander is also of that belief. And depending on your police force's actions, that prevailing opinion can turn into policy."

"Surely you see now, Entryua," said Aizan with a triumphant look. "Through our conduct, we have to make an appeal for the very existence of the police."

I'd love to appeal your existence, Entryua thought bitterly.

"I have an idea; why don't you do it, Commissioner?" he suggested, but when he saw Aizan give it serious consideration, he immediately took it back. If he let the Commissioner head the case, he'd feel bad for his junior officers. "Okay, okay, I'll head the search." Bridling his indignation, Entryua lit himself a smoke.

"What is that?" asked Kyte.

"You don't know about tobacco?" he shot back sullenly.

"Oh, is that what that is. So it's legal here."

"Of course. I'm a guardian of the law, and this is a police building."

"In our society, tobacco has been banned for over 200 years."

"That right? Guess they've got anti-smoking proponents all over. This little guy's totally safe, though. Doesn't even smell. It's like medicine; soothes the nerves and such."

"That medicinal effect is the problem," said Kyte guilelessly. "It's unethical to suppress the mind using drugs. The fact that this planet was forced to legalize such unethical drugs just goes to show how extreme the slave democracy's

oppression truly was. It's our responsibility as the Liberation Army to eliminate the drugs themselves, as well as the reasons people have taken a liking to them."

"That so." Entryua took a deep, deep drag. *I hope you've realized, Military Police Lieutenant Kyte, that with those words, you've just made me into a reactionary for "slave democracy."*

Chapter 12: *Bar Glairh* (Abh History)

“What a nice morning,” said Jinto, taking in the sight of the city of Guzonh as dusk was falling.

“It’s noon to me.” Lafier had her legs crossed, comfortable in her chair as she vacantly consumed some holovision programming.

“You already get a handle on the language?” Jinto asked, looking back from his position at the window.

“A little,” Lafier nodded slightly.

“...About which you have been fed mistaken information. This is a grave injustice. You have the right to know...” droned the level box that was the holovision receiver set. A semitransparent stereoscopic image of a woman’s portrait was projected above the box, and she was talking to Lafier.

“Yet more army propaganda, huh. You having fun watching that stuff?”

“No. It’s dreadfully dull. But there’s nothing else to do.”

She’s not wrong. Their only two diversions were watch holovision or talking. Clasbulian holovision wasn’t exactly edge-of-one’s-seat entertainment. On Delktu, there was so much programming that a viewer could spend a lifetime failing to watch all of it, and could watch whatever, whenever. Here, however, they couldn’t so much as change the channel.

That wasn’t due to some Clasbulian cultural deficiency, though. Clasbule’s array of programming had been just as robust as Delktu’s until mere days ago. The occupying army made sure to change that. They had to give up hope of anything entertaining; this was likely a straight week of “special messaging.”

“You eat yet?”

“No.”

“Guess I’ll be making breakfast for you and lunch for me, then.” Jinto stretched. “What do you feel like eating?”

“I won’t find anything palatable,” she said, not testily but rather matter-of-factly.

“All right, leave it to me.” Jinto stood in front of the auto-cooker in the corner. He retrieved a can from the pouch at his feet. The label read, *BOLKOS-STYLE RED EGGPLANT SOUP WITH BEEF AND KIDNEY BEANS... NEEDS COOKING... FEEDS TWO*. He hadn’t the foggiest what was “Bolkos-style” about it, or even what that meant to begin with, but the picture was appetizing enough.

He pushed the can into the auto-cooker’s insertion hole, set the flavor concentration level to “medium,” placed a bowl on the food arrangement tray, and activated the machine.

It was Day 3 since they’d started staying at this inn, “The Rimzale.” They’d searched on foot for a place to stay after ditching the car. Fortunately, it wasn’t long before they’d stumbled on this inn, and they’d forked over enough cash for a ten-day stay.

It was a two-room: a living room, and a bedroom. It also had a bathroom and a washroom. There was no kitchen, but this auto-cooker took up a corner, making a simple meal no trouble to cook up. The living room contained comfy chairs, and a holovision set.

Right after getting settled into their accommodations, he went to buy changes of clothing, as well as food for the interim... and they hadn’t left the place since. Lafier obviously couldn’t leave at all, but Jinto knew he couldn’t afford to leave much, either.

What’ll they think? he thought anxiously.

The names on the inn register were “Sye Jinto” and “Sye Lina.” He planned to claim they were siblings if asked, but the person at reception hadn’t pried. If early marriage was common on Clasbule, he might have thought the two a young couple. However they were perceived, not signing out after three days must have come off as strange.

On Delktu, at least, they’d be arousing curiosity. Delktunians were comparatively nosy people; if someone stood out in any sense, the average Delktunian would want to snoop around for a reason.

He wondered what Clasbulians were like. Was that person at the desk absolutely burning with curiosity, speculating wildly as to their identities? Or did they not care a jot, and would only concern themselves with the two of them once the question of whether they'd pay for Day 11 rolled around?

If he was curious, Jinto would have liked it if they came to question them directly. Even though he didn't have the utmost confidence he'd be able to lie convincingly, he could perhaps keep the situation manageable.

The worst-case scenario involved that guy telling somebody about them. "*A young couple hasn't left their room in three days. What are they doing in there?*" It was no doubt a great mystery to kill time trying to puzzle out. That mystery would only grow more and more attention-grabbing as the time whiled from Day 3, to 4, to 5...

They could even become famous in the area before they realized it.

The guy at the desk seemed like the talkative sort, too.

Jinto sighed. *I probably need to be going outside from time to time.* It'd certainly help him retain his sanity. This caged-in feeling was getting to him.

They'd decided to sleep according to different schedules for two reasons, to keep lookout, and also because there was only one bed. There was, in fact, a third, secret reason to boot. If they spent whole days in each other's faces, they'd have trouble breathing, and not because they were breathlessly in love, but rather because they needed their space to keep from snapping.

And recently, Lafier was very frustrated indeed. She spent a third of each day sleeping, a third enjoying solitude, and a third with him. But even though she had some ostensive alone-time, if this "schedule" kept up, they could start fighting over trifling matters.

Worryingly, they were also both armed. In these dark doldrums, the **royal princess of the Abh** and the **noble prince of Hyde** killing each other was not outside the realm of possibility.

The auto-cooker beeped.

Jinto took out the bowl that was now full of Bolkos-style red eggplant soup, and then placed another bowl on the machine's tray, setting it to the thinnest

flavor concentration available before activating it a second time.

What a pain. If he could make both bowls with just one flavor, he could have finished cooking in one go.

That's what he'd done the first time he used the thing. And while Jinto had enjoyed his first salty-tasting meal in a while, it had been too salty for Lafier, who didn't eat any past the first bite.

That's why he'd started differentiating their portions by flavor from then on out, but even the lowest setting seemed too strong for the **royal princess's** tongue.

The auto-cooker beeped once more.

Jinto placed the two bowls onto a serving tray, and fetched some cool peppermint tea to go with them.

The dining table was also the holovision set. Perhaps on Clasbule, it was unthinkable poor form to watch a broadcast during mealtimes.

"I'm setting it down," he said, while Lafier had her eyes fixed on the hologram, which had changed from the woman from earlier to a small doll without clean-cut facial features, with a *bach* (orbital city) rotating above its head.

"What the?" he said, setting down the tray.

With the tray in the way, the hologram grew intermittently blurry and jumbled, but the audio continued as normal.

"...The purpose, to explore deep space. It was thought that as 'organic machines,' they were better suited to the task than pure, metal machines were. Thinking that was justified by the technological limitations of the time..."

"It's our origins," she muttered.

"You mean, of the Abh?"

"Yes."

"...THAT is the truth behind the Abh!" A scary DUN DUN played over the soundbite of a woman screaming. *"As such, Abhs are not human. They are*

merely organic machines...”

“How could they say that?” Jinto reached for the holovision set’s **controls**.
“I’m turning this off. Let’s eat.”

“Sure.”

“...Free men and women, we ought to revert the Abh to their rightful place. Which is to say, their place as organic machines who live to serve humans! That’s the only thing that would make them truly happy, too...” But both the audio and the video suddenly cut off.

Jinto poured the peppermint tea into two cups and took his own bowl of soup off the tray. Lafier followed suit and began to partake.

“About that broadcast...” Lafier broached in the middle of eating.

“You mean that pack of lies from earlier?”

“They weren’t lies.”

“Huh?”

“It’s true. Our ancestors were created as organic droids. Did you not know?”

Jinto batted his eyes. He honestly hadn’t known.

Abh history spanning before the creation of the Empire was shrouded in legend, and the reason why was clear. Around the year 120 **P.H.** (Pre-Imperial History), an accident on the city-ship Abliar destroyed its old navigation log, and with it, the entire history of the Abh. The only accurate extant records started from that point on.

Of course, it was difficult to imagine the Abh would forget their origins entirely. Yet the Abh, who were not much inclined to talk about themselves, avoided shedding light on this subject as well. That, or they felt no need to. In either case, this left surface peoples to exercise their own imaginations, and weave their own mythologies.

And now that the topic had come up, Jinto seemed to recall reading something similar on Delktu. It was just that that information had been buried amongst tabloid gossip, so it hadn’t left much of an impression on him.

“Yeah, no, I didn’t really know,” he confessed.

“We aren’t particularly keeping our origins a secret. It isn’t, however, something that we like to boast about. It’s no credit to our race, and can’t be found in any archive. It’s simply passed down from parent to child.”

“Looks like my parent didn’t know.”

“That can’t be. *Lonh-Dreur Haider* must have heard about it during his peerage ceremony. Every Abh knows.”

“Huh... But he didn’t tell me.” Jinto supposed his father considered it to be of no importance.

“I see. Then I’ll be the one to tell you...” Lafier sat straight up and regaled him.

On Earth, there existed a volcanic, arch-shaped archipelago. Due to the geography of the land, the civilization that developed there could pick and choose from other lands and peoples while cultivating their own unique culture.

Yet soon, advances in transportation and the expansion of the economic sphere hit the islands like a great wave. In this period’s early days, the people of the archipelago enjoyed its blessings, and prospered in no small measure. Eventually, however, global-scale cultural intermixture came to pass, leaving their individual language and culture on the verge of total assimilation. And there existed a faction that couldn’t stomach that.

That faction decided to leave Earth, as by then orbital cities were already commonplace, and they sought a realm to call their own in the asteroid belt. Less than one one-thousandth of the archipelago’s populace departed Earth this way, but that proved more than enough to preserve its culture.

Deeming their own culture as “contaminated by foreign influences,” they worked to reproduce its seminal, ancient form. The language was deliberately reconstituted using only the vocabulary found in its basest layer; as for high technology that didn’t exist then, they expanded the meanings of extant words and repurposed archaic words, as well as coining new terms based on the language’s ideophones.

When the existence of **closed gates** was discovered, and with it the potential

to plumb the reaches of the universe, this faction joined much of humanity in wondering whether they ought to head for an unclaimed star. Their population having swollen, the people started thinking they'd like to live their lives on land, even if that land was outside the Solar System.

Despite that, their isolationist attitude would get the better of them, as they proceeded independently of humanity's joint plan to settle outer space. They saw no choice but to undertake space exploration according to their own plan. But they had no access to any **closed gates** they could use to achieve relativistic-speed travel, possessing instead only low-speed nuclear-fusion ships.

In order to make fulfilling their objective using low-speed ships feasible, and to facilitate fatigue duty in space, they turned their hands to a forbidden technology — the creation of superior crew via human genetic modification.

Naturally gifted citizens were gathered, and thirty organisms engineered using their genes. Those life forms were considered non-human, and so they were given a trait which would never appear in "real" humans — blue hair — as a distinguishing mark.

"Our hair color..." said Lafier, pointing to her own locks before suddenly realizing they were dyed. She frowned. "That is to say, blue hair, is a brand of slavery."

Jinto shook his head: "Then I don't get it. Why do you like your hair blue so much?"

"Because it represents our genesis, and our original sin."

"Original sin?"

"Yes — the sin that marks our race..."

Though one was lost in the training process, the rest of the Abh's foundational ancestors were placed on low-speed ships as planned. The ships could only cruise toward their destination at a sluggish pace, their pitiful speed the result of very brief acceleration bursts. In the event they couldn't resupply their hydrogen stores at the destination, even a return trip was likely an implausible proposition. The sound of mind would refuse to embark on such a voyage. But the original Abhs, in their non-humanity, had no scope to enact

their wills.

In their navigations, they spotted a **closed gate**. To seize it, they spent almost all of the deceleration-fuel at their disposal. And though the stakes were perilous, they got their due recompense. These Founding Abhs, having succeeded in securing the gate, employed their limited resources and technological know-how to convert the mothership into a closed-gate-propelled model, thereby obtaining unprecedented high velocities.

The Founders, who yearned for self-determination, had had to muster their resolve to part ways with their birth city once they deviated from their predetermined course, and when they declared their independence, it was in a sector of deep space with no one to witness the event.

“That’s your race’s sin? Betraying your birth city?”

“No. That alone wouldn’t weigh on our consciences. There’s more to it than that.”

The Founding Abhs piloted their ship to a nearby star-system, and used its abundance of resources to build a larger ship, as necessitated by their burgeoning numbers. The ship they’d been piloting to that point was simple exploratory vessel, but the new one was fitted with so many functionalities as to be worthy of the name “city-ship.”

They did not hate their birth city. The mission tasked to them was certainly cold and self-serving, but in the end, it was their progenitors who had granted them life, as well as the ability to perceive the universe around them (*frocragh*).

There was, however, fear. The fear that they might cross paths with a unit sent by the birth city to punish them. In hindsight, those misgivings were irrational, even delusional. After all, what power had the birth city to dispatch such a punitive force?

And yet, the shadow of the city loomed large over their psyches, akin to omnipotent gods.

As such, they pulled information from the mother brain, and produced weaponry. Every adult among the fold banded into a military corps, and trained.

Incidentally, the ones who’d overseen those training efforts were the

navigation officers, who happened to be Lafier's distant ancestors. In any case, everyday tasks aboard a city-ship were a multi-faceted and complex affair, and their population was quite low. Unable to establish a school for each vocation or work duty, education was conducted via an apprenticeship system, which, in turn, didn't take long to shift to a hereditary system. This hereditary transmission wasn't limited to navigation officers; all crew positions became fundamentally hereditary in nature. And that bloodline had been passed down, unbroken to the old **nobles** of the **Empire**... but that is another story.

When the Founders had finished their preparations, they pre-empted their imagined aggressors. That is, they opted to destroy their birth city.

"Talk about short-sighted," said Jinto.

"I had the same thought, so I asked my father about it."

"And?"

"He told me the Founders were in a state of unrelenting, unbearable fear, and that they shuddered at the idea they could never lay hold to any peace of mind. Their only true goal in all of this was to put an end to that otherwise endless spell of anxiety."

"I get where they were coming from, but still..."

"To be honest, I don't know what to think, either. It's not as though my father could be certain that was true; he wasn't present then. In any event, our ancestors turned back to the Solar System..."

When the curtain fell, it did so all too soon.

They would learn after the fact that the birth city hadn't been idling in wait for the Abhs whom they thought would never return. In fact, they'd constructed several **closed-gate**-propelled ships of their own, and sent out multiple waves of emigrants. As a result, their power had waned considerably.

Had they been made aware of those details beforehand, the Founding Abhs likely wouldn't have attacked, as they communicated very clearly that the birth city lacked both the intention and the capacity to deploy some punitive force.

Regardless, the birth city tried playing political games with them. Its leaders

saw much potential in the information and ship technology of the Founding Abhs, and consequently attempted to bring them back under their control. The Founders immediately ended negotiations and marshalled everything they had to assault the birth city.

Though their numbers were meager, the Founders were all warriors, and the weaponry under their command quite ample. The people of the birth city, on the other hand, had long since relegated the concept of war to a relic of the past.

The birth-city that was supposed to be a behemoth was in actuality almost entirely bereft of military power, and utterly defenseless in the face of a city-ship that had been fashioned into an interstellar mobile fortress.

Other nations existed in the Solar System, but none interfered, and even if they tried, things had developed quickly and the space between the various other polities and that asteroid-belt city was wide.

They couldn't meddle if they wanted to. There wasn't enough strength of arms in the whole of the Solar System to hold the Founding Abhs back.

The conflagration engulfed the million-strong population of the birth city, and, flung into the vacuum of space, they expired.

"Our ancestors fulfilled their sole objective. It was only after they witnessed the wreckage scattered throughout space that they realized how deep their affection for the birth city ran."

"Their affection?"

"Yep. It was their home city. They loved its culture. The city had been created for that culture, and our ancestors *born* for that culture. But now the city didn't exist anymore. The city's emigrants couldn't be counted on to preserve that culture, either. As such, it fell on our ancestors to pass it down the generations. The preservation of the culture and its language became their new goal in life."

"And that's the Abhs' life goal to this day?"

"Correct. That's also when they decided to call themselves the 'Abh.' Up to that point, they'd simply called themselves the '*Carsarh*' (Kindred). In ancient Baronh, the language of the birth city, the word 'Abh' meant the 'race of the

cosmos,' or the 'race of the seas.' No other turn of phrase was more suited to us, a race that drifts through space. Though the pronunciation of the language did change a fair amount."

"Isn't the duty of the Abh to preserve the culture? Isn't the pronunciation changing a bad thing?"

"Not so. Abh culture is hardly unique in the fact that it shifts over time, but change is also a characteristic of our culture. Besides, I've heard it said that the supposedly 'perfectly pure' reconstructed culture of the birth city had a mash of elements from many different eras, and the effort was ill-conceived to begin with. As such, we needn't shackle ourselves to things past. Expanding culture is part of preserving it. As long as we aren't too swayed by foreign influences, we should be fine."

"Well, I guess that's true."

"Those are our thoughts on the matter, anyway."

"Huh. But why does the enemy know about all that?"

"That's not odd at all. It must still be recounted in records within the Solar System. There are even **terrestrial worlds** within the **Empire** that know of our origins. Your ancestors must have departed the Solar System before my ancestors returned to it."

"Yeah, must be. Otherwise I'd have learned in history class that an orbital city got destroyed."

"Abhkind erased the home city they so dearly adored. That is the sin that stains our blood. We must preserve the culture we inherited from the city of our birth. Such is our mission as a race. My father told me that to be Abh is to shoulder the weight of that sin, and of that mission. I think likewise." After a brief pause, Lafier asked him: "Jinto, has this made you dislike becoming Abh yourself?"

"What are you talking about?" Jinto forced a smile. "I'm already Abh, aren't I? You're the one who told me that."

"Yes. Of course," she nodded, though Jinto could make nothing of her expression.

Then, as Jinto ate up the last of the now-cold Bolkos-style red eggplant soup, it happened without warning.

“Excuse me,” said a female voice from the other side of the door.

“No, don’t!” Jinto shouted reflexively.

But she’d already opened the door. “Coming through,” said the woman, holding clean sheets in her arms. Her skin was tanned brown, and her hair and eyebrows were black. Her facial features were clearly defined, and she looked to be in her early 30s.

“Who, who are you!?” Even Jinto could tell his voice was quavering. He keenly felt that glint in her eyes.

“Oh my, you can’t tell by my dress? I’m housekeeping.”

“Housekeeping...” parroted Jinto, befuddled. He hadn’t known this inn had room staff.

“Yes. I’m here to switch out your sheets.”

Lafier arranged her bangs to hide her *froch*. Seeing that put Jinto at ease.

“I mean...” pressed Jinto, “Nobody’s replaced our sheets for three days. Why now, all of a sudden?”

“It’s standard service, deary.”

“But couldn’t you just slot them through there?” he replied, pointing to the door’s slotting hole. One had only to toss their laundry there, and after an hour’s time it would be delivered fresh and clean to one’s room.

“I apologize, there must’ve been some miscommunication. May I enter the bedroom?”

“Ah, no, I, uh, I’ll take them.” Jinto was trying his level best to suppress his inner agitation.

The **compuwatches** and **phasers** were in the bedroom. The guns were hidden under the pillows; if she changed the sheets herself, she’d spot them.

“But I couldn’t put that on you, the customer...”

“It’s fine, really!” he cut in emphatically, virtually flying into the bedroom to

rip off the sheets. Then he stuffed the sheets under his arms, ambled back into the living room, and thrust them into her hands.

“I’m so sorry...” she said. “At least allow me to make your bed with these sheets.”

“Please, that won’t be necessary. I’ll do it myself,” he declined politely.

“Well, all right then.” She placed the new sheets on the chair, and then cocked her head. “Do you have any laundry?”

Jinto was about to shake his head, but then he realized it would be unwise to seem too flustered, so he retrieved the laundry basket from the washroom and handed it to her.

“Thank you; I’m very sorry, sir,” she said as she put the dirty sheets and laundry into the slotting hole.

Jinto had a question for her. “Uh... will you be coming to replace the sheets every day?”

She smiled. “If you wish, sir.”

“In that case, you, uh, don’t have to. Just send them over, and I’ll do it.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind at all, but...”

“Plus, is there a way to lock the door from the inside?”

“Of course there is.”

“It’s just, I had it locked, but then you entered...”

“I work here.”

“Can I lock it so employees can’t enter, either?”

“Sir,” she chided him, “the inn wouldn’t be able to think about your safety in that case.”

“Ah... I guess you’re right.” She was totally right; what if a customer decided to shut themselves in? “Could I at least ask you to wait for us to respond before entering?”

“That is my policy, sir,” she answered primly.

“Wait, but you—” Then Jinto thought better of it. If he attacked her for entering even though he told her not to, nothing good would come of it.

The lady wasn’t shuffling her way out. She stood there smiling, as though waiting for something.

“Was there something else?” asked Jinto cluelessly.

She let out a deep sigh. “Sir, I didn’t want to come right out and say it, but do you know the word ‘*sheef*’?”

He did not, so he panicked. What in heaven was this woman asking for?

“You could also call it a ‘gratuity.’”

“Ohhh!” he blurted, overjoyed that that had come to light.

“Sure, got it. Please give me a second.” Jinto took some coin out of the small change pouch he was using instead of a “wallet” and gave it to her.

She eyed the pittance in her hand sharply. Jinto quickly added another coin, and then her face lit back up to oblige.

“I don’t want to be presumptuous, sir, but could I give you a word of advice?”

“Go right ahead.”

She took out the little tray that was installed onto the side of the laundry slotting hole. Jinto had not had any idea what the tray was for.

“While you’re waiting for the laundry to be done, I would be very grateful if you could place the *sheef* onto this tray and push it out into the hallway.”

“Okay, right, must’ve forgotten,” he spluttered out as an excuse.

“If you please,” she stressed.

“I do, I do please,” he nodded emphatically. “Next time I’ll give you three days’ worth.”

“I’m glad you understand, sir,” she bowed. “Now then, I’ll take my leave. Thank you.”

As soon as she left, Jinto exhaled.

“What was all that about?”

Jinto shrugged. "We weren't paying up like we should've, so she came to complain about it in a really roundabout way."

"We did pay them, did we not?"

"We paid the inn. It's just that we hadn't seen the other person we were supposed to be paying."

"You're making this difficult to understand."

"Am I? Well anyhow, now I totally get why she barged in unmasked on Day 3. As long as we follow the rules to a tee, then they won't raise a fuss," he said confidently.

"...I think."

Chapter 13: The *Bileucoth Usér* (Hovercar Spotted)

“You sure there’s no mistake here?” said Entryua.

“I’m pretty sure,” said the senior forensics officer.

“The car’s registration number matches, and we picked up traces of all three victims’ fluids.”

“By ‘fluids,’ you mean blood?”

“Their semen, sir.”

“Ugh!” he groaned. “So you didn’t quit on the spot, huh.”

“It’s not as though we delight in searching for such things,” the officer frowned.

“I’ll never understand how these people can get it on in such a cramped space,” said Entryua, pointing at the **hovercar** with his jaw.

“I completely agree.”

“And all three, at that! Wait. Was this, ahem, ‘ejaculation’ consensual for all parties?”

“That, we can’t know for sure,” the officer shrugged. “But, if I may share my sense of the scene, I think the possibility it was consensual is low.”

Entryua felt the same. “Looks like we ought to be probing around for more offenses our victims may’ve committed.”

“Never mind that,” said Military Police Lieutenant Kyte, who had run out of patience listening to the officers’ conversation. “Are there any traces of one or more Abhs?”

“Not that we’ve found as of now. While we’ve collected over 50 hairs, the lab will perform genetic testing on them in due time...”

“Then please get on with your work, as quickly as you can.”

The senior forensics officer looked at Entryua questioningly. *Just go*, said

Entryua's eyes, after which the officer turned on his heels.

"Guess we should be thankful those three aren't clean freaks, huh," said Entryua as he leaned against the command vehicle and lit a smoke.

The forensics officers who had come all this way from the Lune Beega City Police Office were poking around every inch of the hovercar the suspected Abh and Abh attendant had stolen. Soon they'd be starting to do their favorite thing, which was dismantling and reassembling its parts.

Around the vicinity, Lune Beega Police patrol cars were parked alongside the Crime Lab cars, and lower-ranked officers were standing vigilant.

"We found a clue," said Kyte excitedly.

"We'd have to by now, after three days," replied Entryua bluntly.

To think they'd wasted three whole days on this twaddle! If the police had been patrolling as normal, they'd have found that car in an hour, tops. Or, indeed, if communication between officers was as tight and easy as it had been before. He'd asked Kyte to at least issue traffic permits to squad cars, but Kyte responded he didn't have the authority.

That was when Entryua was seized by a terrifying suspicion — what if this guy was just a deserter who thought himself a military police lieutenant?

Happily, those doubts didn't devil him for long, because as long as Kyte was in the car, they'd be allowed to traverse any checkpoint with the highest priority.

"What do you think we should do here on out, Inspector? I think we should scour every house and building in this city."

Slow down there, pal! thought a fed-up Entryua. *You think we've got that kind of reach? If we scoured every single building, we'd honestly, actually have to commit ALL of the Lune Beega Police's people and resources to this thing. And I don't know if Aizan would be amenable to a lawless city under his watch, but I sure as hell ain't.*

Entryua wanted to dodge that.

"Hmm," he said, pretending to give Kyte's suggestion some thought. "Well, this is Guzonh, so I think we should leave this to the Guzonh Police Force. They

know the area, and there's more of them."

"You'd hand this case to strangers?" Kyte shook his head disbelievingly. "I simply can't understand how you could be so indifferent. We're hunting an accursed Abh. Though it is a little understandable, considering you were hailing your empress up until a day or so ago..."

"Look here, bucko," said Entryua. "I don't even know the **Empress's name**."

"Which is an infringement of your *right* to know. The 'right to know' means —"

"Please, I'm begging you, keep the lecture to yourself. I could look up her name whenever I wanted. I just have no interest."

"That apathy towards politics is democracy's greatest scourge. It was beaten into you by the Abh and the **imperial citizen** stooges."

"Don't badmouth my ancestors." Entryua blew smoke directly at him.

"Your, your ancestors..." he hacked.

"You didn't notice? The name 'Entryua' sounds pretty Abh." (Spelled *Entryua* in proper Baronh.) My great-great-grandparents were **imperial citizens**. Apparently, they were **Star Forces** *sach* NCCs, though I don't know the details. They probably thought life up in space didn't agree with their skin or whatever, came back down to land."

"O-Oh." Kyte's mouth was agape, but he soon collected himself. "Then you should hate our quarry all the more."

"What kind of logic is that? Why would I hate them more?"

"They were demoted from **imperial citizens** to mere **terrestrial citizens**. Surely you resent that..."

"No, I'm not that spiteful a guy," he smiled wryly. "Besides, you've got the wrong idea: there's no real difference between **imperial** and **territorial citizens**. The **Empire** protects the rights of **imperial citizens**, and the **territorial civilian government** protects the rights of **territorial citizens**. It's just a change of jurisdiction. Though that can be a headache for us police, I'll give you that. Anyway, one of my friends is an **imperial citizen**, so it's not like I've got to talk

to them all formal-like. We get on perfectly normally.”

“Your friend...” Kyte’s eyes were open wide.

“Yes, sir. Runs one of the plantations on the **estate of the Marquis of Sfagnoff**. But you must’ve got them locked up in one of your concentration camps, sorry, ‘democracy re-education camps.’ I was worried so I tried contacting them, but they weren’t home.”

“Of course we have. They’re more malignant than even the followers of the slave democracy. I can’t speak on the matter of your one friend, but **imperial citizens** should all be undergoing re-education...”

“I really wonder how I can be so cool-headed at a time like this,” he said, flashing Kyte a ghastly little smile. It didn’t reach *smile of the Abh* levels, but it was a look that had put fear into the heads of dozens of criminals and at-risk youths. “I’m well-known for always thinking of my friends.”

“Yes, well, about that suggestion from before...” Kyte’s composure had chipped.

“What suggestion?”

“That we leave this case to the Guzonh Police Force.”

“Ah, that.”

“Let’s compromise,” he said, looking at him appraisingly. “I can see you don’t enjoy working with me.”

“Oh, no, working with you has suddenly become a laugh riot,” said Entryua as he fiddled with the *cairiac* (needlegun) at his waist.

“I’m warning you,” Kyte responded with a stern look. “Slighting me isn’t a good idea. I’ve been conferred with unrestricted right to arrest.”

“Hey, you lot!” Entryua called out to the officers under him.

“What’s up, Inspector?” A handful of bored-looking officers hastened over.

“No, it’s fine, stay there.”

“Roger.”

Entryua looked back at Kyte. “What was that you said earlier? About your

‘unrestricted right of arrest’?”

Kyte ground his teeth. “Soldiers in my army are stationed in this city, too!”

“Sure, but I don’t see any around here.”

“You wouldn’t...” Kyte looked around restlessly.

Naturally, Entryua had no actual intention to do Kyte any harm. It would have been cruel of him to order his officers, armed only with **needleguns**, to get into a firefight with an army.

“I’m joking,” he said, giving Kyte a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Guess I’m no comedian, huh? I was expecting more than a chuckle out of you.”

“Oh, so you were just joking...” he smiled nervously. “Jokes are useful for harmonizing interpersonal relations. But perhaps this culture’s jokes are a bit tough to grasp.”

“Every planet’s got its own sense of humor.” Then, suddenly, Entryua grabbed him by the collar, and whispered in his ear: “But know this — you and your buddies are not welcome here. And I don’t plan on ‘harmonizing’ our relationship, either.”

“B-But...” Kyte’s mouth repeatedly opened and closed.

Entryua smiled broadly, and let him go. “Let’s go ahead with that suggestion, shall we? I’ll tell the Guzonh Police to send as many officers who don’t smoke as possible.” Entryua picked up the transceiver at his waist and called up the office of Commissioner Aizan. He’d have to settle the matter with the commissioner before he could get the case transferred over. Then they’d set up the crime scene to be taken over by Guzonh.

However, Aizan seemed not to want to let go of his status as cooperating with the occupying army. He was positively dying to show the military that he was useful.

Entryua, for his part, pointed out that they were clearly stepping on Guzonh’s area of jurisdiction, and that if they failed to arrest them, there was a possibility he’d incur the army’s displeasure instead.

Aizan, meanwhile, intimated he’d have Entryua replaced, unless he returned

with the crash-landed Abh in custody.

Entryua replied more clearly than ever before that the good commissioner would have his eternal gratitude if he did indeed replace him, describing the voluminous difficulties of the investigation, and stirring up the commissioner's unease.

At last, Aizan folded.

Momentarily relieved, Entryua hung up.

He smiled at Kyte and said, "Now we'll both be happy."

"In our world, what you just did is a flagrant breach of regulations," said Kyte, stunned. "This may be your last act as a policeman."

"It won't be," said Entryua confidently.

He was a celebrity in Lune Beega, vaunted as a fair and outstanding member of the force. If Entryua got the axe, Aizan would be hit by an avalanche of criticism, and he knew it.

"Inspector." The senior forensics officer who had waited for Entryua to finish his call stepped into the space between him and Kyte and handed him a piece of resin with a hair sealed inside.

"The results are in. It's an Abh hair. It's likely the female suspect's, as it's been dyed black."

"The Inspector was talking to me," Kyte goggled at him. "And why didn't you report that to ME!?"

"Excuse me, Lieutenant, but you aren't part of our chain of command," the forensics officer said, eyeing him coldly.

"My rank is on par with the Inspector's!" he spat vehemently.

"I wasn't aware of that," said the senior forensics officer, not even giving Kyte another look.

"C'mon, Lieutenant, give him a break. We have a new clue to work with now," said Entryua, brandishing the resin sample.

"That's true, but..." Kyte cast his eyes down begrudgingly. Indignation hadn't

vacated those eyes quite yet.

Maybe I pushed his buttons a tiny bit too much, Entryua reflected. Then the transceiver ringed.

Entryua picked it up cheerfully. It was, of course, Commissioner Aizan on the line. Unfortunately, what Aizan had to say dashed his hopes.

Talks with the force at Guzonh had ended in failure. They freely gave them permission to step on their jurisdiction. So freely, they would have given it to them wrapped in a pretty bow if they could, if Aizan's words were to be believed. They said they couldn't spare any manpower, but they'd give them whatever information they wanted without delay.

Entryua could only gripe inwardly over how much cleverer this city's commissioner was than Aizan.

"So, don't worry about the rest, and just push forward with your mission, Entryua," said Aizan, blithely.

Entryua growled and hung up. "We're continuing the investigation ourselves," he told Kyte, imparting the bad news succinctly.

"I see," he replied, with an expressionlessness that exhibited surprising restraint. "I think I'll call for reinforcements."

"You'd better not mean reinforcements from the Police Office," he said, making his unhappiness abundantly clear. Entryua had no doubt Aizan would peel every last person down to the accountant from their desks and push them into the fray if Kyte requested it.

"No," he said flatly. "From my unit. I'll ask my superiors to send me some of their subordinates."

He knew what Kyte was really after with that call. 'Solving a shortfall in manpower?' A likely story. He just wanted allies around.

It was understandable, considering that moments prior, Entryua had similarly intimidated him with numbers. And he had no intention of calling foul; Kyte wouldn't listen, anyway.

"Yeah? Here I'm wondering if any number of boots on the ground is enough,"

he said, without objecting outright.

I've got a proposition for him — what say we split into two teams? That way, we can both do our thing the way we like.

"Yes, I've decided." Kyte nodded and brought the transceiver on his wrist to his mouth.

Entryua had no idea what he was saying into that thing, but whatever it was, it sounded real stiff and formal. It was only through Kyte's visible dejection that he gleaned the outcome of their negotiations.

For the first time, Entryua empathized with him. "Why's everybody gotta be so down on their luck around here? If you ask me, somebody somewhere's hoarding all the good luck."

"I don't doubt it," Kyte muttered, probably without thinking. "Never mind that; what we do now?"

"With only this many officers, all we can do is plod away step by step."

"What do you mean, specifically?"

"Combing every single building would be a giant waste of time. There's no other way: First we search inns and hotels, then expand from there."

"This is going to take quite some time, isn't it?"

"I bet it will. Let's just pray those two were dumb enough to hole up in an inn. I don't think there'll be too many people taking a leisurely vacation during such a state of crisis."

Chapter 14: The *Slacélach* (Warriors)

It happened when Jinto was enduring more holovision to polish his Clasbulian — sudden noises from behind.

Startled, Jinto turned his head, only to find four men storming inside. He jumped to his feet.

“Resistance is futile!” shouted the one short one at the head of the pack.

Each of the men had their **paralyzer guns** aimed square at Jinto. The slightest funny move, and they’d make him stiffer than a petrified log.

“Wh-Who are you people!?” Jinto shouted back.

“Can’t you tell we’re police officers?” replied the short one, clearly offended.

“P-Police...” *So they’ve finally come knocking.* Jinto’s palms grew sweaty.

The men all wore matching uniforms of green on yellow, which hardly screamed “police” to him; Jinto’s image of officer uniforms was more unaffected, but here in Clasbule, the land of garish taste, he supposed they *were* relatively sober in color.

“Now where’s your little friend? The Abh girl?” said shorty.

“Abh girl? Maybe you’ve got the wrong room?”

Lafier had retired to the bedroom. Jinto clung desperately to the faint hope that he could, maybe, conceivably talk his way out of this.

“She must be asleep already,” he said, seeing right through him. “What are you doing awake, anyway? You got a screw loose? Don’t you know it’s bedtime? You’re really screwing up our plan.”

Should I, uh, apologize or something? thought Jinto.

“You.” Shorty looked over his shoulder at one of his men. He was a big, sturdy, black-skinned man. “Go take a look.”

The big lug nodded and headed for the bedroom door.

Another of the men, a lean, fully-shaven officer who resembled a crane on a weight loss program, accompanied him.

“No!” The threat of the **paralyzers** evaded his mind as he leapt at the big one. Annoyed, Big Lug knocked him back onto the ground with a swing of his arms. He tried to get back up, but froze when he saw the muzzle in front of his face.

“You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that.” Shorty thrust the **paralyzer** right between his eyes. “But the next time you move, I won’t be so lenient.”

“Did you come to arrest us?”

“That’s what they want.”

“What they want?”

“Zip it. You’ll hear all about it later.” Shorty shot a glance at Big Lug. “Hey...”

Jinto took full advantage of that moment’s inattention, and grabbed his arm. They tussled and locked bodies, and even as they rolled across the floor, Jinto kept Shorty’s arm pinned, twisting his wrist with a jerk.

“Ow!” Shorty dropped his **paralyzer**.

Jinto reached to grab it, but at that moment, two of the others fell on top of him, the officer who’d followed Big Lug, and the fourth, a young man with close-cropped hair dyed yellow.

“Goddammit.” Jinto was pinned face-down.

Slim was sitting astride Jinto’s waist like a horseman, while Youngin was leaning forward against Jinto’s back and twisting his arms.

“Keep him there!” Shorty squeaked, as he retrieved his gun.

“What if we gave him a shock to the system?” proposed Youngin.

Shorty shook his head. “Do you feel like lugging him places? No, no, we’ll have him walk on his own two feet when and where we can.”

“But Undertaker...”

“You idiot! We’re *police*, remember!? Call me ‘Sergeant’!”

“Yes, Sergeant, sir.”

A strange exchange any way Jinto sliced it. Were they *really* officers? If not, then who were they? They couldn't be enemy soldiers—

But Jinto's train of thought crashed to a halt when he felt something mean and hard press against the back of his head. It was Shorty with his gun.

"Thick as thieves, ain't you? Just so you understand, I'd like you to walk on your damned legs, but I'm willing to carry your ass if I have to. You ever been shot by a **paralyzer**? Cuz let me tell you, you won't be blacking out with a smile on your face. Every muscle in your body's gonna scream."

"Are you thugs really coppers?" asked Jinto.

Slim whistled. "I like kids like him. Asking questions when he's this buried. Or maybe he's just too dumb to understand his position here. Color me right fascinated."

"Yeah huh, whatever floats your boat," said Shorty. Then he ordered Big Lug again: "What're you doing, Daswani? Hurry up."

The big one, apparently named Daswani, nodded without a word, and opened the bedroom door.

He took a step into the room, and then froze. Then he shook his head, *No*, and started stepping back.

At first, Jinto was totally lost. Then he saw Lafier in front of Daswani, and the situation turned clear as day.

Lafier was wearing the inn's provided, white jumpsuit-type sleepwear. Her *froch* glinted inorganically, peeking out from her sleep-tousled bangs. Her eyes, their corners higher than most, were narrowed coldly, and she had a **phaser** gripped in hand.

A **phaser** was always an ill-omened, sinister sight. The guns packed the power to tear a human body to shreds with ease. Compared to lasers, **paralyzer guns** were a mere toy in both appearance and destructive capability.

"It's the Abh..." muttered Youngin disgustedly. "There really was one!"

Daswani found himself against the wall.

No one moved a muscle.

The first to break the silence was Shorty. Unexpectedly, though his brogue didn't evaporate, he spoke in error-free Baronh.

"Drop the weapon, Abh. Don't you care what happens to the boy? Even a **paralyzer** can kill at point-blank range."

"If he should die, so too do you all," said Lafier, her brow furrowed, and her voice firm. "I shall not allow a single one of you to leave this room alive. And to warn you, I am in a supremely bad mood."

"I know I would be," muttered Slim. "In fact, anyone would be, getting pulled from their sleep like that. Today I learned that the Abh are no exception." His insightful discovery went ignored by the rest.

"There are four of us, and one of you. How could we lose?" replied Shorty.

She turned her nose up. "Care to try it?"

Youngin grunted and tried pointing his **paralyzer** her way.

Lafier was faster. She pursed her lips and whistled as she pulled the trigger. The beam of heat that fired from the **phaser's** muzzle hit his **paralyzer** dead-on.

"Yeowch!" Youngin dropped it; it had turned terribly hot terribly quickly.

Big Lug attempted to use that opening to brandish his own gun, but once again the **phaser** pierced through the **paralyzer**.

Big Lug endured the heat and pulled the trigger, but the **paralyzer** had already been rendered inoperative. On both sides of his dumbfounded head, smoldering holes had been charred into the wall. Upon noticing, he sank down to the floor.

"Don't shoot! I surrender!" said Slim, sticking up his arms as he threw away his **paralyzer**.

"As you can see, I have received marksmanship training," she replied calmly. "I have a great many skills I'm proud of, and my sharpshooting is one of them. Yet at present, I am drowsy, and my reflexes slow. As such, you mustn't count on my accuracy for my next shots."

Again, a silence as thick as marble gripped the room.

Shorty was frozen, and dripping with a cold sweat.

Though Jinto's limbs weren't being pinned anymore, the other two were still sitting on top of him, so he still couldn't extricate himself. Moreover, there was still the gun pressed against his head.

Jinto thought of a small bit of advice: "Uh, guys? I think you ought to reassess the situation."

Shorty shot him a dirty look. Then his line of sight moved to the **paralyzer**, followed by a glance at Lafier's **phaser**. Finally, he stared into the distance, his expression that of a man reminiscing about his blissful youth.

Jinto gulped, eyeing the man warily all the while.

When Shorty made up his mind, he acted swiftly. The **paralyzer** vanished from his hand like a mirage, while the two men atop him finally released Jinto from his status as a rug.

Jinto tumbled back to his feet and strode to Lafier's side. "Excellent, you reassessed," said Jinto from the heart.

"Reassess? Whatever do you mean?" said Shorty, pulling an expression that screamed *'I have no idea what you're talking about but I'd sure love to find out before I snuff it.'*

"I'm just glad we could come to an understanding," Jinto said, the forked tongue out at last.

"Absolutely! Cross-cultural understanding is always worthwhile! Welcome to the planet of Claspule!" said Shorty, his hands sticking up wide.

The wind blew across the room, turning the air sour once again, the atmosphere, stifling.

"Maybe I spoke too soon. Looks like we haven't come to an understanding after all," Jinto murmured.

"Jinto, let's pull out. I'll keep my eyes on them, so go gather our things."

"Yeah, guess that's the thing to do." Jinto shook his head and entered the bedroom.

It didn't take him long to pack their bags; all of their clothing was stored in the duffel bag so that they could leave at a moment's notice. He returned to the scene with a **phaser** in his right hand and the duffel bag over his left shoulder.

"Shall we bounce?" he asked Lafier.

"Yep." She turned to address the others. "All of you, go to the bedroom."

"Wait," said Shorty. "We're your allies."

"Well that was a funny way to show it," said Jinto.

"Don't you want to know who we are?"

"Nope," said Jinto coldly.

"So young, but no curiosity. Curiosity's the wellspring of betterment, you know," said Shorty.

"I really don't care if you're 'undertakers' or a goddamned bird lovers' association," he spat. The wrists they'd twisted were still throbbing, so he couldn't say he felt any affection for them.

"The only Undertaker's right here," said Shorty, pointing to himself.

"That right? You must love your job. Do you manufacture corpses?"

"Enough. You will hasten to the bedroom, or else," Lafier urged.

"Dammit." The men shuffled into the bedroom at gunpoint.

That was when another door, the door to the hallway, opened for all to hear.

Fresh troops!? The tension high, Jinto got his gun at the ready.

"If only you lot weren't such serial bunglers."

Jinto was startled; it was the housekeeping lady. "You're with them?"

"I'm their leader," she said, her Baronh more fluent even than Jinto's. "I don't have a weapon, don't you worry."

"Then you're not an employee."

"I am not, no."

"And that bit about the *sheef*, you made that up?"

“Oh no, deary, that’s all true. You two are very unpopular among the actual employees.”

Jinto winced, but he was quick to pull himself together. “You must’ve come in search of us, huh?”

“Yes,” she said. Then she smiled at Lafier: “Little Abh lady, you have some blue showing in the whorl of your hair. If you’re going to dye your hair, you need to do it diligently and regularly.”

“I thank you for your advice,” she said mirthlessly. “Now join them in the bedroom.”

“Wait! Hear us out first. If we cooperate, we’ll both be better off for it.”

“What do we do, Jinto?” Lafier’s expression was as severe as ever, but a little confusion had crept in.

“I guess it couldn’t hurt to listen to what they’ve got to say.”

“A wise decision,” said the false housekeeper.

“Before anything else, I shall have you stand together in a line.” Lafier indicated the window with her gun.

“Always shrewd, I see.” Suitably impressed, she did as ordered.

“Anybody else reminded of an execution by firing squad?” mumbled Shorty.

“It’s okay, Undertaker,” said Slim. “If that’s what she wanted, she’d have already sliced a clean cross-section of our necks.”

“You’re not wrong, but I’ve always had to wonder, why does perfectly valid reasoning piss me off so much?”

The five of them lined up by the window. Now all of them could be monitored.

“First things first, allow us to introduce ourselves. You can call me me ‘Marca.’”

“And you can call me ‘Undertaker.’ Course, that’s not my real name, but it’s what my comrades call me,” said Shorty.

“My name’s Min. My parents named me something else, but I never took to

it, so I hope you'll call me 'Min,'" said Slim. Jinto noticed then that he had a moustache, colored red on the left and yellow on the right.

"I'm Bill. Ask anybody in town about 'Speedwheels Bill,' they'll have heard of me," said Youngin.

"Daswani," grumbled Big Lug.

On that note, the five of them grew silent.

When Jinto cottoned on to what they were waiting for, he shrugged. "Really sorry, guys, but I'm not in the mood to introduce myself."

"That's fine," said Marca, not looking disappointed for it. "If I recall, you were on the inn's register as 'Sye Lina' and 'Sye Jinto.'"

"Ah, right."

"So we'll just call you that. In your case, 'Jinto' does seem to be your actual name."

Clearly, Marca had sharp ears. She'd picked up on it when Lafier had addressed Jinto by name.

"'Lina' isn't an Abh name, though," said Min with a suspicious expression.

"If you want her real name, we're not telling," he said flatly.

"Not even her given name? She must be of quite the high rank. High-ranking enough for people to know her name. Is it safe to assume you're connected to the **Estate of the Marquis of Sfagnoff**?"

"You can pry all you like, but we won't be obliging you. We don't even know who you are."

"Ah, yes, of course," said Marca. "We are members of the Claspule Anti-imperial Front."

"'Anti-imperial'? Is that code for 'anti-Abh'?"

"We don't dislike Abhs, Jinto. We simply seek independence. We don't recognize the right of the **Empire** to station a **lord** here, or deny us the right to trade and explore with our own spaceships."

"But the **Empire** would never let you do that."

“Exactly. That’s why we’re forced to fight.”

“With the **Empire**?”

“No, with the Bird Lovers’ Association. Yes, with the Empire.”

“And you know we’re with the **Empire**, right?”

“She’s an Abh. Of course we know.”

“But you said we’re allies.”

“And we are.”

“Uh-huh.” Jinto gave a big nod.

It was then he grasped the unfathomability of the gap between them and the five hapless Clasbulians, and he turned around to face Lafier. “Well, we heard them out. What say we hit the road?”

“Hold your horses. We’re not done talking.”

“It’s all over my head, okay!?”

“We’re not TALKING to you, the **imperial citizen**. Marca’s talking to the little Abh lady. As her attendant, you oughta just shut up and listen,” said Bill.

Offended though he was, he decided to own up to his misunderstanding and zip his lips. Even if he told them he was in fact a **noble**, it wouldn’t be easy to convince them of that, and nothing good would have come of it anyway.

Lafier, on the other hand, spoke up: “His words are my words. Do not belittle him.”

Jinto saw the jealousy flash across Bill’s eyes.

“So, what is your objective?” asked Lafier.

Undertaker’s lips curled in a smile. “We want you to be our hostages.”

“Jinto, it would seem we really had better leave this place.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” said Jinto, his gun remaining at the ready as he made for the door with the irritated impatience of a cat forced to wear a hat.

“Bye bye. It was a ton of fun meeting you. You were a great boredom-killer.”

“Of course they’d misunderstand if you put it that way!” Marca nudged Undertaker on the noggin. “I told you, hold your horses!”

“If you have anything else to say, best out with it quickly. My arm’s growing tired,” said Lafier, giving them one last chance.

“Please listen! At this rate, you’ll be taken into custody for sure!” she started, rattling on without pause. “You two don’t know how this planet works! You’re as out of place as a camel at a swim meet. But if we join forces, we can keep you hidden until the Abh make their return.”

“That would be nice,” said Jinto. He’d had his survival doubts, so if they could gain the help of some locals, they’d be in the best possible position. “But why would anti-imperials like you do that for us?”

“Isn’t it obvious? So we can use you as bargaining chips!” said Undertaker.

“For heaven’s sake, shut up. Must you be renowned the world over for making things more stressful than they need to be?” said Marca. “But what Undertaker said is true. We want to negotiate with the **Empire** using you two, or rather, just the little lady. Now that we finally have an Abh in reach, we can’t let her get swiped from us by some foreign occupation.”

“What you seek is impossible; Even if I were **Her Majesty the Empress** herself, the **Empire** would never...”

Jinto understood what she was driving at. Hostage-taking would never get an Abh to acquiesce. No matter whether the hypothetical hostage were the **Empress** herself, and the demand a trifling one, it was simply not in the character of the **Empire** to give in. They would instead plot a suitable revenge against such foul play.

Yet Jinto poked Lafier’s side with an elbow and whispered: “Let’s not deflate their ambitions, actually. If they think negotiation is in the cards, that’s better for us.”

“So we *fool* them?” Lafier didn’t bother hiding her disgust at the notion.

“We don’t *fool* them. It’s not like we fed them that ridiculous idea ourselves.”

“That is true, but...”

“Look, ill-conceived motives aren’t exactly rare. We’d just be politely respecting their dreams.”

“But they would learn that I won’t work as a hostage eventually. Then, at that point, they would turn angry, would they not? Enough to want to kill us, surely. That’s what hostage-taking typically entails.”

“That’s the thing, we won’t *really* be their hostages. Just leave this to me.”

Once Marca saw she had their attention, she pelted them with words like a rapid-fire needlegun. “How do you think we noticed you? You two are already the stuff of rumors. The man at the desk got a clear look at your face. You had your hair dyed black, but there’s no mistaking an Abh face; you’re too perfect-looking to be a Lander, and you were acting strangely to boot. The only conclusion to draw is that you’re an Abh who’s running from trouble. He also happens to be a supporter of ours, so news reached us first, but what would you have done if somebody leaked it to an enemy soldier!? Do you honestly think you were hiding? More like you were ringing a bell advertising ‘there’s an Abh here!’”

“Fine, we get it,” he raised a hand to stop her. “We’ll give ourselves over. That is, if you follow our conditions.”

“Hostages with *conditions*?” said Undertaker, eyes open wide.

“You do know what a hostage is, don’t you?”

“Shut it, Undertaker. If you lot had done your jobs properly, we wouldn’t be in such a bind. We would’ve had the advantage. We could’ve strongly urged them to be our hostages with the guns in OUR hands!”

“Then why didn’t you just do it yourself, Marca?”

“You want a frail maiden like me to do the fighting? Talk about inconsiderate!”

“Might you let me lay out our conditions sometime soon,” said Jinto timidly.

“Go ahead,” said Marca.

“One, we’re not handing you our weapons.”

“Armed hostages!? Now you’re just desecrating the CONCEPT of a hostage!”

“How many times do I need to tell you to shut it, Undertaker!? Yes, what else?”

“We do everything together. You can’t leave our side unless we say so.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“One last one. We want you to explain everything you do before you do it. Where you’re going, what you’re doing, et cetera.”

“That’s fine. And now that we’ve cleared the air, let’s vacate the premises, quickly.”

Marca had accepted their terms so readily that Jinto felt almost disappointed.

“Wait, she needs to change.” He pointed at Lafier, who was still in her sleepwear.

“I prefer this attire,” said Lafier. “It’s better than that atrocious garb you bought me.”

“What do you think?” he asked Marca.

“It doesn’t look like it could be anything other than nightwear. And it’s very strange to go out wearing nightwear here.”

“See?” He pulled clothes from out of the duffel bag and handed them to Lafier. “Change into these and come back.”

“Do not treat me like a child!” she said indignantly, but she did as she was told and disappeared into the bedroom.

“You really an **imperial citizen** attendant of a **noble** girl?” asked Bill, clearly suspicious. “Aren’t you being a bit impolite?”

“That’s just an act. And what an act it is,” said Marca.

“Uhh, I’ve got a question of my own,” said Jinto.

“What?”

“You’re all assuming the **Empire** retakes this planet. But what if they never come? What’ll become of us then?”

“You think they’d leave the planet to its own devices after they lost a

battle!?” said Undertaker, staring at him unblinkingly. “That’s the craziest hot take I’ve heard all year.”

About 6,000 **flat space cédlairh** away from the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**, there was the *Ciïoth Biborbina Yunr* (Yunh 303 Star-system). 6,000 *cédlairh* only took five hours or so using a high-speed **connecting vessel**, and even a slower-speed **transport freighter** would take seven. For the **Monarchy of Ilich**, where the **gates** were so far apart, it was practically a hop and a skip away.

That was where the Abh **fleet** was positioned.

The fleet’s *glagac* (flagship) was the **patrol ship Cairhdigh**. As it was designed with its potential use as a flagship in mind, its **bridge** was constructed with a two-tier structure. In the higher tier of the bridge where command of the ship was conducted, the *Gahorh Glar* (Commander’s Bridge) was situated.

That was where *Tlaïmh Borgh Ybdér Laimsairh* (“TLIFE”) was pacing hurriedly.

Looks like we’ve gotten to the good part.

He was stocky for an Abh, his hair dark green, and his swarthy, convex face almost aquiline in its features, like some bird of prey. However, whenever a member of the Tlife family spoke, they laid bare the pointed fangs that were their unique **family feature**, thereby evoking not a falcon or hawk, but a savage beast. In either case, he exuded such a fierce aura, that one would swear he was born to be a soldier. Though he was no different from other Abhs in his handsomeness, it was his countenance’s ferocious intensity that left the bigger impression.

The Command Bridge’s *spénuch* (military staff) comprised two *casariac* (staff officers) and one *luciac* (adjutant), as well as a handful of *catboth* (KAHBOHTH, HQ personnel), all of whom were watching their restive **Commander-in-Chief**.

On the wall behind the *Glaharérribach* (Commander’s Seat) at which Tlife was supposed to be calmly seated, three **coat-of-arms banners** hung in a triangle. At the top of that triangle lay the *rüé-niglac* (imperial flag), the eight-headed *Gaftnochec*. At the base-left lay the flag of the *Chtymec Ralbrybr* (Ralbrybh Naval Station). It too bore the dragon, but its base was red, and it was adorned with bolts of lightning.

The flag at the right was the Tlife family's coat of arms, the *Ctaich* (Lamenting Pheasant). Officers of *Raichaicec İadbyrer* (Half-fleet Commander) rank or higher enjoyed the right to hang that particular banner.

"*Lonh* (Honorable), the **patrol ship** *Adlas* has brought back an up-to-date map of the situation," reported the *Üass Casarér* (Chief of Staff).

His name was *Cahyurec* (CAH'HYOOR), *İarlucec Bot-Satécr* (Noble-Prince of Bot-Saté), *Lemaich Cheüass* (Kilo-commander LEMESH). Unlike his commander, he had the typical slender Abh frame. His hair was the typical dark blue, and his features were average for an Abh (which was to say that maybe one in one thousand Landers could hope to compare to their perfection). His eyes always looked sleepy, giving the impression that he was only dimly aware of goings-on.

"They have, have they? Bring it here." Tlife nodded, expected good news.

"Yes, sir." Cahyoor gave one of his subordinates the sign.

A stereoscopic video of **flat space** emerged.

The currents of **space-time particles** from the densely crowded central band of the **Milky Way Gate-belts** and the space-time particles from the "**volcanoes**" of the outer brink of the **Twelfth Ring** collided near the **Sfagnoff Gate**, making for a relatively high-concentration area in the vicinity.

Space-time bubbles had a hard time penetrating high-density areas, but they did make for easy escapes from flat space. For battles that involved mutual **mine** flinging, whichever side lined up in formation in a high-concentration area had the advantage. It was akin to securing the high ground in a land war, and the **map of flat space** similarly displayed such areas as "tall."

Within that high-concentration area, a flock of **space-time bubbles** was assembling. That was the ideal spot to fend off any invasion of the **Sfagnoff Gate**.

"The enemy has made contact with our ship, and so they've become aware of our approach," Cahyoor explained. "Going by the mass, it is equivalent to three **half-fleets**. It's clearly an interception formation. As such, we believe that the enemy has no current plans to launch a preemptive strike from their base in Sfagnoff."

“Three **half-fleets**. I see. There really aren’t that many of them after all.” This was the good news he was awaiting, so Tlife beamed bright. “That must be all of their forces, too.”

“Probably, yes. I know that if I were a strategist on their side, I’d have them intercept using all of their forces.”

“Enough speculation; do you have any concrete information for me?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Cahyoor, shaking his head. “In order to confirm anything, we need intelligence from Central, but we’re currently lacking in that regard. The **Information Department** hadn’t even caught wind of this invasion beforehand, so it’s likely well beyond their means to grasp their total military strength.”

“Ugh. The **Information Department**,” said Tlife, making sure they heard the annoyance in his voice. “A bunch of incompetent hacks unfit even to feed the cat.”

“I feel you may be exaggerating slightly, Lonh,” said the *casariac drochotr* (communications staff officer), *Roïbomüass* (Vice Hecto-commander) *Nasotryac* (NAHSOHTRYOOA), pointedly. It hadn’t been long since she’d transferred over from the *Rÿazonh Spodér Rirragr* (Military Command HQ Information Department). When he’d badmouthed her old haunt, the sour look on her face said it all.

“I see...” Tlife placed his chin against his fist and paced aimlessly around the room.

The *Saimh Spodér Rirragr* (Director-General of the Information Department) *Cachmanh* (CAHSHMAHNSH) *Fraudéc* (Commodore) was a man against whom he bore a personal grudge — a grudge that traced its beginnings to a certain episode revolving around a sky-blue-haired girl and a room at their **flight academy**. Ever since then, they bickered every time they crossed paths.

There’s no doubt Cashmansh is a trash human, or that he’s as inept as it gets. The fact that a “winner” like him made such an important position can only be some nasty prank on the part of Rÿazonh (HQ). That said, it’s hardly fair of me to paint all of his subordinates with the same brush. They slipped up this one time, but they’ve more or less done their jobs over the years. A man’s man

always takes back his words when he's wrong. Yes, I should take back what I said.

"I was wrong," said the **Commander-in-Chief**. "Feeding the cat would be the perfect position for the crew over at the **Information Department!**"

"I'm certain the members of the **Information Department** will feel honored by your words of praise, sir," said the **Chief of Staff** impassively.

"Good, I'm glad," said Tlife, pleased as punch.

Nasotryac kept mum, her face a war ground of dueling emotions.

Tlife proceeded to forget about the matter of the **Information Department** entirely, as he turned his thoughts to more serious concerns. *Now then, how do we go about this?*

At the moment, he had seven **half-fleets** under his command:

The *iadbyrec acharr* (offensive half-fleet) *Byrdaimh*.

The **offensive half-fleet** *Rocérh*.

The **offensive half-fleet** *Üacapérh*.

The **offensive half-fleet** *Citirec*.

The *iadbyrec bhotutr* (strike half-fleet) *Basc-Gamlymh*.

The *iadbyrec usaimr* (reconnaissance half-fleet) *Ftuné*.

The *iadbyrec dicpaurér* (supply half-fleet) *Achmatuch*.

In addition, a handful more *saubh lagoradha* (independent squadrons) and a provisional fleet including HQ's *glabaüriac* (directly controlled warship) formed another unit adorned with the name of the **Commander-in-Chief** — the *Byr Tlaimr* (Tlife Fleet), totaling around 2,100 warships strong.

Pitiful numbers, thought Tlife discontentedly.

The fleet didn't even have a clear objective to begin with.

When the **Ralbrybh Naval Station** learned of the attack on the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**, they sent seven half-fleets to *Roiglaharérh Chtymér* (Naval Station Vice Commander-in-Chief) **Commodore** Tlife as a temporary stopgap

measure.

Their foremost objective was reconnaissance: that is to say, determining the scope of the enemy's forces, and snooping around for their plans. However, he had too many ships for just reconnaissance. Reconnaissance didn't even necessarily call for the formation of a fleet at all. He ought to leave it to the **reconnaissance half-fleet** under his command, the *Ftuné*.

On the other hand, he had too few ships for the retaking and anti-invasion defense of the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**.

I must have pulled the short end of the stick. As they sailed along, Tlife recalled the faces of his colleagues.

The **Ralbrybh Naval Station** had four **vice commanders-in-chief**, Tlife included. A **Naval Station Vice Commander-in-Chief's** position was assigned by the **Commander-in-Chief** when it came time for strategizing and drills. In peacetime, one possessed no fleet to command, but during times of crisis, they were always attended by **staff officers**. A patchwork fleet could operate, but not so for *Glagamh* (Headquarters).

The other three were fine candidates for the job, so why him? Frankly put, Tlife had been nursing the feeling that he'd been treated unfairly the entire time he navigated to this place. He didn't even encounter the enemy invasion fleet he'd expected he would on the way over. It had been a perfectly smooth journey. Even drills had more nervous tension than this, if only slightly.

Little wonder, when the enemy that lurked in the **Sfagnoff Marquessate** had penetrated deep into **Empire** territory with such vastly insufficient forces.

"We can win this," he said, running the sentiment by the **Chief of Staff**.

"Yes. That is, however, assuming that the whole of the enemy's forces is what has already appeared."

"Can't say I like fighting based on assumptions."

"Then shall we retreat? Shall we ask for reinforcements?"

"I'll pretend you didn't say that," declared Tlife, raising an arm overhead.

"We're retaking the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**."

“Yes, sir.” The **Chief of Staff** clicked his heels and bowed.

“Cahyoor, how long will you take to draw up a plan?”

“There are some matters that I must confirm first,” he said quietly.

“What matters?”

“Do we include the annihilation of the enemy as one of our strategic goals?”

Casariac iocsscurhotr (strategy staff officer) **Hecto-commander Chrir** motioned: “I think we should use a pincer attack.”

“Hmm...” It was an intriguing proposal. Pincer attacks were flashy as far as war tactics went. It involved splitting one’s ships and having them advance to their rear, cutting off escape. Then they’d attack from the flanks along with the main force. If it succeeded, they could obliterate the enemy without a trace. Plus, it was difficult to see how they could possibly lose in this situation. They had more than twice the total power of the opposing side. Even if each enemy ship destroyed one of theirs, it would still be possible for them to progress the battle toward a favorable position.

Furthermore, Tlife had the **reconnaissance half-fleet**, *Ftuné*.

Upon hearing the words “reconnaissance half-fleet,” a person not versed in matters military would probably think it lightly armed and almost purely for support, but in fact, little could be further from the truth.

It is the reconnaissance half-fleet’s mission to rely on their brute strength to peer into hostile sectors. Slow and heavy **battle-line warships** and weak **assault warships** would only get in the way. All of their tactical forces are made up of patrol ships. In addition, the *dihosmh* (supply ships) that accompanied them were the smaller variants, around the same size as the patrol ships themselves, and with the sheer maneuverability and destructive power to match.

The strength of the fleet was even said to be five times greater than the standard assault fleet. Though it would be difficult to achieve owing to cost-efficiency and operational flexibility issues, there was also an endless supply of zealous believers in the **Star Forces** who believed that all of its main forces should be composed of reconnaissance half-fleets.

They were the so-called heavy cavalry unit, galloping across the heavens. And there was no more suitable unit to be the detached force for the pincer attack.

Tlife considered it for a few seconds. Then, with reluctance, he shot the idea down.

“No can do. Our goal isn’t battle, per se. It’s simply the retaking of the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**. This war won’t be over for a while. Even if victory would be absolute, we can’t afford to lose vessels or fleets in a purposeless battle.”

“But sir...” Chrir tried to object.

“Shut your mouth, and don’t tempt me any more than you have already!” said Tlife.

“Yes, sir.” To her chagrin, Chrir held her tongue.

“So, we’ll be intimidating the enemy as we march, then,” said Cahyoor.

“Right.” In his heart he was all for the pincer attack, yet he nodded. “We’ll display our might through a horizontal single-line formation, and slowly march our way in. Seeing that, they’d have to jump ship.”

“Understood. I’ll draft a rough plan along those lines.”

“How long will it take before we can depart?”

“What will we do about the **patrol ships** that are currently on the reconnaissance mission?”

“We won’t wait for them to finish, of course. We’ll pick them back up on the way.”

“In that case, it will take under two hours.”

“No easing up. Do it in an hour.”

“Understood.”

Tlife frowned. That Cahyoor accepted that time reduction so readily meant they could in fact take even less time. But it was too late now; he was the one who said, “do it in an hour.”

“Good. Now do it. If I don’t see a fine strategy in an hour’s time, my disappointment in you will be immense.”

“Yes, sir.”

He watched the **staff officers** withdraw to the *chicrh iocsscurhotr* (strategists’ room), and at last, Tlife took a seat on the **Commander’s Seat**.

Exactly one hour later, Cahyoor presented a ranking order for the march and the scheduled route.

While Tlife had run his mouth earlier, ultimately, he trusted his **Chief of Staff**, so he approved the plan without even really skimming through it and issued the order to the fleet.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ll be retaking the **Sfagnoff Marquessate**. Unfortunately, we’re going to do it without engaging. If by some unexpected windfall we do plunge into battle, I look forward to watching your beautiful warriors’ dance. Now lift off!”

Two thousand vessels spouted their **propelling flames** simultaneously.

Appendix: Abh Metrology

The aspect of Abh culture most reminiscent of Earth is their measurement of time. A year in the Abh calendar is also 365 days.

Naturally, as they have no need to differentiate between a calendar year and the sidereal year, there are no leap years, nor leap seconds. A year to the Abh is always 365 days; a day, 24 hours; an hour, 60 minutes; a minute, 60 seconds.

Other measurements used by the Abh are based on Earth antecedents. Namely, the meter, which was established based on the length of the equator, and the gram, which is defined as the weight of one cubic centimeter of water under Earth gravity.

However, care must be taken, because in Baronh, they have their own distinct words for metric system measurements, and the prefix changes with every increment of four digits.

With the exception of time measurements, measurements are denoted as follows:

Length... *dagh* = centimeter (cm)

Mass... *boc* = gram (g)

The following prefixes are attached those basic units to represent larger units. For example, 3 *zesadagh* is the same as 30 million meters, while 800 *üésboc* is 8 tons. However, the Abh also use light-seconds and light-years, so units of distance above *zesadagh* aren't used all that often.

Moreover, there is vocabulary for a minute unit system based on the Planck length and the Planck mass, but I won't get into that here.

As for flat space, which is governed by different laws of physics from normal space, a different set of units and measurements is of course necessary. That is the "astro-mile" (*cédlairh*) and the "astro-knot" (*digrh*).

1 *cédlairh* is defined as equivalent to the distance travelled by a space-time

bubble of one *sebec* (100 tons) in one second of space-time bubble time.

Meanwhile, 1 *digrh* is the speed needed to traverse one *cédlairh* in one hour in space-time bubble time.

Afterword

I once read that what Robert E. Howard wrote down — that seminal heroic fantasy series — was what Conan himself dictated to him.

I'm not normally one to believe in the occult, so I understood that as an episode of subconscious greatness. I thought it an amazing feat of the mind. I was still in school at the time, and I envied Howard, thinking that I'd love to be an SF writer and experience that very same phenomenon. More than anything else, because it seemed so fun.

The months and years passed by, and some time after I managed to put out my debut shortform story, it happened.

As I was busy being lonely, staring at my bottle of booze and absorbed in my contemplations, a beautiful woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties swooped down where I was. Her hair colored a deep forest green, and adorned with an exquisite crown, she looked down at me with her striking jet-black eyes.

What luck, I thought. Since I'm a healthy, red-blooded male, a youthful beauty like her was much preferable to a filth-ridden muscle man like Conan.

On the dime, I booted my word processor in preparation, ready to listen to her tale. "Err, may I ask you your name first?" I asked.

Haughtily, she raised her chin and proclaimed: "You will call me 'Lafier'!" And with that, she vanished.

"Wait, what about your story!?" But no answer came. All I was left with, or rather all my brain was left with, was the name "Lafier," and her vivid look and feel.

I still want to try writing her saga, though, thought I.

Yet her story as she was now would be too much for a novice writer like me to do justice. As such, I decided to depict her childhood. I don't necessarily think the inner life of a girl is less sophisticated than that of an adult woman's in every case, but there is an order to events one ought to follow.

...Of course, whether or not you choose to believe such drivel is entirely up to you! Honestly, though, I have faced moments of doubt wherein I question myself whether these people really only exist inside my head.

For instance, the scene in Volume 2 where Jinto and Lafier are walking.

Lafier is in a bad mood. A bad mood that even the author doesn't fully understand, because the author's point of view is Jinto's point of view. All I know at that moment is what I know through Jinto, which is that she's seething.

What on Earth is she fuming over? And to think, she's not usually one to shy away from making it clear what exactly is ticking her off... I found myself thinking, much like another character of mine would be.

Then, when I stepped out of Jinto and assumed Lafier's viewpoint, the source of her discontent became abundantly clear. *Ahh, of course, given her personality, it's only natural that would anger her.*

It was a strange experience.

At any rate, I'm sure you all know the word "slump." I fear Volume 2 might have been a bit on the plain side, comparatively. On the other hand, it's the volume that contains my favorite scene. If I told you which scene was my favorite, it would ruin the mystique, so on that I'll keep my lips zipped.

Next is the final volume, entitled *The Return to Strange Skies*. Not only is it the climax, but the increasing roster of characters will also serve to make it a boisterous ride.

Look forward to it!

Bonus: The Origins of Baronh

Now that you've read Volume 2, you know the Abh hail from a faction of far-future Japanese cultural restorationists (the reference to a “volcanic archipelago” wasn't fooling you). That's part of what makes the concept of Baronh fascinating. It's a constructed language comprising the distant evolution of what amounts to an in-universe constructed language, albeit one rooted in real-world Japanese. Specifically, a new, purportedly culturally “pure,” atavistic Japanese with all foreign loanwords plucked out (including Sino-Japanese vocabulary), replacing them with constructions using phonology and morphemes deemed to be of homegrown Japanese origins, including archaic language from the time of the oldest texts (as for an analog regarding how different ancient Japanese was, think Beowulf, not Shakespeare).

For example, this translation opted to call 昇降筒 “elevator-tubes” (*dobroriac* in Baronh), but that term actually avoids using the word modern Japanese people would use, which is... the English word “elevator.” Instead, they replaced it with a neologism using the characters for “ascending” and “descending,” which describes an elevator's functionality clearly and succinctly. You may have already drawn the comparison to the way the French government handles English loanwords. The tension between linguistic pride as cultural pride on one side, and the inexorable flux of language on the other side, has dogged humanity for some time, and will no doubt continue to do so.

Speaking of linguistic evolution, let's detail how, exactly, that putative “pure Japanese” shifted over time into the Baronh of the books, in order.


- Change #1: Vowel elision and fusion. (Almost every syllable in Japanese is open, meaning that every consonant is followed by a vowel, but with this shift, Baronh obtains closed syllables, or syllables that have a consonant

following the vowel. You can see this in action in the chart below.)

- Change #2: In order to avoid too many homonyms, an increase in distinct kinds of vowels, due to the remaining vowels being influenced by the vowels that had dropped out.
- Change #3: Changes to consonant sounds, such as the denasalization of nasal sounds.
- Change #4: Fusion of word stems and case-marking particles, as well as the accompanying change in the pronunciation of some consonants.

Through natural linguistic evolution, much like how Old English is incomprehensible to modern speakers, so too did Baronh change drastically from its ancestral tongue (of course, not only phonologically, but also grammatically).

In addition, MORIOKA has provided four different examples of the step-by-step transformation of words into their modern Baronh counterparts.

ORIGINAL JAPANESE	Yatagarasu	Takamagahara	Karasuki	Subaru
WHAT IT MEANS	Three-legged crow of folklore 	In Shinto belief, the heavenly abode of the gods	One of the 29 founding clans of the Abh	Another of the founding clans, each derived from one of the original 29 Abh Founders
↓				
VOWEL CHANGES	Yatgarse	Tacmgahar	Karsc	Sbaur
↓				
CONSONANT CHANGES	Gatharse	Lacmhacar	Sarrc	Spaur
↓				
NOMINATIVE CASE INFLECTION ADDED	Gatharsec Remember, the “ec” at the end is silent.	Lacmhacarch The Abh capital. Remember, “mh” is pronounced “f.”	Sarrych Remember, “ch” is pronounced “sh.”	Spaurh Remember, “rh” is a rolling “r.”



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