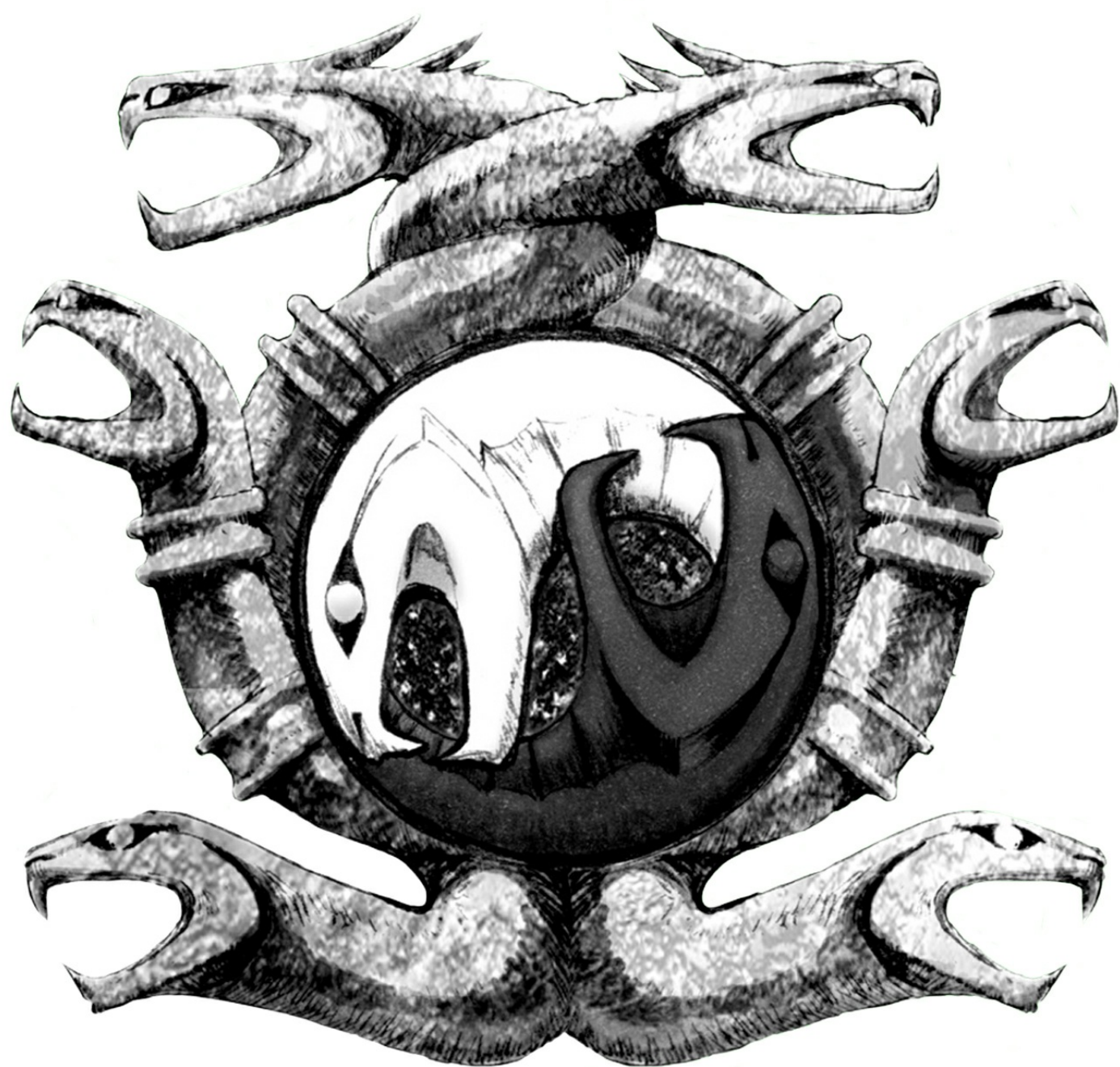




BANNER OF THE STARS

DINNER WITH FAMILY

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Welcome Back to the Abh Empire!

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

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

Banner of the Stars is ongoing (its sixth volume having been released in 2018), and according to MORIOKA, Crest of the Stars was something of an introductory primer to this, the “story proper.” Each volume of Banner is its own episode, a snapshot in the lives of our protagonists at a certain point in the grueling decades of galactic warfare. As such, please know that unlike the individual volumes of *Crest of the Stars*, Volume III of Banner is a *self-contained story* in addition to being a part of an overarching saga. Pick it up and read at your leisure!

I believe in the existence of universal ethics.

I will endeavor to elevate universal ethics.

I will endeavor to spread universal ethics.

I place my trust in the United Humankind as the best instrument for the advancement and diffusion of universal ethics.

I abide by the laws and principles of the United Humankind for the sake of universal ethics.

I will obey the decrees of the United Humankind for the sake of universal ethics.

—Excerpt from the United Humankind's "Pledge of Citizens United"

BANNER OF THE STARS III: Dinner With Family

Synopsis of BANNER OF THE STARS II

In the year 955 I.H., the Imperial Star Forces successfully completed Operation Phantom Flame and cut through United Humankind territory, thereafter, commencing Operation Hunter in order to neutralize the sectors' remaining enemy ships. Amidst it all, Lafier, the Captain of the *Basrogrh* within Hunter Fleet 4, was appointed as a liege agent by Fleet Commander-in-Chief Commodore *Biboth*, and made her way to the planet Lohbnahss II, only to discover it was a penal planet whose population consisted of inmates forcibly sent there by the UH. Moreover, a factional conflict over the right to rule over the planet had broken out, and a portion of the administrators and inmates were requesting asylum. With the impending threat of the return of the enemy squadrons repulsed by Operation Hunter, Lafier narrowly managed to secure the citizens' escape. During the rescue mission, Jint went missing on the planet's surface, but following the enemy fleet's surrender, Lafier formed a mercenary corps and found Jint safe and sound.

Characters

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

Jint (*Ghintec*) ... The Count of Hyde.

Samson (*Samsonn*) ... Main Retainer to the House of Hyde.

Paveryua (*Pabhairyac*)

... Former subordinate of Samson's.

Atosryua (*Atausryac*)

... Commander of Trample-Blitz Squadron 1.

Roiryua (*Roïryac*) ... Captain of the raid ship *Sircaubh*.

Sobash (*Sobach*) ... Captain of the raid ship *Flicaubh*.

Ecryua (*Aicryac*) ... Navigator of the same.

Grinshia (*Grinchiac*) ... Inspector Supervisor of the same.

Yestesh (*Ĵestaich*) ... Examiner of the Financial Affairs Bureau of the Chancellor's Office.

Dehryooz (*Dereuzz*) ... Magistrate of the Countdom of Vorlash.

Lohgdohnyuh (*Logdaunh*) ... Captain of the *Baucbiruch*.

Sehrnye (*Sérnaïc*) ... Chief Executive Officer of Sehrnye, Ltd.

Que Durin (Que is pronounced "Coo")

... An old friend of Jint's.

Till Corint

... Head of State of the Hyde Star System.

Lina Corint

... Till's wife.

Prologue

Through no volition of his own, ever since he'd been born, Dyaho had had his place of residence changed many a time. Each of those domiciles had their own merits, and he wiled his days far removed from any desire to move to outside pastures. Despite that, he did occasionally reminisce about a former den of his, and had even felt like returning at points. And yet, the species known as "cats" was vested with a rather hazy power of recollection, making it not readily apparent whether those memories were of a place the cat's paws had in fact once prowled, or whether it was some imagined realm it had dreamt of in a passing noonday nap.

This time, however, that bygone house-scape doggedly refused to ebb from the recesses of his mind. There were times he deemed the palace, where both cat and human knew their manners, a comfortable den indeed. The humans were well enough behaved, but somewhere in his heart of hearts, he could still see the sights and smell the smells that were not to be had in this place.

It wasn't solely that the atmosphere paled in comparison. The humans here were also a careless, inattentive lot. In fact, his tail had gotten tread upon *more than once*.

Even more troublesome were the cats. He couldn't sniff out any sort of order among the cat society here. As Dyaho patrolled his territory, a wretched despondency filling the insides of his diminutive cranium, he encountered a male cat blocking the way.

Dyaho was not familiar with this cat. In all likelihood, he'd gotten lost after getting chased or some such, and was trying and failing to find his way back.

It was not among catkind's virtues to show consideration to others. On the contrary — if the other party was an *invader*, then no value was seen in mercy.

Dyaho's fur bristled as he bared his fangs. And while it was unclear which had brandished his claws first, that was of little significance in feline culture. Dyaho wrestled with the tomcat and thrust his sharp nails into the intruder.

The battle lasted some time. During their prolonged scuffle, they would at times groom each other, and even take breaks. Eventually, Dyaho repelled the young tom.

He licked his right foreleg, bringing relief to the bite wound. Once the housemate bumped into him, he'd probably apply some kind of sticky wrap to the injury while mumbling something or other in a patronizing tone. Dyaho did grasp, albeit dimly, that that wrap made the wound heal more quickly, but even so, he couldn't stand that odor.

Having gotten hungry, Dyaho elected to return to his roost. All he had to help him tell the passing of time was his stomach.

After passing through a handful of cat doors to reach his destination, he aimed to snuggle up to his favorite crevice... only to find an occupant already there.

It was Sercruca. The white female was in a lousy mood as of late, and today was no exception; she was combative. When Dyaho attempted to enter his roost, she bared her own fangs at him.

Dyaho could not fathom why he was receiving such poor treatment. Until relatively recently, they'd shared the same crevice with good grace. Dyaho used to fear nothing besides the tub of hot water with the odd-smelling bubbles, and yet his fighting spirit wilted before Sercruca. Bemoaning the absurdity that had gripped his soul, he decided to relax in a crevice he didn't particularly like.

And there, as ill fortune would have it, he was discovered by the housemate. He was casually passing by when he noticed Dyaho's foreleg. The human scooped him up, and Dyaho, knowing what was to follow, protested vociferously.

"It's one of the many mysteries of Abh society..." he said. "Why haven't they developed an odorless salve for cats?"

"If they did, the cats would end up licking the ointment," said the housemate's housemate. "They make it smell bad to cats on purpose."

"Then they should just make it *taste* bad."

"This one does taste bitter, though."

The housemate licked his finger. “It’s more salty than bitter.”

“Cats don’t like saltiness.”

“For real?” The housemate brought his finger under Dyaho’s nose.

Dyaho repaid this act of violence by digging his claws into the human’s hands.

Chapter 1: *Gnac Martinr* (Flowers of Martin)

Like other planets of its type, it was born as a clump of boiling molten rock. When the lava covering its surface cooled, it solidified into a layer of bedrock. Then the water that poured down gathered in pools, becoming giant oceans. Within the oceans, chemicals that were as common as could be kept reacting in their run-of-the-mill way over and over again, gradually yielding proteins and sugars.

Up until that point, the planet's story was like that of so many others. Granted, the planet was of a rare type on the galactic scale, but in terms of overall numbers, planets in general were plentiful. A fair few even had oceans with highly active cellular structures. That in itself was no "miracle." But in that planet's oceans, something vanishingly rare occurred — the emergence of self-replicating molecules, which attached to cellular structures.

The resulting primitive lifeforms absorbed organic matter, proliferated, and teemed across the waters of the world. The proliferating lifeforms competed against each other, and several species successfully incorporated enzymes catalyzing high-energy activity, thereby gaining supremacy over other, sluggish-at-best lifeforms.

Almost no other planets had ever reached this stage of evolution. In this case, to call it a "miracle" would be no exaggeration. Furthermore, some among the primitive lifeforms acquired a special ability. Those lifeforms were traitors, in a manner of speaking, for the free oxygen they released through the process known as "photosynthesis" proved poisonous to their fellow lifeforms. The kingdom capable of photosynthesis reproduced at intense rates, polluting the atmosphere and oceans with free oxygen in no time. Consequently, scads of lifeforms met their ends. Those that escaped death were either the lifeforms that lived in environments that tenaciously refused oxygen, or the lifeforms that acquired the art of utilizing oxygen.

After epochs that were even lengthy on the cosmic scale, another miracle

manifested in the planet's ecosystem. Multicellular structures — lifeforms composed of more than one cell — began arising. Multicellular life had existed before then, but those agglomerations of cells had no division of labor: they were just herds of cells. For these multicellular beings, on the other hand, each individual cell could not survive on its own, as it was a mere component of a larger whole.

These multicellular lifeforms absolutely flourished. They appeared in multifarious forms, fighting for the survival of their respective species. In the shallows, fish with photosynthetic fibers resembling fur spread their hydro-wings, while in the deeps, creatures with exoskeletons strode on their eight radially-arranged legs. Soft-bodied giant coelenterates established themselves on the deep-sea floors, while extending their tentacles near the water's surface. Spherical sea-trees rolled from the deeps to the shallows, adrift on the tidal currents, washing up on the shores of the landmasses that were biologically barren. Unequipped to survive on the land, they withered on the beaches, but the winds blew and scattered their seeds inland.

The vast majority of the seeds that germinated failed to grow, but some did adapt to the land. Evolutionary variation ensued in the process, and they dominated the land in the blink of an eye. Particularly successful were the trees that laid *dynamic seeds*. Some of the seeds grew legs, while others possessed wings. The leg-seeds marched inland like a massive herd aiming to cover the whole of the ground, while the wing-seeds journeyed on the winds like little gliders.

Eventually, other plant species timidly began to advance inland, while some of the more quick-witted animals sneaked their way in as well. That was where the curtain closed on the planet's miracles. Of course, another miracle or two could occur down the line, but that would likely take place eons from now. The next miracles in the chain did occur on a planet far, far away. There, many species gained high intelligence, with one in particular capable of stepping forward onto the stage of the stars.

That especially intelligent lifeform traveled from a planet characterized by a parade of miracles to pay this planet, dubbed "Martin" — a planet that was a comparatively late bloomer — a visit. The endemic creatures never came up

with a name for the planet, so they didn't object. Though of course, they didn't exactly actively welcome it, either.

The alien lifeform set foot upon this land not long ago. They were not hostile to the native life. In fact, they demonstrated good will, and as such, the biosphere's cycle of life was not much disturbed. Even the more intelligent species might not have even noticed the planet had been invaded. While the indigenous species lived their everyday existences, persisting since ancient times, the aliens assiduously built up their own base of everyday life.

Eventually, another set of aliens that shared a point of origin with the first set of aliens arrived. The second planetary invasion was also a very mild affair, but the original invaders' pride was badly wounded. Yet there was a more pressing problem than even the blow to their self-esteem, for it was then that the first set of aliens learned that the universe was in an era of upheaval. They had to accept that their isolated and quiet lifestyle was never to return, and that they had been swallowed by that galactic turmoil without an escape rope.

That terrible agitation had reached the carefree primitive lifeforms, as well. Many creatures that would otherwise have died in obscurity on-planet were brought to the threshold of the stars.

"Jint, the flowers look about ready to bloom."

"Hm?" said *Linn Ssynec Raucr Dreuc Haider Ghintec*, looking up from the dining table. "Oh, morning, Lafier. You eat breakfast yet?"

"Not yet," said *Roibomoüass Laburer* (Star Forces Vice Hecto-Commander) *Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Bærh Parhynr Lamhirh*, shaking her head.

"Well then, how about breakfast together?" Jint gestured toward the chair.

"Did you not hear me?" said Lafier, remaining on her feet. "The flowers are about to bloom."

"Yeah, I heard about it, too," said Jint as he scooped his scrambled eggs with a *sréragh* (fork-spoon). Lately, he was feeling a bit sleep-deprived. His head felt numb, and he didn't have much of an appetite.

"Then why are you still eating?" Lafier asked, casting a look.

“What do you mean? I’m not done eating,” he explained, clearly and concisely. Despite his status as a **count**, Jint was raised in a modest home, and he felt pangs of conscience at the prospect of wasting leftover food.

“You **idiot**,” she assessed his character, clearly and concisely. “A flower blooms, a cat is born.”

Jint glanced at the corner of the room where Sercruca’s labor bed was installed. The white **Abh cat** was feeding her three newborn kittens with her milk. Abh cats were active by nature, but they were also exceedingly docile in character. The exception was before and after giving birth. They’d expended some effort transporting Sercruca to the labor bed after she’d gone into labor atop one of the shelves in the commodities warehouse, and whenever they tried to touch the kittens, the cat lost her cool.

It was on Jint to decide what would become of the kittens, as a result of his consultation with Lafier. But as things stood, it was probably wise to wait a while before finding the kittens a new owner. Besides, Jint wanted to be with the kittens for a little longer.

Jint returned Lafier’s gaze and said: “Flowers don’t wilt immediately. Why all the fuss?”

“Aren’t they special flowers to you?”

“Ahh,” he said, rising from his seat. “You mean *those* flowers? Shoulda told me sooner.”

“I didn’t think you were that slow. Why would I inform you about any old normal flowers?”

“True enough, but I just got up and my head’s not working properly yet,” explained Jint. Had he been in typical form, he would have at least thought to ask which flowers she was referring to.

“Liar. You’re always like that,” declared the **Royal Princess**.

“Well, if you’re not sharp enough to know I’m not that sharp, what’s that make you?”

“You’re so unexceptional sometimes it’s a work of art. If you’re not the

sharpest, you should stay that way.”

“That defies logic.”

“What are you going to do? Are you going to go see the flowers, or keep eating?”

“I’ll go see ’em,” he said, pushing away the plate.

“Would you like me to lower it?” asked the table.

“Yep. Please do,” said Jint, but not without feeling guilty. The center of the table, on which his plate of leftovers rested, proceeded to sink down. Jint gazed with regrets aplenty as his breakfast vanished from view.

“You’re surprisingly plebeian,” said Lafier, amazed. “If you were that hungry, you didn’t need to be so hasty. The flowers won’t wither that quickly.”

“That’s not it. Those flowers are at their most beautiful the moment they bloom, and it doesn’t take long after they start blooming for them to be in full bloom. Also, I’m not hungry. I’m just sad I couldn’t fulfill my duty.”

“What duty?”

“I really don’t think you’d understand,” he deflected, not feeling like explaining.

“You don’t know that.”

Jint saw her earnest eyes, and became racked by a different guilt altogether. It appeared as though Lafier was taking his wise-cracking seriously. He almost wanted to tell her that he was just putting a little twist on the nugget of discipline they’d drilled into him when he was a kid to always eat the entirety of the food he was given by calling it a full-blown “duty.”

“Never mind that. Let’s just go see the flowers. They really might bloom any moment now,” he dodged again, summoning and mounting a **personal transporter**. Then he tendered a hand to Lafier. “C’mon.”

“Okay.” Lafier wasn’t entirely satisfied, but she too stepped aboard. The **transporter** then began to shuttle them forward.

The ship they were currently on was called the patrol ship *Baucbiruch*. The

ship had actually already been retired from service, its armaments mostly removed. Therefore, it was more accurately a *rébisadh solaicena* (lightly armored cargo passenger ship) named the *Baucbiruch Mura* (Former *Baucbiruch*), though in casual speech it was referred to by the name it bore when it was a patrol ship.

The only weapons left were the twin mobile **laser cannon** turrets. The **main engine systems** and **space-time bubble generators** were still installed, but they were just awaiting their inevitable removal. And that would occur once the *Baucbiruch* reached the **Countdom of Hyde**. When that happened, the *Baucbiruch* would lose its function as an **interstellar ship** and become the *Garich Dreur Haider* (Manor of the Count of Hyde). Needless to say, the ship's **take-off deck** would become the manor's **spaceport**. Larger vessels would not be able to enter the port, but for the time being that wasn't likely to be a concern. The giant-sized *zocrh hocsatr* (space-time mobile mine deck) and *zocrh sair* (engine deck), meanwhile, would be reassigned as office work sections for the purpose of reigning over the **territory-nation**, residential areas for the **servant vassals**, and more. The *samh* (reactor furnaces) and **antimatter fuel tanks** which wrung out vast quantities of energy would also be uninstalled, with solar cells expanded to cover for the manor's electricity needs.

Nevertheless, the current *Baucbiruch* retained vestiges of a combat ship. At the very least, there could be no doubt whatsoever it was a ship equipped to navigate multiple star systems. That was because at this very moment, it was sailing through **planar space**.

A modest garden, itself an installation left over from the vessel's patrol ship days, had been set up on the outskirts of the residential area. But the garden's environment had been changed, adjusted to that of Jint's home planet of *Martinh*.

The **transporter** passed through a double door, and stopped at the center of the garden. All the plants growing there were native to *Martinh*. They were the offspring of the flowering plants that had been exported from the **territory-nation** after the planet had been incorporated into the **Empire** and before it had been captured by the Three Nations Alliance. Unlike the plant species (now all over the human-populated galaxy) that originated from Earth, very few of

Martinh's plant species were the type that sprouted flowers. There were only a handful of exceptions to that rule. And those exceptions were planted on the edge of the garden opposite the entrance.

The flowers were named “bryanflowers,” after their discoverer. And since they were already in full bloom, Jint couldn't help but feel disappointed.

“They're rather lackluster,” said Lafier behind him.

“Thanks for your candid words,” said Jint.

Earth-origin flowers had been selectively bred over and over again over lengthy months and years to please the eye. If bryanflowers, said to be the most exquisite of *Martinh's* few flower species, were to be displayed alongside Earth-origin flowers, they'd fall under the “shabby” category.

“But my planet's flowers are at their prettiest the moment they bloom,” said Jint. “And that goes for bryanflowers, too. People appreciate Earth-origin flowers when they're still, but on my planet, they view flowers as they're in motion. You saw how big the buds were.” Jint gripped a flower vine. “That was stuffed with this. When the buds open, this vine will peek through. Almost like it's exploding.”

“That sounds a little unsafe.”

“There's nothing dangerous about it. It's so beautiful...”

“That's why I was on the lookout. Because that's what you told me.”

“Sorry,” said Jint, shooting her a sheepish look.

There were two reasons he felt so awkward. The first went without saying — the fact that what Jint had told her had weighed on Lafier's mind, but he'd been so dense. When he'd gone into how beautiful bryanflowers were while they were blooming, she seemed less than fascinated.

The second reason was that they were having a casual back-and-forth about something as trivial as the timing of flowers blooming. The galaxy was at war: this very second, another multitude of lives was getting snuffed out somewhere in **planar space**. Naturally, it wasn't as though Jint had started this war, and the **Empire** guaranteed him the right to step out of the fight at any time — at the

cost of his **noble rank**, and with it, the right to dwell among the stars. Besides, now that he was riding on interstellar ships as an **imperial noble** without participating in the fight, he was feeling guilty over that, too.

He had trouble wrapping his mind around Lafier at the moment. Jint saw himself as unfit to be a **soldier**, any way he sliced it. Lafier, on the other hand, truly seemed a born soldier. If even a lousy soldier like Jint was feeling somewhat ill at ease, how was Lafier so composed this far from the field of battle?

“What’s the matter, Jint?” she asked, visibly dubious. “Are you in some kind of mood to stare at my face?”

“Can you blame me?”

“You **idiot**.”

At that moment, Jint’s **wristgear** beeped. It was a communication from *ĭestaich*, a fellow passenger of Jint’s dispatched by the **Chancellor’s Office**. “Lonh-*Dreur*. It’s time. I’m rather surprised you’re not in the conference room.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll be there right away,” said Jint.

Yestesh was the reason behind Jint’s current sleep deprivation. That was not to say he was a bad person. He was just being diligent about his work.

“There’s a meeting. Wanna come?” he asked Lafier.

“Of course I do. I’m here as a representative of the **Royal House of Clybh** as well.”

Taking into account the fact that he was a young man in his twenties, Jint was certainly well-to-do. Of course, the only assets of the **House of Hyde** were the **Countdom of Hyde** itself, and while it was occupied by the enemy he received no income as a **grandee**. That being said, as might be expected from his wealth of experience getting caught up in the fires of war, the **Empire** had established a system of compensation for **nobles** whose **star-fiefs** had been taken over. As such, Jint was able to receive an annuity from imperial coffers, a figure more than ten times the pay of a beginning **starpilot**.

Taking into account the fact that he was a **grandee**, however, he was next to

broke. A **star-fief** can produce enormous profits, but maintaining and running one also takes eye-watering amounts of money. Amounts of money Jint didn't have.

Not having had occasion to use any of it, the lion's share of Jint's funds were in his savings. And all of it would get blown immediately operating the *Baucbiruch* for a single day. Yet lack of funding was not that much of an issue. Most newly appointed **grandeess** faced the same troubles, after all. Financing a new **territory-nation** was an extremely solid investment, so normally, there was no shortage of lenders — in fact, lenders would come like a swarm of locusts, whether or not their services were asked for. Except now, it was wartime. The Abh had two sides to them — the mercantile race, and the war-making race. And this was the season for the latter side to stand out. Outside of the very eccentric, people were more concerned about the tides of war than increasing their fortunes.

But that wasn't all, for unlike other fiefs, the **Countdom of Hyde** was by no means a secure investment. Depending on the fruit of battle, the **countdom** might even have to be abandoned again. And if that happened, each lender's investment might ultimately go to waste. Due to those factors and more, Hyde would have trouble getting financing, despite having just returned to **Empire** control.

It was probably fortunate, then, that Jint had inherited his **noble rank** under the guardianship of the **King of Clybh**, Dubeus (otherwise known as Lafier's father). The **Royal House of Clybh** was awash in monetary resources. Naturally, it wasn't interest-free — it looked as though no matter the circumstances, if they were to neglect potential profits, it would wound their pride as a mercantile race — but still, they were lending him capital at an extraordinarily low interest rate, considering the state of affairs.

Needless to say, it was not a custom of the **Royal House of Clybh** to send the **Royal Princess** just because they'd agreed on a loan. In addition, in Jint's view, Lafier lacked a sense for money, which was unbecoming of a member of a mercantile race's **Imperial Household**, and made her not so useful as a representative of the interests of the **Royal House**, either. If they'd really wanted someone to accompany him for the stated reason, they'd have chosen

a **servant vassal** who was knowledgeable about accounting. There was no way the **Royal House of Clybh** lacked a single expert on economics.

In short, Lafier's title as the **Royal House of Clybh's** representative was secondary to her real role. In reality, she was merely helping her family's enterprise as a side goal (however ineffectively) while on what was primarily a personal trip. Her actual title might be something along the lines of "Jint's travel companion" (which, Jint mused, might just be the dullest and most trifling duty in all Lafier's years). Then again, he figured that with a lifespan that wearisomely long, a less intense period like this wouldn't be so bad.

"Won't you be bored at the meeting, though?"

"We Abliars are accustomed to boredom."

"Oh yeah, guess so." The souls of the Abliars were clad in the blazing armor of imperial wrath, or so rumor had it. Yet they made sure to do right by dealing with the tedious functions that attended the **Imperial Household** as well. "Maybe that's a boon you gained from your training from an early age. I shudder to think how much effort was spent beating a spirit of patience into you, given your clan's innate disposition."

"What are you trying to say?" Lafier's eyebrows were at that dangerous angle.

"I'm saying it must be hard to become **Emperor**."

"I don't think that's what you were getting at."

"I'm sure you're just imagining things."

"If we weren't just about to conduct public business, I'd have you try to prop up your body weight with your right pinky toe."

Jint could think of a handful of clever comebacks, but he knew enough to seal those remarks deep into the recesses of his heart. "Guess public business is good for something, then," he said, in lieu of other options.

As they headed for the conference room, Jint wondered how Sobash and Ecryua were doing.

"**Ileesh Portal** in E-minus ten seconds. Eight, seven, six..." said the **Navigator**,

the countdown filling the otherwise empty **bridge**.

Sobach Üémh Dor ïuth had thought the countdown always amounted to the same no matter who did the counting, but now he'd changed his mind. That woman's voice was *made* for countdowns. There was no emotion to it whatsoever.

"...three, two, one, passing through."

Cheers all throughout the ship, and the bridge was no exception. After a brief span of open elation, the bridge personnel came to **Ship Commander** Sobash to voice their congratulations. But those remarks were short, and Sobash himself kept his reply to a short nod. There was still work to do.

Ecryua alone was detached, aloof. The *sopaïc* (raid ship) *Flicaubh* had now completed its familiarization voyage, returning to the **imperial capital** of *Lacmhacarh*. This meant that the *Flicaubh* was now full-fledged. And although his title wouldn't change, Sobash too felt as though he'd be regarded as a "full-fledged" commander, now that the *Flicaubh* was officially the first ship under his beck and call.

Raid ships were an all-new type of vessel within the **Star Forces**. Though assault ships had been deemed overly fragile, eliminating them entirely and replacing each with a patrol ship wasn't a cost-effective strategy. That was why this new class of ship was conceived — essentially taking patrol ships and leaving their mine deployment capabilities on the cutting room floor. More accurately, they were closer to *gairh oba* (heavyweight assault ships), but their principal weapons were **EM cannons**, just like patrol ships.

The great debate on whether to dub them heavyweight assault ships or *résic saura* (lightweight patrol ships) embroiled not only **Warship Management Headquarters**, but even many top-level leaders of the **Star Forces**. The *Caubh*-class was the first class ever designed for raid ships, and the *Flicaubh* was one of the first twelve *Caubh*-class vessels to be placed in commission.

Holding the reins of a new class of ship fresh off the blueprints was a daunting task, but distinguished in equal measure. As such, Sobash had no complaints regarding his current post. This duty was beyond an honor.

Sobash had only just risen to the rank of **Vice Hecto-Commander**, a

promotion that would normally be unthinkably fast, given that he'd only been a **vanguard starpilot** a few days prior. Of course, if he'd devoted half of his life to the **Star Forces**, it wouldn't be surprising if he'd reached the rank of **commodore** by this age.

This kind of imperial edict was often enacted in past wars, and served as proof that the **Empire** was going all out. That didn't mean that the Empire hadn't taken the war seriously up until that point. It was simply a matter of personnel composition. There weren't enough ships or lower-ranked **starpilots**, but they couldn't then just populate ships solely with higher-ranked **starpilots**. Then again, it wasn't just due to the unique circumstances of the war that he'd obtained the rank of Vice Hecto-Commander. The **Star Forces** couldn't be so short of personnel as to select any old soldier as a **ship commander** of a bleeding-edge vessel.

Sobash cleared his head of the misgivings he'd chewed over countless times since receiving the notice of personnel change. To Sobash, who regarded himself as a merchant through and through, his **rank** as a **soldier** and his military status were transient things. That said, he was still enjoying his work.

Immediately after passing through the **portal**, a huge bulk of information came flowing into the *Flicaubh*. Orders from above were mixed in with the general information and the personal messages meant for individual crewmembers.

The orders were not confidential. Running his eyes over its contents, he saw they were the simple instructions that followed a familiarization voyage as a matter of course. He felt relieved. The familiarization voyage was fun, but the toil involved was exhausting. He was in no mood to be receiving any more intricate commands.

He ordered his **Vice Commander-cum-Gunner** to shift course. In assault ships, steering the ship was said to be a **ship commander's** role while in **3-space**, but in larger vessels like **battle-line ships** or patrol ships, that was the **Senior Starpilot's** job. The all-new class of vessels, raid ships, adopted the same allocation of labor as in large-sized ships.

After the **attitude control system** howled for a brief spell, the *Flicaubh's*

course became fixed. Sobash then ordered the **main engines** stopped, and broadcasted the following to all hands:

“This is your **Ship Commander** speaking. The ship will now be entering inertial navigation. You are relieved from your shifts. As per the shift schedule, I permit the off-duty to take their breaks.” Then he once again scanned the bridge. “I’ll be needing all of you to keep working.”

His eyes met the **Navigator’s**. The Navigator being the same as on the *Basrogrh* — Ecryua. She’d been a **rearguard starpilot** there, but with her battle experience taken into account, she’d now been made a **vanguard starpilot**. And it was no coincidence she was his subordinate. The **Star Forces** gave ship captains the right to choose their subordinates. Naturally, those chosen enjoyed the power to turn them down, and the circumstances occasionally got in the way of the chooser and the chosen even if they had a burning desire to be on the same ship. In their case, Sobash wanted her along, and though he had no idea whether she was thrilled by his request, she at the very least didn’t refuse it.

Sobash turned his gaze to the Inspector Supervisor’s Seat. He had nothing against the woman in that seat, but he had wanted Samson there instead. The **Inspector Supervisor** of the *Flicaubh* was instead *Loüass Scæmr* (Mechanics Deca-Commander) *Grinchiac*. Just like Samson, she hailed from a **landworld**. And since she’d worked her way from an **NCC** up to a **Deca-Commander**, there could be no doubt she was skilled and knowledgeable. Unfortunately, she just wasn’t as fun to be around. For one, she never touched alcohol — perhaps due to religious reasons? In fact, if other crew members took to a drink or two, her face would scrunch. If that were all, Sobash wouldn’t have minded — after all, he himself was not all that fond of drink — but she responded the same way to light-hearted jokes, too.

During his trading days, Sobash rented **supply ships** and journeyed to the far corners of the **Empire**. He’d had to employ crews, of course, and so he’d had two criteria for selecting subordinates. One was hiring heterosexual males, not because he was particularly prejudiced against women or gay men, but because even giant ships had limited space in their living quarters, with relatively small crews. He’d just figured dealing with any romance that might spark in such a

cramped environment sounded like a pain, and there were other diversions besides. The other criterion was for the employee in question to have some sort of bad habit. And while Grinshia's strict and rigid lifestyle could be called a bad habit in itself, it wasn't the kind of bad habit Sobash preferred. Samson, on the other hand, had been a treasure trove of the bad habits Sobash loved. His idle chatter would liven any room, and he'd even occasionally abandon his senses of his own volition.

Just Sobash's luck, then, that that lovable jokester would retire from the **Star Forces**. From what he'd heard, Samson hadn't yet withdrawn to his home planet, but all the same, they'd probably never meet face-to-face ever again. A thought that made Sobash feel a touch lonesome. He contemplated writing the man a lengthy letter.

Granted, even if Samson had remained in the **Star Forces**, greeting him on this ship as its **Inspector Supervisor** wasn't in the cards anyway. His **rank** hadn't been high enough. His rate of promotion had been slow since his days as an **NCC**, and despite the fact it was wartime, all he'd managed to reach was **rearguard starpilot**. Although he could have still invited him as *Roibynecairh* (Deputy Inspector Supervisor).

Sobash seemed about to grin. Just imagine the look on his face trying to work under Grinshia.

"Call Military Command Headquarters. I want to speak with the **Commandant** of *Saubh Dtirér Casna* (Trample-Blitz Squadron 1)."

"**'Trample-blitz squadron'?**" Ecryua cocked her head.

"It's a new type of **squadron**. Though at the moment, the **command center** is all there is to it. We'll be part of Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 the moment it's officially formed," explained Sobash.

"Trample-blitz squadron,' huh..." said the **Vice Commander** and **Gunner**, *Idliac*. "Now that's talking tough, with a name like that."

"We just have to hope it lives up to the name."

"Oh, I'm sure it will. This '**raid ship**' is a fine vessel. I've always thought **patrol ships** would be easier to handle if they'd just take out the **mines**," said Grinshia.

“Well, if that’s what our tech master thinks, then it must be true.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“Trample-blitz squadron” was a novel word for Sobash, too. He resolved to grasp the gist of the formations and personnel that were planned for Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 while they waited to hear back from the **Commandant**.

Each trample-blitz squadron was made up of twelve raid ships. Two of the twelve **Ship Commanders** were called the *Almsarérh* (Senior Ship Commanders), and they were of **Hecto-Commander** rank. If anything ever happened to a commanding officer, they would of course be replaced, and depending on the situation, a platoon of about four ships was to be entrusted. However, unlike **assault squadrons** composed of **assault units**, *symh dtirér* (trample-blitz units) had not been long-established, leaving room for formational flexibility.

“**Ship Commander**,” said the **Communications Officer, Rearguard Starpilot ïatechec**. “The line is connected. The message lag is 2.7 seconds.”

Sobash stood up and saluted. “The *Flicaubh* has just finished its familiarization voyage and returned to base. I’ve just received orders from the *Glagamh Byrer Claiïar* (Training Fleet Command Center) to act under **Your Excellency’s** command for the time being. Your orders, **Commandant Atosryua**?”

“Thank you for your hard work, **Ship Commander** Sobash,” smiled **Kilo-Commander Atosryua**, after returning the salute. “I remember you.”

“Yes, **Kilo-Commander**, ma’am,” said Sobash, letting his saluting hand drop back down and nodding. “I haven’t yet had the honor of meeting you directly, but I was a **senior starpilot** on the *Basrogrh*, a ship that was in the **assault unit** that you commanded.”

“I know. I read the career log.”

“I see. What a coincidence, that we should cross paths again.”

“A coincidence? Do you honestly believe that?” she said, her tone a little teasing.

“Yes, ma’am. What else could it be?” said Sobash, tilting his head in

puzzlement.

“I see you’re not very up on this sort of thing. I don’t blame you — judging by your career log, you’re all about trading. Oh well, never mind that. We’ll talk about that when we’re assembled. There’s no hurry on that front. The **Training Fleet** has already booked your ship to be lodged at *Locrh Difaca Danbaurhmatmata* (Special Construction Site 7022). Could I get your navigation plan?”

“Please wait a moment.”

After double-checking the location and relative speed of the designated base, Sobash set the acceleration to five *daimon* G-levels, calculated the route himself, and sent over the results through the **Communications Officer**.

They could see Atosryua’s eyes train left and right on-screen as she read the message.

“I see you’re taking things quite slowly, **Vice Hecto-Commander**.”

“I believe it would be best to proceed with caution while at the **capital**. The ship does, however, have resources to spare. We can expedite docking if required.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Atosryua. “Once things have settled down aboard ship, come with all of your crew over to the restaurant named ‘The Stylet.’ Let’s have ourselves a modest little meet-and-greet before **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1’s glamsaihoth** (crest bestowal ceremony). I was waiting for you guys.”

“Then perhaps we *should...*” *start accelerating*, Sobash almost said.

“It’s fine,” said Atosryua, waving off the suggestion. “I just know you’ll all be driven like horses in time, so I’d like for you to take it easy for now. You can wring out, what, around thirty hours at most? Besides, for a restaurant as big-name as The Stylet, it’ll be tough to reserve a room. Or are you the type that can’t get a good night’s sleep unless you’re smack dab in the gleaming fields of battle?”

“Decidedly not,” Sobash smiled. “I’m not exactly yearning for the warzone quite yet, either. There are many things of beauty to be found outside the light

show of combat. A crystal goblet filled with **apple cider**, for instance. Now then, until we meet again.”

The line dropped.

Sobash set himself back down into the Commander’s Seat and ruminated on that brief conversation. It appeared that in the **Empire**, some affairs were not the concern of ‘natural traders’ like him. And by the looks of things, **Commandant** Atosryua would explain it all. Her demeanor told him loud and clear that even if he were to say he didn’t want to hear it, she’d regale him all the same.

“All right, any bridge personnel who are supposed to be off-duty, feel free to rest. I will take a break as well. **Deca-Commander** Idlia, I leave the rest to you.”

When they all stood up and saluted, Sobash nodded in return, before withdrawing to his quarters. Then, he began to write a letter to Samson, whose whereabouts he knew not.

Samson was in *Lacmhacarh*. To be precise, he was in the *ladabh* (commercial complex) known as *Baidec*. It was the largest of the countless commercial complexes in the **imperial capital**, with innumerable ships and recreational facilities.

There was a bit of a housing shortage, but there were plenty of inns and hotels for people without homes in *Lacmhcarh*. Samson was currently staying in one of them, *Baidec* Hall. The breakfast served there was a classy, dressed-up dish of Abh cuisine. The aroma was fine, but the flavor was unfortunately bland. And he felt like sprinkling heavy amounts of salt would come across as an insult to the chef, so Samson usually ate out. Thankfully, *Baidec* offered cuisines from various different **landworlds**. A recent favorite of his was an establishment named Grimshtadt, whose fare evidently came from a landworld named *Becraunh*. That planet’s name rang a bell, if faintly, and while he had no idea where the restaurant’s name originated, the dishes on offer there were pretty tasty in any case. Of course, they couldn’t hold a candle to Midgrat cuisine. But, much to his chagrin, there wasn’t a single Midgrat restaurant or eatery in the whole of *Lacmhacarh*, let alone in *Baidec*.

He could whip something up himself, but Samson was currently a busy man. He had no time to be cooking for himself. And so, once again, he found himself passing through the doors of Grimshtadt in the morning.

“Good morning, Mr. Samson, sir,” said a waiter with a familiar face. “Can we get you your usual?”

“I wouldn’t mind the usual, but I’m actually waiting for some lady guests today. I’ll have the food after they arrive.”

The waiter smiled. A smile that was a bit too unabashed to be a business smile.

“Are these lady guests of the beautiful variety, sir?”

“All ladies are beautiful, if you ask me.”

“Yes, sir. Shall I bring drinks until such time that your companions arrive?”

“Hmm, sure. What was that tea called again? Maxillon tea? Bring me some of that. I’ve gotten weirdly into the stuff.”

“Right away, sir.” The waiter took his order, but not without a slight tinge of criticism about his eyes. “A few words, if I may: I don’t believe there is anything ‘weird’ about taking a liking to Maxillon tea.”

“You’re totally right,” said Samson.

After a spell, his Maxillon tea came to the table. It was served hot, the considerably offbeat aroma wafting up. Samson poured some honey and wine, and slowly sipped.

His **wristgear** buzzed. Someone was calling.

“Oh, look who’s giving me a ring.” It was Paveryua, his erstwhile subordinate from his time on the *Basrogrh*.

Samson had spent many long years in the military, and had enough old friends to show for it. But he was especially close with the old *Basrogrh* gang. While they hadn’t been with him during his first proper battle, they were blood brothers, their bond forged through escaping the maw of death as a unit.

“It’s been too long. Why don’t you be honest with yourself and greet me as

such?”

“Well, if that isn’t the Paveryua I’ve dearly missed. Not a day has gone by that hasn’t felt colorless and dull from not having laid eyes on your visage. My bosom constricted by plaintive longing, my tear ducts parched. So parched I can’t shed a tear even during this moment of deep, deep emotion... that enough for ya?”

“Eh, I’ll allow it,” said Paveryua, feeling generous.

“So, what’s the story?” Samson noticed Paveryua wasn’t wearing a **military uniform**. “You had civvy clothes on you, too, huh?”

“Course I do. Especially seeing as I won’t be wearing the uniform from now on.”

“So you retired?”

“It was time for you to retire, too, **Inspector Supervisor**. Shouldn’t come as a shock if it was time for me, too.”

“It’s not a shock, but...”

“I want to work with you again. Please hire me.”

“Buddy, you should’ve retired *after* consulting me, not before. Are you that sure I won’t turn you down?”

“If you do, I’ll look for work elsewhere. It’s a seller’s market.”

“Can’t think of a place with better benefits than the **Star Forces**, though.”

“But thinking about it from a *mortal peril* perspective, the **Star Forces** are a uniquely rough work environment. And whether I live to see another day’s on the top of my career concerns.”

“Then why’d you join to begin with?”

“I didn’t think there’d *actually be a war*.”

“Ah, well, guess we’re no different on that count.”

“Right? Anyway, are you going to hire me or not?”

“A job interview’s all I can promise.”

“Oh, c’mon, after all this time? If you still don’t know me, what are you going to be gleaning from a ten-minute interview?”

“You don’t understand. I’m also a hiree,” he said, in a non-joking tone of voice. “If you don’t follow the formalized system, you can’t meet face-to-face with Lonh-*Fapyter* (His Lord Excellency).”

“Lonh-*Fapyter*, as in the **clerk** kid, right? He wasn’t my direct superior, but we were comrades fighting on the same tiny ship. It’s not like I don’t know him at all.”

“No calling him a ‘kid.’ While us hirelings reserve the right to make fun of the boss, it wouldn’t be a great look to hire somebody who makes fun of him from the outset.”

“I’m not making fun of him. We chatted a few times, and I know he’s a fine young man. For one, he’s got some common sense for a **noble**. He does kind of lack the *mystique* of a **lord** of a **territory-nation**, if you know what I mean.”

I mean, yeah, thought Samson. He was now a **servant vassal** of the **House of Hyde**. The previous **count**, Jint’s father, must have had vassals of his own, but no one knew where they were or what they were doing. All they knew was that they were no longer the vassals of Hyde. For all intents and purposes, Samson was the virtual first vassal.

The **House of Hyde** would require many vassals in the coming times. Most urgently of all, they needed personnel for the reconstruction of the **antimatter fuel factories**. Samson was at the **imperial capital** in order to recruit more vassals for the countdom. But he was having trouble, for, just as Paveryua said, it was a seller’s market, and precious few wished to be servants in an as-yet developing **territory-nation** like the **Countdom of Hyde**. As such, Samson actually appreciated Paveryua’s request. The man’s specialty lay in **reactor furnaces**, which was to say, in the consumption of **antimatter fuel** as opposed to its retrieval, but that expertise was also sought after by the **House of Hyde**.

Samson had already decided to hire his former subordinates; when it came to personnel affairs, Jint had vested him with full authority, not only because he trusted him, but also due to logistical realities. After all, contacting people outside the star system required messages to be carried by ship through **planar**

space, so it was impossible to seek the **Lord's** approval on every single matter.

"In any case, we should take lunch together. I aim to take my time interviewing you."

"Lunch today?"

"If you can make it. Are you in *Baidec*?"

"I should be able to make it, yeah. If you want, I can even make it to breakfast if I fly out the door. Is the **House of Hyde** treating?"

"Sure is."

"Sweet. Mind if I pick out the place? I know a good one. Though it is a tad pricey."

"Can't have that. Your taste is not to be trusted."

"Based on what?"

"How can I place my trust in the taste buds of a man who scarfed down **Star Forces** food with such relish?"

"Dude, it wasn't that bad. Especially when you're hungry. And I agree that it's not the best food ever."

"See, there you go. You appraised it as 'not that bad.' Those are not the words of a man with a functioning palate."

"You're horrible. Don't you ever feel like broadening your horizons?"

"Guess you're right," said Samson. "Just once, trying my chances with expensive and unappetizing eats ought to build character."

"Then it's a date. I'll message you back after making the reservation. That okay?"

"If you could do that for me, it'd be a huge help, since I've got a lot on my plate at the moment, but by the same token, I'm only free from 12 to 13 o'clock. I leave it to you."

"Okay, got it. It's a shame we can't set aside more time, though."

Samson felt much the same. "Sorry, bud. There's always next time."

“Right. So, seeing as you don’t have much time, I’ll ask now: what made you want to be a **servant vassal**? Did the kid, err, I mean Lonh-*Dreur* ask you?”

“No, I asked him.”

“How come?”

“Well, you know how I’m gonna go back home and start a farm, right?”

“Yeah. That’s why you have me wondering. I thought you’d be flinging around livestock dung as fertilizer on your home planet right around now.”

“I figured I’d learn a lesson or two from raising up a new **territory-nation** that I could apply to running a farm.”

“Really? And here I assumed you were just doing it for the money again.”

“The money? That’s not an issue. If I can make myself a fair bit, then you won’t see me complaining.”

“You won’t see me complaining, either.”

“Mr. Samson, sir,” whispered the waiter from nearby. “Your companions have arrived.”

“Ah, thanks.” Samson faced the **wristgear**. “See you later, Paveryua.”

“Sure thing.” The line dropped.

Samson then stood up to greet the three women.

“Mr. Samson? Of the **House of Hyde**?” asked the one in the middle.

“Yes, I am *Gabotiac* (Main Retainer) *Samsonn Baurgh Tiruser Tirusec*. Sehrnye Ltd., I presume?”

“Yes; I’m *Faigdacpéc Sérnaïc*,” said the middle woman, nodding, though not without a faint tinge of disappointment in her eyes.

“I hear you’ve a letter of introduction from *Fiac Lartnér*.”

Chapter 2: The Vorlash Countdom

The meeting room was within the flower gardens, where it was the Earth-origin plants that were in glorious bloom. They were leagues easier to cultivate than *Martinh*-origin flowers, and all the more beautiful for it.

Seated upright in a luxurious chair (and amidst the choking floral fragrance) waited a man with light indigo hair. He was the *Bélycec Bhosorr Bauchimiacr* (Chancellor's Office Financial Affairs Bureau Investigator), *İestaich*.

"Good morning, Lonh-*Dreur*," he said, getting up and saluting after the fashion of the imperial court upon seeing the two of them. "*Fiac Bærr*," he added reverently.

As might be gleaned from his ominous title, he was in tax collection — an alien concept among those born and raised as **gentry** within the **Empire**. For the vast majority of **imperial citizens** from **landworlds**, taxes were a nightmare of the past, one they jettisoned alongside their **landworld citizenship**. In fact, the major share of both gentry and imperial citizens lived out their lives never becoming aware that the Empire had any system of taxation to speak of.

It was a different story, however, for **nobles** in possession of **star-fiefs**, for they were the only people in all the **Empire** to enjoy the dubious privilege of paying taxes. **Grandeess**, or nobles with inhabited planets to their name, were guaranteed the right to monopolize their respective **territory-nations'** trade, as well as the right to produce antimatter fuel around their systems' suns and extract mineral resources from any uninhabited planets. In return, they had to offer up a portion of their production output to the Empire. In the case of the **Countdom of Hyde**, the **landworld administration** had no mining bases, plantations, or other settlements outside of the planet of *Martinh*.

Consequently, it was the **Empire's** view that preferential rights to all space and celestial bodies outside of the system's sole inhabited planet went to the **House of Hyde**. And the most vital of those celestial bodies was none other than the Hyde System's sun, also named Hyde. If they were to develop and

expand on the **antimatter fuel factories** surrounding that sun, they could produce **antimatter fuel** for the next five billion years. Such was the privilege of the **House of Hyde**, but also its duty. No matter whether it was a populated **territory-nation**, or merely a small **domain** with no indigenous population, the primary role of any **star-fief** was to serve as a fuel resupply base.

And it was the job of a *bélycec* (investigator) to determine the appropriate amount to levy.

Few societies in the cosmos welcome tax collectors with open arms, and the **Empire's aristocracy** was no exception, but Jint found this Yestesh a dependable fellow. Providing counsel to the **liege** was included in the man's work duties. And from what Jint had heard, he was quite the veteran bureaucrat. One couldn't tell from the Abh-by-blood's outward appearance, but he'd been working as an investigator for twenty years, and apparently even held **rank** as a *Bomoüass Sazoïr* (Quartermaster Hecto-Commander).

There was a good reason someone as senior as Yestesh had been dispatched here. Shortly after the **Countdom of Hyde** became a territory of the Empire, it got taken over by the United Humankind. That fact presented a slew of complicating circumstances that were comparatively unique even among the sundry worlds of the Empire.

Even so, Jint was still annoyed by how he could barely escape this consummate bureaucrat. Yestesh would let nothing evade his notice, including things Jint didn't think were worth the effort.

"I should start by relaying the present state of affairs," said Yestesh. "No reports yet of the **landworld administration** of *Martinh* accepting reentry into the **Empire**."

"That's a shame," said Jint, nodding so as to seem as gravely serious as possible.

Strictly speaking, Jint's home planet was not yet imperial territory. It appeared there were still land troops on the surface. The **Star Forces**, after securing the **Hyde Portal**, kept a **recon squadron** in the area to search for enemy ships for about a month, only to determine there was no sign of the enemy in the astrospace and promptly withdraw. Even the **interstellar ships**

making use of neighboring routes ended up passing by the Hyde Portal, having no way to resupply in the system. Only **patrol ships** and **battle-line ships** would ever drop by the **Countdom of Hyde**, in order to verify anew the will of the **landworld administration**. That was how Jint and the others knew they hadn't changed their minds.

"How long has it been since the last space-time fusion?" asked Jint.

"There has been no space-time fusion since leaving the *Saudec Estoter* (*Estotec* Portal)."

Jint inwardly heaved a sigh. The *Baucbiruch* was currently sailing through **planar space**. **Inter-bubble communication** was only possible at close range, and the rate of information transfer was extremely slow at that. In other words, as long as they didn't merge with the space-time of another ship, there was no way for them to keep abreast of the latest news. Yet they reported the current situation as conscientiously as they could.

"The amount of information is lessening with time," said Yestesh. "Since they can't resupply **antimatter fuel**, ships are veering away from the **Countdom of Hyde**."

"I know that." Jint wondered why he kept stating the bleeding obvious. He'd thought the Abh were a more practical race. "We are currently recruiting fuel-related personnel. We are also arranging our equipment, and plan to arrive in the **countdom** alongside the necessary personnel."

"I know that." Yestesh's eyes screamed, "why is this young man stating the obvious."

Is he for real? lamented Jint.

"Now then, have there been any changes to our plans?"

"No, no changes," said Jint sharply.

"Then we're to stay in the **Vorlash Countdom** for some time, correct?"

"For some time? We're not just resupplying there?" Lafier butted in.

"Yeah. It's undecided for how long, but the plan's to stay there. Did I forget to tell you?"

“This is the first I’ve heard of this. Why must we stay at a place like that?”

To Jint, the planet Delktu was a trove of memories. To Lafier, it was some unremarkable rock.

Jint’s displeasure must have crept over his face; Lafier’s sharp eyes spotted it. “Do not tell me it’s because it’s where we first met. Just hearing you say that would be dreadfully embarrassing.”

“Oh, I won’t. It’d be even cringier to be the one firing off a line like that. But Vorlash, or rather Delktu, is my second home.”

“Then we’re staying there because of your personal feelings?”

“Well, I’d be lying if I said I was totally impassive, but we do have business there. I want to recruit **vassals**.”

“**Mechanics Linewing** Samson is recruiting in *Lacmhacarh*, is he not?” Lafier knew Samson had had his name crossed off the military registers, yet she still appended his former title to his name.

“I’m having Mr. Samson pick out engineer vassals, but we need administrative vassals, too. He was in the **Mechanics Branch**, and I’m in the **Budget Branch**. It makes sense that I should be looking for administrative vassals.”

“But surely, it would behoove you to look for them in *Lacmhacarh*, too.”

“If anything, we ought to be searching in *Martinh*, since the people there are familiar with their own situation. But it’s not in the cards at the moment.”

“If so, we should be making it over there as soon as possible to make the **landworld administration** surrender, no?” She wasn’t trying to persuade him, but rather asking sincerely.

“If you’re that confident you can persuade them, we’ll do that.”

“If we try and fail, we can always return to Vorlash then,” she said, cornering Jint without even meaning to.

“Fair point,” he replied. Jint realized he may have just come up with any old excuse to postpone going to the system that had become his **star-fief**.

“Actually,” said Yestesh, Jint’s unexpected savior (though not through any

volition of Yestesh's own), "it may be best to wait a little while before **His Excellency** returns to his **star-fief**."

You're right, Jint was about to say, before stopping himself in the nick of time. "Why is that?"

"It pains me to say it, but conditions as of now are very rough. I believe it would be best if I go there first and gather more detailed information."

"I see." Instead of a young **grandee** strolling on up and making affairs even more tangled, the experienced public official ought to observe the scene first.

"The **Star Forces** have already conducted some reconnaissance in the **countdom**, but it's still unclear at the moment what exactly the **landworld administration's** thoughts are. I think it wise to ascertain that before **Your Excellency** goes to persuade them."

"From what I've heard, they fancy independence."

"Such a strange notion," said Yestesh, pity in his voice. "They can't be serious."

"They knew there were other worlds somewhere, but they didn't know anything beyond that. They'd spent more than two hundred years living solely off their system."

"Yes, I did hear tell. It's just so hard to picture a system with such an isolated economy."

"I don't blame you, but I can tell you *Martinh's* **administration** would have no qualms staying isolated from interstellar economics."

"If that's the case, then why don't we leave them be?" asked Lafier. "I don't think there's any need to lose our heads over it."

"We haven't."

"Oh?"

"Do I look that flustered to you?"

"It seems to me like your **landworld citizens** can take care of themselves; why don't we just bide our time until they come to the **Empire** of their own accord?"

“By that time, my debt will’ve reached astronomical proportions,” pointed out Jint.

“That won’t be a problem if we install **antimatter fuel factories** and *itymh* (refueling stations). We don’t particularly need the **administration’s** assistance for that.”

“What, so you’re not gonna say ‘take however many loans you need’?”

“It isn’t my money.”

“But you’re the inheritor, aren’t you?”

“That is a long way off, and my brother might be the one who ends up inheriting, anyway.”

Yestesh cleared his throat. “**Your Highness**, I’m afraid that plan might not necessarily fly. So long as the **landworld Martinh** is near the **Hyde Portal**, its **administration’s** stability is indispensable. Ships can’t afford to expend time and effort to fly out to Hyde’s sun or to a gas planet further out from the sun than *Martinh* in order to refuel.”

I dunno, looks pretty stable to me, thought Jint. He did know what Yestesh meant, of course, so he refrained from picking him apart. To Yestesh, a “stable” **landworld administration** was one that wasn’t ostensibly hostile to the **Empire**. It was understandable why he might not deem a world where the term “territory-nation “ and the truth of the matter were so estranged as “stable.” That being said, seeing as it was the Empire that dubbed Hyde a “territory-nation,” *Martinh’s* government felt quite stable, and they probably ought to be viewed as such. (Incidentally, if they ever came to know they were being called a “territory,” they’d doubtless have a fit.)

...Before he knew it, Jint’s train of thought was running in circles.

“Then it’s just as I thought. We should save recruiting **vassals** for after we’ve gotten a grasp of the **landworld administration**,” said Lafier. “Or no?”

It seemed this conversation was running in circles, too. Jint chose to make a decision here and now. “Mr. Yestesh, I hereby formally request that you go to the **Countdom of Hyde** ahead of me. In the meantime, I will stay in the **Countdom of Vorlash**, and gather some **vassals** if possible.”

"I accept your request, Lonh-*Dreur*," nodded Yestesh.

"It's your **territory-nation**, so I have no objections," said Lafier.

"Then it's settled. What'll you do, Lafier?"

"Do about what?"

"You gonna stay in Vorlash with me, or go see my home planet ahead of me?"

"I'm here to keep you company," said Lafier. "Besides, I couldn't stand to let you just take it easy without me."

"All right then."

"About that, Lonh-*Dreur*," said Yestesh. "Where will you stay in Vorlash?"

"I intend to put up at a hotel in the **spaceport**, at least to start with."

"To start with?" Yestesh raised an eyebrow.

"I'd like to try my luck staying on the surface if I can."

"Lonh-*Dreur*, don't tell me you wish to stay at an inn run by a **landworld citizen**?" he asked, a measure of distress ruddying his brow.

"You're saying I can't?" he said, somewhat confrontationally.

"**Your Excellency** is an **imperial noble**," he explained, as one might to a child.

Ugh... will the day ever come when people stop getting a kick out of telling me I'm a noble? Needless to say, he knew he was in the wrong. It was all because he lacked a certain active self-consciousness — he didn't really see himself as a **noble**. Whether that was ultimately a good or a bad thing, he didn't know, but it did trip him up when it came time to conduct himself as an **imperial noble**.

"I think even just the **spaceport** is rather unsafe. I can post some of my subordinates as your guards, but none of them are dedicated bodyguards. Also, I brought them here in order to investigate **Your Excellency's territory**, and so they'd end up in a place far removed from where they're meant to be working."

"The **spaceport**'s unsafe, you say?"

The *Bidautec Delctur* (Delktu Spaceport) belonged to the *Dreughéc Bhorlacr* (House of Vorlash), but there was a **Star Forces** administrative zone as well,

with **soldiers** on duty at all times.

“Yes,” nodded Yestesh. “**Landworld citizens** are allowed there, and there might be people formerly of UH military rank among them. And even if that’s not the case, there are many out there with wild ideas.”

With those words, Jint grew more and more worried. Now he wanted to collect as much info as possible on the current situation over at the **Delktu Spaceport** using his **wristgear**...

Soon, he learned the *bærélach bidauter* (spaceport guard garrison) that the **House of Vorlash** set up was in shambles. “Well, that’s not very good.”

“Besides...” Yestesh flashed a glance at Lafier.

Jint knew what he was getting at. It was painfully obvious. A young **grandee** jumping into danger at his own risk was one thing, but he could not be allowed to involve a **royal princess** of the **Empire**. After all, Lafier would be in a whole different level of danger compared to Jint.

Jint was just a **grandee**, and one that looked like a normal **Lander** at that. Lafier, on the other hand, was a member of the **Imperial Family**, and a candidate for Empress. She was a much more attractive target for agents with an axe to grind against the Abh half of the galaxy. And there was no end to people intent on ransoming her life to make demands of the throne. In truth, it made no difference whether the **Empress** or a random **imperial citizen** was taken hostage. The Empire did not negotiate with kidnappers, and that was a known quantity throughout the Milky Way, but endless scores refused to believe that was anything but subterfuge. In fact, the **title** of “First Person to Successfully Extort the Empire” was all the more alluring for it.

Jint also understood why Yestesh didn’t outright explain all this. There was a tendency for the **Royal Princess** to lose her temper whenever she felt sheltered by others. That wasn’t unique to Lafier — it was a trait shared by all in the Abliar clan. Therefore, Abhs with their heads screwed on tried to avoid pointing out danger to an Abliar, and, if the cat was out of the bag, to avoid suggesting they change their mind regarding said danger. And Yestesh had his head screwed on tight.

“I strongly suggest you stay at the *Garich Dreur Bhorlacr* (Vorlash Count’s

Manor),” said Yestesh.

“At the **manor**, huh...” Jint didn’t hate the **House of Vorlash**, but he wasn’t exactly thrilled at the prospect, either. Back when he’d lived in Delktu, the **landworld** right underneath the Manor, they must have been aware that the heir to the **House of Hyde** was on-planet, and yet they never contacted him. Jint didn’t bemoan that; he just took it as a sign that perhaps the **House of Vorlash** harbored some prejudice against landworlder **nobles**.

As for why Jint never took the initiative and paid the Manor a courtesy call, one reason was that he’d been brought to Delktu when he was still a clueless and callow little boy, and by the time he realized it, he’d already long since let the opportunity slip by. One other reason — a reason he couldn’t deny — was that he was afraid he might get treated coldly, which would land a blow to his self-esteem.

There were other reasons to avoid staying at the Manor even outside of that purely emotionally-based hesitation. Part of why he was going to begin with was to recruit **vassals**. Being stuck high up in orbit would hardly serve that end.

Jint gave it some thought, and came up with a safe course of action. *I’ll stay at the Manor for the time being, and then I’ll head for the spaceport and/or the surface by my lonesome.* It wasn’t as though he’d need Lafier’s assistance to go headhunting, anyway.

The big problem was getting the **Royal Princess** to agree to that. There was no hope she’d take it lying down if she perceived it as coddling her. A fight would be sure to ensue. But if he weathered that storm, the skies were clear from there.

“I’ll try asking the *Dreuc Bhorlacr* (Count of Vorlash) to let me stay at the Manor.”

“I can do that for you, if you wish?” said Lafier.

“That’s okay,” he said. “This is my job.” Reluctant though he was to engage in inter-**grandee** negotiations, (and all the more so due to it being his first time), he’d feel like a worm making Lafier do it for him. This was a matter for the **House of Hyde** — that is, Jint himself — to attend to.

Of course, a **royal princess** of the **Empire** asking would carry more weight than a count from a neighboring system, but as Jint couldn't hide that he was accompanied by a princess, it was very unlikely the **House of Vorlash** would turn them down, no matter who made the request.

"Have neither of you heard, *Lonh-Dreur, Fiac Lartnér*?" said Yestesh, eyes wide.

"Heard what?"

"Currently, **Count Vorlash** and his family are missing. At the onset of the Three Nations Alliance's invasion, *Aimemyrh Aronn Boscyger Dreuc Bhorlacr Mhisceucec-Lonh* was together with his loved ones at the Mansion. And even now that we've recovered the **Vorlash Countdom**, their whereabouts remain unknown. They were likely taken somewhere within the Three Nations. Or, perhaps, they're no longer alive."

"Then how is Vorlash coping in general?"

"**Her Majesty the Empress** has filled **the countship** for the time being, with administrative affairs being handled by a **magistrate**." The **investigator** then ran a search on his wristgear. "Her name is *Aimemyrh Üémh Cerdér Dereuzz*. Judging by her name, she's of the **gentry**, connected to the Emyoor Clan."

"Guess that won't affect our stay there, then."

"Correct, but I shall be the one to make the request. **Magistrates** standing in for **Her Majesty** are duty-bound to accede to the requests of us **investigators** to the best of their ability, so that will smooth out the process."

"Okay, understood. Then I leave it to you. Thank you," said Jint, relief washing over him.

The look and feel of Delktu were unchanged from before the Three Nations Alliance takeover — or at least, so it appeared from way up in the spaceport.

The rust-red planet lacked much in the way of moisture content. In fact, the only pools of water that could be seen from orbit consisted of a number of giant ravines formed by convection between the planet's nucleus and crust, though the rather sharp-eyed could also make out the lakes and marshes dotting the

surface.

That being said, telling residents of Delktu that their planet had no seas or oceans was inadvisable. They called their ravines filled with freshwater “seas,” with a sense of endearment and attachment that outsiders had trouble comprehending.

Where one of those “seas” — the Sea of Fai — intersected the equator, lay the largest city and capital, Mei, and that was where the **orbital tower** stood in geosynchronous orbit. Delktu had a short rotation time (causing dust storms that were notable even on the galactic scale to be visible from orbit as well), so the geosynchronous orbit was relatively close to the ground. The spaceport, situated at the tower’s center, floated a mere 20.6 *saidagh* off the surface.

Meanwhile, 7.1 *saidagh* above geosynchronous orbit flew the **Vorlash Count’s Manor**. The orbital tower extended higher up than the spaceport at its core. The laws of physics discovered eons past demanded a balance be struck, and so there was a long stem on the opposite side of the planet’s surface as well, with a small asteroid fastened to serve as a weight. As such, the Manor had to change course from time to time to avoid getting split into two by the **carbon crystal fiber**.

Vorlash had been a comparatively recent addition to the **Empire’s** list of **territory-nations**, and less than a century had passed since its settlers first stepped foot onto its sole inhabitable planet. For such young **landworlds**, it came as no surprise that immigrants from many different worlds would get mixed up in a big welter, and yet it was common for somewhat colorless societies to coalesce. Delktu was an exception to that rule, because the first wave of settlers all hailed from a certain **landworld**, rich with history, named *Üamcamec* of the *Læbehynh Elcacr* (Marquessate of *Elcach*). Settlers from other **territory-nations** were accepted into the fold from there, but the majority of **landworld citizens** in Vorlash had distant relatives in Elcash, and so the planetwide society was tethered by a Wahmcahm sense of ethics. To give one example of such cultural cohesion, to the citizens of Vorlash, moving was a big to-do that might or might not happen in one’s lifetime, so they tended to regard people who swapped houses two or three times a year as total aliens with bizarre customs.

Furthermore, the **House of Vorlash** was related to the *Læbeghéc Elcacr* (House of Elcash), and both were connected to the Emyoor Clan, which was one of the Founding Families.

The Emyoor Clan's **crests** had a common motif in the symbol of the *asüith* (dragonfly). Naturally, the crest of the **House of Vorlash** was adorned with a dragonfly as well. The *Asüith lo Daitemh* (Dragonfly and Lightning) were the crest of the **Count's House** and of the **Countdom** itself, and there they were above the gate that was the main entrance of the **Count's Mansion**. The *Baucbiruch* was just a hundred *dagh* away, more than close enough to make out that crest with the naked eye.

"That took quite some skill," said Lafier, impressed.

"Yeah," nodded Jint.

Not one of the **servant vassals** of the **House of Hyde** were currently on the *Baucbiruch*, so the ship wasn't being run by vassals, but rather by employees of the **Empire's** Merchant Ship Company.

Wish I could just hire them, thought Jint. But that was not to be. The *saucec Rüé Casobérlacr* (Imperial Merchant Ship Company crewmembers) enjoyed higher status than the vassals of the **House of Hyde** could. Besides, they were all reserve *lodairh Laburer* (Star Forces starpilots) anyway. If the war got more dire, they would get conscripted.

A bridge extended from below the gate, and attached itself to the *Baucbiruch*. When prodded to say something, Jint activated the intra-ship comms.

"This is **Count Hyde** speaking," he stated, albeit not without feeling awkward about it. "I'm sure you're already aware why, but I'll be parting ways with you all for a time. Until we meet again, I'm leaving command of the ship to **Investigator** Yestesh." Jint wondered how to close off, before settling on: "The situation is fluid, but I ask you bear with me."

He could feel Lafier's critical gaze. "Did I mess up somehow?" he asked fretfully.

"No, it's fine," she said coldly. "I think everyone is too busy to have been listening anyway."

Chapter 3: *Flaigec Laiblacharr* (Banquet of Departure)

The *Flicaubh* had entered final deceleration, but no fine tuning was needed. The course forward was beautiful, elegant, and undistorted by fiddly alterations as the **raid ship**, now come of age, approached its temporary dwelling.

The **Empire** had set up factories to mass-produce ship docks in its **capital**, sending out their manufactured wares to bases of operations scattered all over space. But not all were dispatched; about ten percent remained in the **Abliar Countdom**, where the capital was located. **Special Construction Site 7022** had bound fourteen of the remaining docks together and added on affiliated facilities. But fourteen was just the current number. There was room for expansion.

The *Flicaubh* flew into Special Site Dock 5. Coincidentally, Special Site 7022 was near **Behtoor Construction Site**. The *Flicaubh* and its sisters were all carefully prototyped one at a time in a dock not very different from Dock 5, with mass-production slated for Behtoor. Of course, “near” being relative, they were still several *saidagh* away, but even so, some of Behtoor’s production pipelines were visible from 7022, shining in the light of Abliar’s sun. If the *Caubh*-class was deemed serviceable, then a number of those production tubes would be used for the construction of raid ships. The siblings of the *Flicaubh* would march down the tubes’ interiors as they were given shape, to be shot into the void between the stars.

While Sobash had not been informed of the construction plans, he was sure that preparations for mass-production had already commenced. It had yet to be tested in battle, but he could tell *Caubh*-class raid ships were keepers. At this very moment, Sobash could sense, with his *frocragh* spatio-sensory perception, that five of the production pipes were straightening out from their coiled states. And in the vicinity, some hundreds of structures were floating, waiting to be connected to the pipes. If that wasn’t a sign mass-production was in the works,

nothing was.

The floating structures in question included factories that mass-produced ship components, as well as residential facilities for employees. Once the production pipes were fully straightened, and the mini-factories and employee residences established in the appropriate positions, mass production would begin in earnest. Granted, there was no evidence they would be creating the *Flicaubh*'s brethren, but Sobash didn't know what else it could be.

After the *Flicaubh* and the other ships were examined, minor modifications would be made to the positioning of the manufacturing equipment and production process at **Warship Management Headquarters'** inner vault. Then *Caubh*-class raid ships would be born in rapid succession.

During his years as a trader, Sobash had only boarded inexpensive used **supply ships**, but he was deeply humbled by the fact that he'd lent a hand to the birth of a new class of vessel. After finishing the administrative procedures concerning the inspection and maintenance, Sobash transferred the crew to a **smallcraft**. They were three hours away (at a velocity of two *daimon* G-levels) from The Stylet. Ecryua was piloting on his orders.

"This is my first time at The Stylet," murmured Ecryua, sitting in the Steerer's Seat.

I suppose she's expressing excitement, in her own way, mused Sobash contentedly, sitting in the Assistant Steerer's Seat.

Sensing his inquisitive eyes on her, she cast him a glance and cocked her head.

"Act as you please," said Sobash, his inner smile breaking out. "You're the **Skipper**, after all."

Ecryua nodded expressionlessly, and took that as her cue. "This is your Skipper speaking," she broadcast. "All hands, fasten your seatbelts and prepare for high acceleration."

Wait just one minute! Sobash nearly shouted.

All of a smallcraft's passenger seats were perpendicular to the floor. When the vessel landed in a place with gravity control, the passengers could but

remain standing. But once the ship started accelerating, the perceived direction of gravity would shift at once, making those upright seats into beds instead. That was when passengers could lie down and relax, with individuals' wristgears providing entertainment for the bored. Of course, going to the bathroom was a tricky proposition, since one would need to go up and down a passageway, but for the most part, a trip on a smallcraft was comfortable.

But that described sailing at two *daimon*. In Star Forces lingo, "high acceleration" referred to velocities in excess of eight *daimon*. Putting aside the bodily makeup of the Abh, who were genetically engineered to withstand high acceleration, **NCCs** from **landworlds** often felt discomfort at even just three *daimon*. If they were to shift into high acceleration, they'd be unable to so much as raise their voices as they got pressed against their seats.

The familiarization voyage had been hectic enough. It was simply common sense among the **Star Forces starpilots** to give the crew a pleasant three-hour trip afterward. That's what Idlia would have done. Yet Ecryua was trying to reach their destination at velocities at the brink of what a human body could possibly endure.

Ultimately, however, Sobash said nothing. He'd appointed Ecryua the Skipper — they had to follow her orders. She was a fully trained **starpilot**, so she'd make sure there were no casualties. If he felt things were getting overly dangerous, he did reserve the right to take back command.

Sorry, everyone, Sobash apologized to the **NCCs**.

Unaware as to Sobash's thoughts, Ecryua conversed with Space Traffic Control. Accordingly, the **pier** was depressurized, and the lock gate opened.

"Requesting electromagnetic propulsion," she said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, raid ship *Flicaubh* **smallcraft**," said the Construction Site Space Traffic Control Center. "There is no EM propulsion mechanism here. You're cleared for low-temperature jet propulsion."

"Roger that, Space Traffic Control. I thank you. *Flicaubh* smallcraft ending transmission."

There are those who made for capable starpilots, but not necessarily for

competent commanders. And she might be one, thought Sobash as he stared at her profile. But then he abstained from speaking ill of her, and she stared blankly back at him.

As they stared at each other, Sobash started feeling like he'd imagined that whole incident.

"We're taking off," she murmured, and she moved her **control gauntlet**-equipped left hand.

The trip from hell had commenced.

Like many well-known establishments across *Lacmhacarh*, the Stylet was an orbital facility unto its own, serving as both restaurant and hotel.

"This is the *Flicaubh* smallcraft speaking. The Stylet Space Traffic Control, please respond," Sobash heard her calmly say.

Thanks to the intense deceleration, half of their bodies were absorbed into their seats.

"This is The Stylet Space Traffic Control," said a much more fraught voice.

"Permission to enter?"

"You may, but please understand that if you intend to come inside, we ask that you first pass by in order to decelerate a little more before coming back around."

"I don't want to."

"**Vanguard** Ecryua," said Sobash, speaking up at last after noticing she was about to brake so hard it'd make even the **Flight Branch Starpilots** who were accustomed to high acceleration shriek, "you should follow Traffic Control's instructions."

"Okay," she nodded quietly.

Sobash was convinced that in her heart, she had appended some truly creative and colorful curses onto that "okay."

The smallcraft passed by The Stylet while decelerating. At the point of closest

proximity, Sobash's *frocragh* sensed the restaurant as being within arm's reach. An onlooker might have mistaken the scene for the ship grazing against the structure... or did they actually, in fact, graze it?

It took nearly ten seconds for the gap in velocity between the smallcraft and The Stylet to reach zero. Changing direction, she revved the **main engine system** once and approached The Stylet the rest of the way using just the **attitude control engines**, which was a huge relief for Sobash.

The smallcraft slid onto the arrival square.

"This is your Skipper," said Ecryua. "The ship has arrived at The Stylet. All hands, disembark."

They could hear the **NCCs** shouting with joy. From today onward, they would hold their lives even more dearly than before.

"Now then," she said, standing up out of her seat.

Sobash, the Captain, was the last to get off. After a while, he went to the boarding gate. The crew were there, waiting for him in lines. At the **whistle**, they saluted simultaneously. This was very much an experience he never could've had when he was a merchant, and he didn't particularly dislike such pomp and circumstance. While he'd also joined the **Star Forces** when he was younger, his life after that was characterized by interpersonal relationships of a more casual flavor, so this was certainly fresh.

He took his time descending the stairs. Below waited not only his crew, but also formal-wear Stylet staff.

"Welcome. This is the *Flicaubh* group, correct?"

"That's right," Sobash nodded. "We're in your hands."

"We received your reservation from the command center of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**. The banquet is tomorrow, so please, make yourselves at home today. Allow us to take you to your rooms."

"If you would," he said, looking back at his subordinates. "You hear that? There's no work for anybody today. I'll be sending the schedule for tomorrow to your **wristgears** later, so don't worry about a thing. Enjoy yourselves to the

extent the law and military protocol allow.”

What ensued was cheering of explosive proportions.

The entry time of each ship’s crew had been set beforehand, and the *Flicaubh* was the last, so when Sobash led the crew to the banquet hall, the crews of the other ships were already there, with only the command center personnel yet to arrive.

He ordered **Deca-Commander** Idlia to have the crew line up into two columns. Sobash himself, of course, stood in front of them. The crews of the other ships were lined up in identical files. With a large gap in the center, the crews’ respective sets of columns were face-to-face, six crews on one side and six on the other.

The venue’s gravity level was sent to 0.5 *daimon*, which was the carefully considered standard for standing banquets, meant to prevent foot swelling.

The whistle sounded.

Sobash pulled out the **command baton** from his waist and held it in front of his face. This was a rite permitted only to those who bore the reins of command. The majority of **soldiers**, who had no command batons, saluted as normal.

Commandant Atosryua walked out in front, leading her staff officers. She stepped onto the platform at the farthest point from the door and about-faced. The soldiers dropped their salutes at her turning around.

“Sorry for the wait,” she said. “*Bénh, tyce loré!*” (Everyone, take your cups!)

Mobile tables with the cups appeared on each side of each crew’s columns, and began moving from the back of the line to the front. Finally, the mobile table came by Sobash, and he glanced at it. Various drinks had been prepared for them, because every individual had their preferences, and some did not drink alcohol at all (like Grinshia). Sobash chose the sparkling rice wine. The Abh believed that particular beverage to be indispensable to celebrations, and Sobash was no exception. As for the drink’s container, it was made of bamboo genetically modified to be made into cups, feeling sticky to the touch.

“None of you are yet official members of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**,” said **Kilo-Commander** Atosryua, though not before making sure everyone had their drinks. “At present, the only official members are the **command center soldiers**. That being said, Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 will eventually be formed via each of your ships. Squadron 1 has nothing to boast of, but that’s not shocking considering it hasn’t been born yet. In any case, I unfortunately can’t tell you to be proud of getting into my squadron. We must build a foundation of which we can be proud. After a series of exercises, our **squadron** will probably be dismantled, with each ship dispersed to a new, different squadron. Every one of you is expected to serve as a cornerstone of the **trample-blitz squadrons** to come. Then you can hold your heads up high and tell your subordinates, your colleagues, even your superiors, ‘welcome to our squadron.’ Here’s hoping that greeting someone to a trample-blitz squadron becomes synonymous with sharing in glory.” She held up her bamboo cup. “And though I know this is a wish that can’t come true, I hope that when the **Empire** snatches victory, every single person here gathers again to talk and reminisce about the days they earned bounteous glory in battle. *Tyce cosé!*”

With that call to toast, they cheered in response and partook.

“All right, everybody, please enjoy yourselves. There’s only two rules — no saluting or bowing, and no playing with your food. I can’t stand it when people play with their food. It’s indecent. Outside of that, I’m permitting you to let loose a little. You can lick your plates, and you can even shake hands with cats.”

At the snap of her fingers, even more mobile tables, this time with both food and drink, entered the venue. The **soldiers** broke rank and grouped around the cuisine on offer. Sobash viewed it all out of the corners of his eyes as he took up a fresh new cup. The banquet would last long enough, so the food wouldn’t be going anywhere. Right now, what he needed to secure instead was conversation partners.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, raising his cup to a close-by female **ship commander**. “I’m **Vice Hecto-Commander** Sobash of the *Flicaubh*.”

“I’m **Vice Hecto-Commander Serboth**, **Ship Commander** of the *Lymcaubh*,” she said, smiling as a formality.

“How is your ship?” he asked, deciding to go with a safe topic.

“It handled amazingly smoothly. The only defect was with the water drainage system.”

“Talk about spoiling a perfect ride.”

“I know. Were there no such problems on the *Flicaubh*?”

“The drainage system was fine. We did find a few small things here and there that could be improved upon, but we’d be perfectly happy with the ship as is, too.”

“I think the number one thing to improve is how they’re having the **Gunner** pilot while in **3-space**. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Would you rather have the Captain pilot, as with **assault ships**?”

“Right,” she nodded. “In the heat of battle, having the **Ship Commander** give orders while the **gunner** moves the ship strikes me as too circuitous. The **Ship Commander** piloting the ship directly would be more efficient.”

“I would counter by saying that there’s no correlation between one’s piloting skills and one’s aptitude as a commander. Wouldn’t it be difficult to apply both skills at once?”

“We need to be doing both. While they operate on smaller scales, the **Captains** of **assault ships** and **defense ships** are asked to do the same. You were the **Ship Commander** of an **assault ship** once, too, right, **Ship Commander** Sobash?”

“No, actually,” Sobash confessed. “I was promoted from the **Senior Starpilot** of an **assault ship** directly to **Raid Ship Commander**.”

“I didn’t know that,” she said, blinking.

If Captains were the ones to pilot in 3-space like she wants then I would never have gotten the chance to be a raid ship captain, he thought to himself.

“I don’t have any experience as an **assault ship captain**, either,” said a male **starpilot**, joining the conversation. “I’m *Deurec* of the *Batcaubh*. I was the **Vice Commander** of a **patrol ship**. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“I’m surprised. I’d thought a lot of us had experience on **assault ships**.” *Serboth* peered at her **wristgear** and looked into the backgrounds of the soon-to-be ship commanders. “Looks like that impression was mistaken. One of the **Senior Ship Commanders** is a *sarérh symr acharr* (assault unit commander), and the other is from a **patrol ship**. Then there are five **assault ship captains**, and another four from patrol ships. It’s almost half assault ship people, half patrol ship people.”

“I fall under neither category,” said Sobash as he reached out for another cup. “I am from an **assault ship**, but it may be more accurate to put me in under the ‘**vice commander**’ category.”

“Did they gather **starpilots** with diverse backgrounds on purpose?” *Serboth* muttered to herself.

“But it’s too lopsided for that. In that case, there should be people who were **vice commanders** on battle-line ships, or *manoüass laiter* (defense ship captains),” said *Deurec*.

“True,” *Serboth* nodded.

From there, the topic shifted to whether the raid ship should be operated as a light patrol ship or a heavy assault ship. *Serboth* was on the heavy assault ship side, and *Deurec* was on the light patrol ship side. Both seemed to be repping for their previous positions. Sobash felt no loyalty to his previous position in and of itself, so he remained neutral. Soon, another **starpilot** joined the debate, averring that raid ships were raid ships and nothing more, raising the temperature of the argument even higher.

A tad peckish, Sobash stepped away and approached the mobile table. While **rank** was said to be moot during this banquet, **starpilots** tended to chat with starpilots, and **NCCs** with NCCs. Even **starpilots** from **landworlds** who’d earned status as **gentry** were speaking with NCCs.

Suddenly, a familiar starpilot came into view — it was Ecryua. Meanwhile, a **linewing starpilot** he didn’t know was enthusiastically chatting her up.

Maybe she’s finding him annoying in his persistence, thought Sobash. There was no sign from her that she minded his presence, but then again, there was no sign she was enjoying his presence, either.

Sobash walked over to the pair. “**Vanguard** Ecryua, are you enjoying yourself?”

“Uh-huh,” she nodded. “More or less.”

He sized up the **Linewing Starpilot** as a father might. He must be young, given his **rank**. In addition, his features were very young. Not much time must have passed since he’d hit his **slow-aging period**.

*Maybe I ought to have just minded my own business, he thought. Knowing her personality, if she’d felt him a bother, she would have left him hanging immediately, even if he’d been **His Highness the Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief**.*

Besides, he was lower in **rank** than her. If she was standing near a man who kept on firing words in her direction, then she really was enjoying herself to an extent.

“Uh, **Ship commander...**” The **Linewing** looked nervous, raising and lowering his right hand as if swallowing the urge to salute.

“You heard the **Commandant**, didn’t you? No saluting.” *Maybe he’s mistaken me for a rival in love. Honestly, if he’s going to be putting the moves on a higher-ranked soldier, he needs a bit more nerve,* he thought, all the while smiling his way. “I’ll get out of your hair. Have fun, you two.”

He left them alone and picked up a plate and chopsticks.

“**Ship Commander,**” said Grinshia. “There’s a fight.”

Sure enough, a commotion had broken out. One with multiple people on each side, at that. On one side: the crew of the *Flicaubh*.

“Where’s the other side from?”

“The *Lymcaubh*, sir.”

“I see,” he nodded. “My ship’s crew better win.”

“May you grant me permission to stop them?”

“No need to grant you permission. If you want to stop them, you can. I didn’t know arbitrating fights was a pastime of yours.” Sobash was exceedingly

pleased. He'd finally found a bad habit in her.

"It isn't a pastime, sir."

"Then what's the issue?" asked Sobash, with some disappointment.

"We need to stop them, because we're obligated to," she said impatiently.

"Why, though? The venue is quite large. If you don't want to participate in the fight, just keep your distance and no harm will come."

"That's not the reason I want to stop the fight, sir."

"Then why?"

"Our subordinates may get injured."

"But they're not armed. They won't be maiming each other fighting hand-to-hand, and we can give them any treatment they might need before departing."

"That may be, but..."

"But?"

"They may hold grudges."

"Which stopping them won't solve. Do you know what caused this?"

"It seems it started when a conversation was struck with a crewmember of the *Lymcaubh*."

"Why would that spark a fight?" he asked, tilting his head in puzzlement.

"I don't know the particulars, but it seems it's a lady who's popular on the *Lymcaubh*."

"And the crewmember of ours who talked to her is male?"

"Yes. Multiple males, actually."

"The picture is getting clearer by the second," he said, observing the fight for the time being. "Low-gravity fistfights... how clumsy. How unsightly."

"Of course they're not fighting on the level of **Airship Branch NCCs**, sir."

"Even for **Mechanics Branchers**, they're pretty bad fighters. It's settled — I'm giving them training to do later. Fortunately we still have time."

Although rare, there were times starship crews had to emulate *bausnall Üacér* (Airship Branch soldiers) and serve as land war troops. For that reason, the **Airship Branch** wasn't the only division whose soldiers received such training. The **soldiers** of the **Star Forces**, too, were expected to master base-level close quarters combat skills.

As more and more joined, the fight gradually grew in scope. The mobile tables surrounded the scufflers, in an attempt to contain any damage. One of the crewmembers called over a mobile table, which, like all machines made to serve humanity, sadly couldn't disobey.

Several hands reached for the plates on the table, and much of that food soon found itself flying through the air. One plate even made its way all the way over to Sobash. It was a low-gravity environment, so projectiles soared long and far. However, since the Abh were furnished with *frocragh*, none of those culinary missiles hit them.

But they couldn't afford to do anything more; they were all still eating, after all. Before Sobash's very eyes, a plate was sticking out of a beautiful platter of *apyyrrirh* (roast meats).

"You're still not going to stop them?" he asked Grinshia, who was still by his side.

"No, I will. No matter what you say, **Ship Commander**, I cannot let my subordinates get injured over a farce like this."

"Can I come with you?"

"For what, sir?"

"To arbitrate, of course. Looks fun."

He didn't know how she took that sentence, but in any event, she turned on her heels without a word and strode toward the cyclone of fists and fury.

But ultimately, she had no time to shine.

"ENOUGH!" Atosryua scolded.

That instant, the brawling **NCCs** froze in their tracks.

"I thought I told you playing with your food is off limits."

“We aren’t ‘playing’!” said one stupendously courageous NCC. “We’re in the right!”

“So are you saying you’ve weaponized the food?” she said, glaring at him. “You do know how friendly-fire fights with *weapons* are punished under military regulations, do you not? And that food was provided for you by the **Star Forces**, of that there is no doubt.”

Even that brave man had no retort for that. If he was found to have brandished a weapon against a fellow soldier, then he’d be spending years brawling with mud and dirt on a freshly-terraformed **landworld**.

“Then it’s not a weapon? That’s good to hear. If I was forced to invite **guard NCCs** to this hall, I would be very disappointed. Now, back to the topic at hand: making your food into a plaything as opposed to a weapon is not a military violation, but do be careful. I’m sorry I’m pushing my pet peeve on you, but I have that right. If you doubt I’ll do anything about it, I suggest you press your luck. If you play with your food, I will hold you in insubordination. Hey, you, do you mean to break another of my rules?” she said, spotting some of them saluting stiff as boards with her eagle eyes. “You understand, I trust? Now then, you may continue.”

Not a one of them resumed fighting. In fact, they may have been searching for a pretext to stop.

“No one feels like it anymore? Well, I won’t *order* you to keep at it. It wasn’t very entertaining as far as fights go. Let’s just say I’m glad none of you are **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** people yet. I’d hate to have to enter a brawl this limp into the records of our **squadron** as its first-ever throwdown. Don’t forget what I said the next time this happens, got it?”

After that, a peaceful, relaxed air wafted over the venue.

Sobash stared as Grinshia walked away from him toward their subordinates in large strides. He could practically see the anger rising from her back like a shimmering heat haze. He didn’t know whether she was angry at their men for having started that stupid fight, or at the **Commandant** for stealing her thunder. Either way, she pushed into the throng and began counting the injured with remarkable self-control. Thankfully, the fighting hadn’t been that serious, and

no one from either ship needed treatment.

Sobash then noticed Ecryua was by herself, standing still.

“What happened to the guy from before?” asked Sobash.

Ecryua cocked her head. *What guy from before?*

“The **Linewing** that you were talking to a little while ago.”

“Oh, him. I wasn’t talking. He was talking.”

“So, what happened?” He knew it wasn’t becoming to pry, but he found it hard to bottle up the need to know how Ecryua had handled him.

“He went over there.”

Poor guy, he thought.

That was when his *frocragh* picked up on somebody approaching them.

When he turned to look, there was Atosryua, cup in hand. “Great timing. I’ve been meaning to talk to you guys,” she said.

“With us, the former crew of the *Basrogrh*?”

“Right,” Atosryua nodded. “You’re **Vanguard** Ecryua, if I recall?”

“That’s me.”

“How about a drink?” Atosryua snapped her fingers, and a mobile table with cups shifted over.

Sobash took a glass of distilled apple cider, and watched as Ecryua chose a loudly-colored mixed drink. “Might you be telling us that it was no coincidence we became your subordinates, **Commandant**?”

“For starters. And at the same time, you’ll come to know how we’ll probably be in each other’s company for a long time.”

“I did entertain the notion, ma’am, but...”

“You were probably right to do so; that said, I hope and expect that train of thought to have veered from the beaten path. That way, it’ll serve as a topic of conversation down the road.”

“I’m afraid I’m not imaginative enough to meet those expectations, ma’am,”

Sobash smiled wryly.

“That’s a pity. Oh well, let me in on your thought process anyway.”

“I surmised **Her Highness the Royal Princess** had something to do with it.”

“You’re on the money so far. And if you’d been off the mark from the first sentence, I’d have been disappointed, no matter how entertainingly wildly you’d swerved. In fact, I’d feel like reconsidering how long we’d last in each other’s company. Now, how exactly do you think she was involved?”

“*Fiac Lartnér* is currently taking a break, but she’ll be returning to the **Star Forces** eventually. She is an Abliar, after all. Those born in the Abliar Clan can’t keep away from an active battlefield for too long. And would it not be our duty, then, to provide her with a place to return to?”

“You could put it that way,” she nodded lightly. “Though I wouldn’t use that phrasing.”

“How would you put it, ma’am?”

“We’re her ‘chosen.’”

“Favoritism?” said Ecryua, with Ecryua-like brevity.

“Now that’s straightforward,” said Atosryua with admiration. “That’s right.”

“So we’re being treated with undue favoritism?”

“No, *Fiac Lartnér* is.”

“I see.” Sobash was beginning to understand now. The Imperial Family was forced to vie for the throne. Each individual born with royal blood was so obligated. And what the **Empire** sought most in an **emperor** was an aptitude for military leadership. As such, young Abliars competed with each other for the path to the throne through **Star Forces** positions. Whichever Abliar in a given generation made it to the **rank** of **Imperial Admiral** first would be crowned the next **Emperor**. The Imperial Family and its members were demanded, during the course of this generational competition, to burnish their skills as commanders while also eventually selecting a top-caliber commander-general. The Empire was too vast to be led by a single brilliant **commodore**. Instead, the Emperor put many brilliant commodores to full use.

Apparently, she'd been chosen as a candidate for the role of brilliant commodore. "An honor," said Sobash.

"You're a good egg," said Atosryua, impressed.

"You don't think it's an honor, **Commandant**?"

"Well, a little," she acknowledged. "What do you think?" she asked Ecryua.

Ecryua scanned the venue. "Is **Captain** Abliar the only one being shown favoritism?"

"So you noticed," she replied, surprised. "While there aren't any **Imperials** in my **squadron**, all of the commanders have some connection to the Imperial Family."

"So it's not just a place for *Fïac Lartnér* specifically," said Sobash

"Right. No one knows yet how useful **trample-blitz squadrons** will be. If they end up being the principal force of the **Star Forces**, then Imperials will be stationed in them one after the other. Needless to say, by that time there will be more than one such squadron. At the moment, we're testing these so-called '**raid ships**.' And once the test phase is over..." Atosryua gulped down her glass. "We'll be the ones made into test tools, with the Imperials as examinees."

"Ah. That doesn't sound all that pleasant, certainly."

"In more gloomy news — well, gloomy for me — is that, going by her **rank**, **Her Highness** won't be made into a *raichaicec saubr* (squadron commandant) just like that. She'll probably be the **Ship Commander** of a newly made ship first. In other words..."

"In other words?"

"I'll be **Her Highness's** superior."

"You've been her superior before, ma'am. Surely you're used to it?"

"Being the superior of a candidate for **Emperor** is exhausting. I'm more than happy having it done just once in my life. I'd much rather be her subordinate," said Atosryua, brushing her hair up. "Of course, she'll be outstripping me in rank soon enough either way. And if she doesn't, then *Fïac Bærh Parhynr* was never going to become **Empress** anyway."

“I don’t think they promote Imperials any faster than they promote **gentry**, ma’am.”

“Oh no, the promotion criteria won’t change. Or at least, as far as I know, they won’t. But the Abliar Clan knows how to make excellent **soldiers**.”

“That may be, but you’re far from talentless yourself, **Commandant**,” said Sobash, and he meant it. There was no doubt in his mind that Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 would be an indispensable asset to the **Star Forces**. Too indispensable to be leaving in the hands of a third-rate commander, no matter her connection to the **Royal Princess**.

“Thank you.” She smiled — likely, the smile of a woman who knew he wasn’t just flattering her. “That said, if she’s only as competent as I am, she’d make for a feeble **empress**, especially since the **Empire’s** at war right now.”

“Even if *Fíac Lartnér* were to become heiress to the throne, she would accede only after the Crown Prince does.”

“So? Are you saying the war will be over by then?”

“I don’t think that idea’s too off the beaten path.”

“I guess it is possible. But the chances are high the war will still be on. Distressingly high, I’d say. I hate to think how I might not ever be able to live out my days in peace in my **capital manor** in *Lacmhacarh* before I die,” Atosryua lamented.

“There may come a time when having ever known an age of peace will be a huge privilege.”

“I’ve never really known one,” said Ecryua, taking the two aback. The way she saw it, the war had basically started by the time she’d reached adulthood. As of now, she had spent most of her life outside of wartime, but the day would come where she felt like the greater half of her life was caught up in unquiet strife. That was, if she lived to see that day.

“Well, **Vanguard** Ecryua,” said Atosryua, her smile not abating, “peace is a tedious affair. At the end of the day, we Abhs are a strange and incorrigible race given to war, and who yearn for the blood and plasma of the battlefield. Looking back, I feel like before the war, half of me was asleep. And now, I feel

like my whole body's not only awake, but fuller than ever. But you know, the tedium of peacetime can be fun in its own way. As long as neither of you falls in battle, you won't be dying of age by the time the war ends who knows how many decades or even dozens of decades from now. Once it's over, come hang out at my place. I'll teach you how to have fun during peacetime."

"Okay," said Ecryua, looking down and blushing.

"The future's going to be littered with children who have never known peace," said Atosryua as she scanned the venue. "If we survive, I'll hold a truly lavish banquet. I don't mind if I borrow enough to leave my descendants in debt for ten thousand years — it's going to be a fete to remember. And I'll be teaching the kids who have only ever known war how to indulge in the joys of boredom."

"That sounds like cause to get up in the morning," said Sobash.

"It is. And it'll be doubly important, given that if the **Empire** takes hold of victory, humanity will likely never wage war again."

"What about the Hania Federation?" Ecryua reminded her.

"The chances they stay independent and neutral until the end of the war are almost zero," Atosryua declared. "Either the Three Nations Alliance goes back to being the Four Nations Alliance, or they capitulate without fighting. Even if, hypothetically speaking, they do remain neutral, they could never hope to compete with the **Empire** after it's annexed the territories of the Three Nations. One way or the other, the Age of Boredom will come. And while I won't say it'll last until the end of the universe, we might just have to weather a hundred million years making some non-war-related fun for ourselves."

Chapter 4: *Batotdaco*th Delctur (Revisiting Delktu)

To sum up the **Vorlash Manor** in a word, it was a labyrinth.

Immediately after leaving the **spaceport**, the corridors seemed comparatively wide (though quite narrow for the main passages of a **manor** of this size), and soon enough, they were only barely spacious enough for a single **personal transporter**. There were periodic cavities along the walls, however — probably so that transporters could pass each other by.

That being said, there were no pedestrians walking the halls, let alone transporters. The place was as deserted as a ghost town.

A myriad of other corridors branched off from the corridor that the **transporter** (upon which Jint and the rest were riding) was whizzing down. Unbelievably, those passages were even narrower. Some of them were debatably not even really passages at all; it made much more sense to assume they were just gaps the manor's designers forgot to close up.

The path the transporter took wasn't straight, either. It often turned, and sometimes, not at right angles. Some of the bends in the road were at difficult-to-describe angles. That was to say nothing of all the slopes they'd be forced to go up and down, all the bridges suspended far above what seemed to be other passages, and all the open spaces they'd encounter. Those "open spaces" could not be called plazas or squares, since one got the distinct impression they existed for no other reason than because the architects were too lazy to fill them. One such space, however, was lined with the wreckage of whatever it was that had been placed there, so somebody somewhere must have thought the empty spaces an exercise in absurdity.

By all appearances, if that wreckage wasn't once part of some barber's chair or operating table, it could only have been a torture rack.

At this point, Jint felt giddy, like they might travel through a hole in the wall and end up passing through somebody's personal garden. Sure enough, they really did travel along a lane in a flower bed. There weren't any holes in the

wall, but there were places where the ceiling got so low they had to duck.

As he soaked in his surroundings with curiosity, Jint noticed the signage in the official language of the UH, Ricparl, that had been left here and there.

“Question,” Jint asked *Dereuzz*. “Was this place used by the enemy?”

“Yes,” he nodded, still facing forward. “It seems it was seized and used as a barracks.”

“So did they remodel the place to look like this?”

“Having never visited the Manor before the war, I’m afraid I can’t tell you for sure,” she replied politely. “I think it was probably like this from the beginning, though. If by ‘like this,’ you mean this disorderly. The clan prefers layouts they can get lost in. Maybe they suffer from agoraphobia.”

“I once visited the **capitol manor** of the **House of Elcash**,” said Lafier. “While I was very young and don’t remember much, I do seem to recall it being maze-like.”

“There you go. A layout like this could never have been dreamt of by the likes of the Three Nations Alliance,” said *Dereuzz* with pride.

Upon hearing the tone she’d taken, his read on her age grew slightly shakier. “This place would be a paradise for cats,” he commented. *Glad I didn’t bring Dyaho with us.* Usually, as long as Jint wasn’t taking him to the bathtub, Dyaho would stay docile in his arms, but if he ever caught sight of this labyrinth, the temptation would be too great. It’d definitely be a tall order to find him again, the transmitter in his collar notwithstanding.

It wasn’t as though Jint refrained from bringing a cat in anticipation of the Manor’s inner layout. He’d just thought it might take away from the majesty and dignity. At the moment, Dyaho was in his carrier alongside some furniture. Arrangements had been made for Dyaho to get taken to the living room; he’d probably already been whisked away from the *Bauchiruch* as they spoke.

After advancing a while, the ceiling turned transparent. Countless stars dotted the ebony of space above. Jint thought he’d gotten used to them not twinkling, but they did come across as lacking. *This must be the Manor’s top floor, the area farthest from the artificial gravity generator surface.*

“Please use this room,” said *Dereuzz*, stopping the **transporter** in one of the top floor’s chambers.

The ceiling was around a thousand *dagh* high, and the room was sixteen square *üésdagh*. At the center stood a small but well-manicured garden, and next to it, a pond in the shape of a gourd. Judging by the white vapor, it was water for bathing. On the opposite side of the bath-pond was a strewn carpet, a set of couches, and a table. That area could be thought of as the lounge. In addition, there were individual pieces of furniture placed here and there, as well as two extravagant beds (complete with canopies) set a considerable distance apart.

“Pretty open room,” said Jint, casting a sideways glance to see what Lafier thought.

The **Royal Princess** was expressionless, seeming neither particularly fond of it nor particularly displeased.

Jint gave the room another scan. It occurred to him that it didn’t fit with the rest of the Manor. If the Emyoor Clan were actually a bunch of agoraphobes, wouldn’t this room be their nightmare? Jint wasn’t an agoraphobe, and even he was having a bit of trouble coping.

“I thought that in this state, it would be easier to tell where everything is,” said *Dereuzz*. “Most guests seem to prefer it this way.” She worked her **wristgear**, and walls rose up from the floor. Once the walls had stopped rising (at around the 500 *dagh* mark), a maze very much to the Emyoor Clan’s liking had been created. “Now then, allow me to take my leave,” she said, fixing her eyes on them.

“Thank you very much,” Jint bowed.

“What’re you doing?” she whispered, pulling on a sleeve of his long robe. “Step off already.”

Jint realized he was still atop the **transporter**, and stepped off.

“Your luggage will be here shortly,” said *Dereuzz*. “Do you have any other questions in the meantime?”

“No questions, thanks for asking,” said Jint. It seemed their **wristgears** had

already taken in all the information that was necessary for living in the Manor, including the various call numbers to request services, the name registry of the main staff, and the guide map to the enormous labyrinth that the Emyoor Clan members, who evidently shared a penchant for causing headaches, had seen fit to erect. Naturally, the floor plan of this room could also be pulled up using their **wristgears**, along with info on how to raise and lower the partitions.

“Goodbye,” said *Dereuzz*, setting off on the **transporter**.

Thanks to the partitions, the area where the couches and the table were situated looked more like a proper lounge area. Surrounded on three sides by the walls, it looked out directly onto the garden. The bath-pond on the other side was also surrounded by walls, making it a bathhouse with privacy.

“How drab,” said Lafier.

“I’ll fix it.” Jint hooked up his **wristgear** into the **compucrystal net**, replacing the dull hue of the walls with some nice background video projections of a bird flying between picturesque clouds. He also sent some relaxing music to play at barely audible volume. “Like that?”

“Sure, it’s fine. It’ll do.”

“I thank you for your words of praise. Now then, I shall be setting back to work.”

“To do what?”

“A trifling matter, compared to carrying out your orders, *Fiac Lartnér*.”

Jint checked to see whether his **wristgear** could establish contact with the **landworld** below. Luckily, the Manor’s **compucrystal net** was one with Delktu’s own. That was a sign that the people of Delktu and the **liege** had been on friendly terms. In many **territory-nations**, due to mistrust between the **liege** and the **landworld administration**, the *Fapytécth* (Liege’s Manor) and the landworld operated using separate compucrystal networks.

The time had come for what Jint was really after. He searched for his closest friend from back when he’d lived in Delktu pretending to be just another immigrant. Que Durin.

Unfortunately, it looked like Delktu was practically swarming with people named Que Durin; 30,000 popped up in the listings.

“What do you feel like drinking?” asked Lafier.

“Ah, a cold **coffee**,” he replied half-heartedly.

Every **landworld citizen** in Vorlash had a “birth number.” As long as one had a person’s number down, they could be contacted no matter where they were. Unfortunately, Jint didn’t know his friend’s birth number. As such, he was forced to plug in as much of Durin’s information as he could remember. Age, birthplace, place of residence by the time Jint left Delktu... At last, he’d narrowed it down to one Que Durin. Just in case, he requested a photo.

That was him all right. The boy Jint had gotten to know through the minchiu team.

Meanwhile, a mobile table had reached him with the drink Lafier had ordered.

Jint took a sip. “Just to let you know, I’m gonna be speaking in a language that’s not Baronh,” he warned her.

“Okay,” she nodded.

The rest was easy. He rang him up for an audio-only call, and Durin picked up immediately.

“Is this Que Durin?” Jint asked nervously.

“Well, if that’s not a voice that stirs some memories,” said Durin. “Or I guess, it’s not so much your voice as it is your accent. I know a handful of offworlders, but you’re the only bumpkin I know who can make our language sound so unsophisticated. It’s like you encased your tongue in mud. Half-dry mud. It’s been a while, Lynn Jint.”

“Right back at you, Que Durin. And it’s been a while since I’ve spoken Delktunian, too.” Jint was relieved to learn his friend still remembered him.

“Come on, man, your Delktunian hasn’t changed since we last saw each other. It still sounds like you’re chewing hay dipped in mud, just like old times.” They’d last seen each other on the day Jint left Delktu. “So then, Your Excellency the

Noble Prince of the Countdom of Hyde, have you decided to ditch the aristocracy?”

“Not yet. I’m actually a count now.”

“Congratulations... or maybe not. Did something happen to your dad?”

“Well, yeah, but it’s no big whoop,” he said, keen to keep the conversation elsewhere. “How’s business doing on your end?”

“Don’t have a business yet. And to think, you got promoted to a count while my uncle still never misses a beat pushing me around.”

“That’s a shame. I mean, about your business, not about your uncle.” Jint licked his lips. Now was the time. “So hey, I have a job proposition for you.”

“A job proposition?” he asked, with a slight air of innocence.

“You know exactly what I mean,” Jint smiled wryly.

“Course I do. I just couldn’t believe *you’d* be hiring *me*.”

“Is it that crazy?”

“You bet it is. What are the **servant vassals** of a pathetic excuse for a **noble** like you to do? Unless you make me a cabinet minister or something. Then I might consider it!”

“I can make you a cabinet minister, if that’s what you want.” Jint hadn’t originally planned to create such a high-flown position, but depending on Durin’s attitude, he didn’t mind founding the position just to pester him.

“Wait, hold on,” said Durin, genuinely disconcerted. “If you do that, won’t the vassals that are already working there go in a tizzy? Or is that level of self-indulgence just a fart in the wind to a big fancy noble? Maybe you’d be okay with that, but I’ll pass. There’s more mental fatigue in it for me than glory; I already know my head would explode from work I haven’t the first idea about.”

“You already know? From experience?”

“I told you, I’m working under my uncle. He treasures his relatives, but he has a funny way of showing it. It’s nice that he gives us jobs, but he never tells us stuff we should know in advance, and then he gets cross if we don’t deliver.”

“There’s nothing to worry about—”

“Oh, I know. I don’t want to be a cabinet minister, but I’ll gladly take the job of harem master. I dunno how many concubines you’ve got now, but feel free to leave them all to me. You may get a bunch of newborn princes and princesses that look kinda like me, but I can assure you that’ll be one giant coincidence, so don’t think about it too hard.”

“You’re still blessed with a vivid imagination, I see.”

“No dice?”

“I haven’t got any concubines to begin with.”

“Not a single one? For real?” said Durin, shocked. “Then what the hell did you become an imperial noble for!?”

“Not sure, but not to surround myself with a bevy of harem girls.”

“Your values leave me scandalized and appalled.”

“I can live with that. While we’re on the subject, precious few imperial nobles have harems. In fact, as far as I know, there was only ever one, but he’s dead now. And he’s been succeeded by a woman.”

“Then I’ll have to turn down your offer. I’ve no ears to lend a **noble** who hasn’t even got a harem.”

“C’mon, don’t say that.” But he left it at that, since he knew Durin was just joking. After a moment’s thought, Jint added: “Before long, I’ll be creating a harem that’ll knock your socks off.”

Despite himself, Jint checked Lafier’s expression. The **Royal Princess** was drinking her **peach juice**, and stared at him blankly before flashing a meaningful smile and activating her **wristgear**.

“Well, might as well hear you out,” said Durin. “But only face-to-face. We’re talking the rest of my life here.”

“That was my intention from the start. I’m in the **Vorlash Manor** right now. Could you possibly make it up here? We’d be covering your flight, obviously.”

“Can’t. My mom’s last will says I’m not allowed on spaceships.”

“Wait, your mother passed away?” Jint had made her acquaintance. He’d occasionally visit Durin’s place after minchiu practice, and every time he did, he’d avail himself of her home cooking.

“Nah, she’s doing good.”

“Dude, don’t spook me like that.”

“Why so spooked? My mom’s fit as a fiddle. My family line’s always been super healthy, on both my mother’s and my father’s sides. That’s exactly why I’ve got to follow her last will and testament.”

“Uhh, sorry, I don’t really get what you’re trying to tell me...”

“What don’t you get? Following the will of somebody who’s still alive? I don’t think that warrants explaining. Who wants to rigorously follow the last wills of *dead* people?”

“You know what, never mind that,” said Jint, realizing he’d been about to tread into unproductive waters. “Let’s meet up. I don’t mind if we leave out work talk, either.”

“I’m totally down. Just don’t make me have to go up there.”

“All right, you got it. I’ll head down there.”

“How about we meet at the halfway point? You know, the spaceport?”

“No need to worry on my behalf. It doesn’t make much difference whether I stop at the spaceport or go straight to your house.”

“That right? I hate to impose, so I owe ya one. Come dressed in Delktunian clothes, though. The old bat next door’s got a weak heart. I’ve told her again and again to just get it replaced already, but she really hates hospitals. Startling her with your wardrobe is a recipe for disaster.”

“A rotter like you, worrying about that?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve gone and forgotten the basic Delktunian rules of life? I don’t know how the Abh do it, but down here, whenever there’s a funeral, the whole neighborhood’s gotta pitch in. And let me tell you, I’m busy at the best of times. I refuse to get dragged into community service, you hear me?”

“Now there’s the Durin I know.”

“I just knew we could come to understand each other.”

“All right, I’ll send you the details and the meetup time in a bit.”

“Don’t bring a whole bunch of servants with you. My mom’s healthy as an ox, and in her will she states we’ve always got to feed our guests before letting them go home. And our dining room only fits five.”

“All right, all right. I won’t go overboard, I promise.”

“Catch you later then. I look forward to the day we can discuss plans for our Harem Construction Project.”

With that, the line dropped. Jint hoped against hope the **Royal Princess** didn’t catch Durin’s parting words.

“Right, so, I’ll be stepping out to meet an old friend of mine,” he explained hurriedly.

“Okay. I’ll pilot,” said Lafier.

“Huh?”

“If you’re headed to the **Spaceport**, then we ought to borrow a **smallcraft** or some other ship, which I’ll pilot for you,” she said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Loath as I am to trouble you so, *Fiac Lartnér*, I thank you.” Using his **wristgear**, Jint pulled up info on how to access the **landworld** below. “Looks like there are regular flights, though. An **intrasystem ship** makes a trip between the **Manor** and the **Spaceport** once every day, so I’ll just take that ship.”

“Would my company be a nuisance?”

“Don’t be silly. If you want to come with, I’d be delighted.”

That was no lie, either. Jint had always wanted to show her the **landworld**. She’s only ever touched down onto one twice, and both times it was a world Jint was unfamiliar with, so he hadn’t been able to play the guide. Not that they’d had any time for leisurely sightseeing anyway.

Delktu, on the other hand, was his second home. He wanted to see the

scenery she could never witness in the Abh world reflected in those jet-black eyes of hers. Then maybe, just maybe, she'd grow to understand him on a deeper level. Jint had gotten a good taste of the wonders of the Abh world. Now, it was Lafier's turn to marvel at the natural features of a landworld.

Sadly, Yestesh's warning was stuck in his head. And even if Yestesh hadn't warned him, deep down he knew that bringing a **royal princess** down to the surface was out of the question. He had to ensure her safety, and he had to be *subtle* about it.

"Then it's settled," said Lafier, with no way of knowing Jint's inner conflict.

How did she get this unconcerned about her own safety, anyway?

"Right. But you did listen in on our conversation, didn't you?"

"Yep. Starting partway through."

"Then you know we're going to have to dress you in Delktunian fashion."

"What's Delktunian fashion like?" she asked, furrowing her brow. She was no doubt recalling the garb she'd been forced to wear in Clasbure.

"It's not that different from Abh wear," Jint explained. "Only, it's separated into top and bottom halves. Also, Delktunians bare their legs from the knees down."

"Bare legs?" Lafier's brow furrowed even more.

"There's diversity in the colors and patterns, and there's strictly male and female clothes. It's somewhat hard for outsiders to grasp, but I think that'll resolve itself, since trends aren't that big of a thing in Delktu. It's very conservative. The fashion probably hasn't changed much from when I lived there."

"They really don't wear anything from the knees down?"

"Yeah. Well, apart from shoes and socks. Those they wear."

"I can't believe they think nothing of that."

The Abh didn't typically expose any skin apart from the hands and head, even during childhood. In a sense, they might just be the most modest race in the

galaxy.

“It’s not embarrassing for them. Everybody dresses the same way. Besides, it fits the climate. I happen to like it a lot. Oh, shoot, we need to dye your hair, too.”

Lafier moaned.

“Can’t forget Que Durin’s mom’s food, either.”

“Is it hard to stomach?”

“Not to me. I’m looking forward to it. But it is Delktu cuisine. They use dairy products and spices galore. I don’t think it’d suit your palate.”

“I see...” Lafier’s tone grew uncharacteristically deflated.

“The whole planet’s under the impression that the more butter they use, the better. And being guests from far away, and Durin’s mother knows her manners, you can be sure she’ll whip up for you what, in her eyes, is the perfect meal. Oh, maybe you should try some Billis scallions while we’re down there.”

“Billis scallions?”

“They’re an endemic vegetable, and a Delktu specialty. It can be nice if you have some as a little spice, but for whatever reason Delktunians use the things like they were just tomatoes or something. If I recall correctly, the first time I tried Billis scallion broth, my mouth was burning for three whole days. And trust me, I drank plenty of water.”

“And I’d have to eat some?”

“If you visit Que Durin’s house, yeah.”

“You don’t actually want to take me, do you.”

“I’m just giving you fair warning.”

“You lie,” she declared.

“I swear it’s all true. You can see for yourself. Just search for info on Delktunian fashion and cuisine.”

“I’m not doubting you about that.”

“Then what...?”

“I don’t care for that *paternalistic* expression on your face.”

“I’m making a paternalistic expression?” Jint stroked his face.

“Absolutely.”

“Look, I’m worried for your safety, all right?” he confessed. “This **landworld** was under enemy control until very recently. If I take **Her Highness the Royal Princess** with me to a place like that without any guards, **His Highness the King of Clybh**’s going to wring my neck.”

“My father will do no such thing,” she snapped, glaring.

“Fine, maybe not, but that’s just a figure of speech... You get what I’m trying to say...”

Lafier rose to her feet and drew closer.

Jint, too, got to his feet. “I have the right to worry about you, don’t I?”

“You do,” said Lafier. “So don’t hide the truth. I’m happy you’re concerned for me, but I don’t like being deceived — even if it comes from a good place.”

“I’m sorry. I just didn’t want to offend you...”

“I’m more offended that you thought that puerile lie would be enough to fool me.”

“Guess you’ve got me there,” he said, scratching his cheek.

“Besides, I’m concerned for you, too.”

“And that makes me happy. But in my case, you really needn’t be.”

“Really? Even after you’ve been abducted and imprisoned not once, but twice?”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten. But it’ll be all right. This isn’t Lohbnahss II, and it’s not the **Febdash Barony**, either. This is the planet I grew up on. My home. I wasn’t born here, but it’s my home, nonetheless. I’ve even got a friend here. To tell you the truth, I’d love to show you around my home planet. But...”

“Okay. I believe you.”

“Thank you. I’ll be going it alone this time, but once we know for sure it’s safe, we’ll go together. And not just to Delktu. To *Martinh*, too.”

“Sure.” Lafier nodded.

“I’m glad you understand,” he said, clasping her shoulders. “I apologize for trying to trick you. I just want to get a lay of the situation for the time being.”

“You’d best come back in one piece.”

“I will. Promise.”

“By the way, Jint,” Lafier whispered sweetly in his ear.

“What?” he said, with a dreamy look on his face.

“I want to hear about that little ‘Harem Construction Project’ of you two. Best speak the whole truth and nothing but the truth; I don’t like being deceived.”

Mei City, the capital of Delktu, had a population of only about one million, yet its urban area was vast. Delktunians didn’t like multi-family dwellings, perhaps due to some universally shared psychological trauma.

Endless lines of two-story buildings stood along the roads that stretched like a giant mesh. There was no city center. It was the same scenery at any given point. There were government offices, given that it was the capital, but they were to be found not in one area, but sprinkled all over the map. Not only that, but even the government buildings were only two stories tall (albeit bigger than most general residences).

Jint’s self-driving **hovercar** stopped in front of a certain house. The second he stepped out, the distinctive aroma of Delktu cuisine hit his nostrils.

“Hey! Lynn Jint!” shouted Durin, rushing out to meet him.

“Long time no see,” said Jint, raising a hand in greeting.

“Never thought I’d ever see you with your feet on the surface again,” said Durin, slapping him on the shoulder before peering behind him. “Where are your vassals?”

“You’re the one who told me not to go overboard.”

“Yeah, but I don’t remember telling you to come by yourself, either. You may wanna brace yourself, ’cause I told my mom a bunch of guests were coming, so she prepared heaps.”

“Yeesh, my bad.”

“Don’t even worry, man. Her cooking can feed an army, and the more she makes, the better it is. And I’ll be calling over some old pals to join us later. They’re our buddies from the West Bookick Minchiu Team.” Durin’s eyes took on a serious sheen. “Some of the gang want to apologize to you for how they treated you.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for, really,” said Jint, shaking his head. “I appreciate the sentiment, though. I want to see the gang, too.”

“Sweet. But first, we gotta talk business, the two of us.”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s get the boring business stuff over with first. Not least ’cause... well, you know how it is. Once everybody’s here, talking business will get downright impossible.”

“And I take it there’ll be alcohol, which won’t exactly help.”

“You crazy? Of *course* there’ll be alcohol. You remember Meerno Distle? Our old shortstop pitcher. Back when you were around, he used to be our cute little short pint, but now he’s got quite the frame, and he’s a bottomless pit for booze. Once I let him stay over for three days, and the crime prevention police came a-knocking for him. He’d bought so much hooch they suspected him of running an unlicensed bar.”

“That’s something else.”

“Oh, right, business before pleasure. Forgot.” Durin led Jint by the shoulder to the threshold. “C’mon, let’s go inside. Sorry it ain’t a mansion fit for a noble, but it’ll have to do.”

After briefly greeting Durin’s mother, Jint settled into the drawing room, where four lounge chairs were situated in the Delktunian style. Jint was seated in one of them.

“What’re you putting on airs for?” said Durin, who was sprawled on his chair, eyes reproving. “This is Delktu. Do as we do. You can play at being an Abh noble if you like, but I don’t know the etiquette for an Abh noble. All I know is how to receive a friend, the Delktu way.

“If you’re sure it’s all right...” Jint smiled, and lay himself down.

Delktunians only ever sat up straight on a lounge chair when there were more people than seats.

“So, are you serious about hiring me?”

“Hire, sure, but at the end of the day I’d just like you to help me out.”

“Is the pay worth the effort?”

“One hundred percent.”

“Then I’ll hear you out.”

“You asked where my servants are, earlier.”

“Right. Should I not have asked?”

“No, that’s not it... It’s just... I don’t have any.”

“I know that. I’ve got eyes, you know. Unless you created invisible people with Abh genetic modification?”

“I think that would be beyond us. Not to mention pointless.”

“Oh?” said Durin, with a perverted smile. “I can think of a use or two.”

“In any case, what I’m trying to tell you is that I haven’t brought any vassals with me. As in, to this landworld — or to the Vorlash Countdom as a whole. I do have some vassals to my name, but only a few. Right now they’re recruiting at the imperial capital, so I’ll be gaining a few more soon. For the time being, we mainly need engineers. As for administrative vassals, I haven’t got a single one, strictly speaking.”

“I figured as much.”

“You knew?” said Jint, blinking.

“Well, to be honest, the possibility just crossed my mind. Why’d you hide it,

though?”

“I never *hid* it. I was going to tell you, but you changed the subject,” Jint pointed out. “Plus, I just thought there was no need to go into it beforehand, since we were gonna be meeting in private anyway.”

“So in other words, all you’ve got for vassals right now is engineers.”

“Yep.”

“That’s funny. When I think ‘vassals,’ I think number crunchers and negotiators who go over all the fiddly little things.”

“Well, I want you assisting me with the paper pushing, or maybe external affairs. Something like that.”

“Long story short, you’re telling me to become your one and only vassal, huh.”

“Nah, man, I’m thinking about how to assemble more. Actually, that’s another area I want you to help me out with.”

“Wait a sec. You’re forgetting something important,” said Durin. “I don’t speak Baronh. Unlike you, I never did any language ed.”

“Oh, that’s not a big deal. You can just use a translation device, in the short term. And if you cram for a month or so, you can speak on my level,” Jint assured him. Stemming from the **Empire**’s tradition of taking in **landworlders** as **NCCs** or **servant vassals**, Baronh language education methods had reached an extremely high level of sophistication.

“You say that, but ain’t Baronh way harder than Ricparl?”

“You know Ricparl?” said Jint, surprised. Then he remembered that the planet had been under UH control until quite recently. “Probably should’ve guessed, huh.”

“I know it, but that doesn’t mean I can speak it. They told us we were in an ‘interim grace period’ or whatever, so we were allowed to speak Delktunian until the last person who couldn’t speak Ricparl kicked the bucket. So I didn’t go crazy mastering the language. I dipped my toe and tried speaking a little, but it was bad. It’s just not my forte. To me, anybody who can speak two or three

languages is practically a sorcerer. Can you blame me? We don't learn those languages in school."

"Really?"

"What, you didn't know? We figure one language, our own, is more than enough. The weirdos who wanna learn a different language go to specialized schools. Like the Abh school you went to."

"I see. But I'm telling you, it's easy. You've just gotta give it a shot."

"I'm sure that's how it looks to you. But I just can't work it out. Delktunian's got hold of my tongue, and it's not letting go. And my ears can't discern anything besides Delktunian. I learned that when I tried comprehending Ricparl."

"But you only dipped your toe. You didn't try learning it for real."

"Argh!" Durin tore at his hair. "You could stand to let me flex a little."

"I've never seen you do anything but."

"That right? Well, take a good look, because I'm about to lose face for you. I *did* try learning it for real. I didn't actually just dip a toe. I mean, who wants to be a second-class citizen?"

"'Second-class citizen'? What's that?"

"They don't teach kids in Abh school? In the UH, there's 'star system citizens' and 'UH citizens.'"

"Oh, that I know," nodded Jint. The **starpilots** of the **Star Forces** were briefed on the enemy's political systems. In a world where even information could only be transported through **planar space**, it was difficult to contact people outside one's star system. In vast nations like the **Abh Empire** and the United Humankind, a simple letter exchange could often take months. Consequently, residents of the same superstate but of different star systems seldom felt a sense of unity. The average person could only feel a genuine sense of solidarity with the other residents of their own system. And for a superstate like the UH, the impossibility of promoting a sense of belonging to the interstellar power ruling over them was a problem.

The Abh had no desire or political will whatsoever to conquer this “problem” on their end. In fact, they didn’t consider it a problem to begin with. The Empire didn’t want or expect the residents of its **landworlds** (i.e., **landworld citizens**) to be conscious of their status as imperial subjects, let alone feel any affection or loyalty toward their rarefied rulers.

The UH, on the other hand, pushed its constituent star systems to see themselves as members of the interstellar union. In order to foster a sense of unity, they advocated for interpersonal exchange, and sought to homogenize the planets’ respective cultures (starting with the language). Yet the reality was far from that ideal. The UH had incorporated formerly independent systems, and the attempts at homogenization were insufficient. Furthermore, even though travel to other star systems was encouraged, ordinary people could only manage interstellar travel once in a lifetime, if that, thanks to cost and time restraints. As such, even in the UH, the vast majority of people couldn’t regard the politics of the superstate as their concern. That was why the UH restricted citizen’s qualifications to participate in politics. Only “UH citizens” were granted the right to vote and run for office, among various other privileges. Star system citizens could only participate in star system politics.

Given all that, it made sense that Durin viewed star system citizens as second-class citizens. Jint didn’t know the exact requirements for becoming a UH citizen, but speaking Ricparl had to be a minimum requirement.

“For argument’s sake, let’s assume I didn’t put in enough effort.”

“Right,” Jint concurred ardently.

“Even if I did put in the effort, and learned Baronh, what would I get out of it? The credentials to work for you? Compared to the perks of being a UH citizen, that’s a hard sell.”

“I mean, you get to work for me, yeah. But also, don’t you want to see the world outside Delktu at least once in your life?”

“Sure, a little. But I think there’s a bunch of places of interest in Delktu I haven’t seen yet.”

“Que Durin... You really don’t feel like working alongside me, huh.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to work alongside you. The only problem is the workplace. If you stay here, on Delktu, I’ll work with you any day of the week. Actually, I’m thinking the time is ripe to strike it out on my own soon. I plan to leave my uncle’s company before long. And I’d be ecstatic if you could be my business associate.”

“Hold your horses, my friend. I don’t even know what you’re doing, or what you’re planning to do once you’re on your own.”

“I could say the same. ‘Servant vassal’ is so vague; I’d have no idea what I’m doing.”

“It’s the same as running a company. I think I can secure the engineers. All you’d need to do for me is bring together the people who handle the deskwork and operations.”

“Then it really is the same work either way.” Then, a devilish curl of the lips. “The only difference is who’s on top. But I don’t mean to place myself above you, necessarily. I’d just have you learn the ropes under me on a temporary basis. Or you can just be my equal partner on paper. Oh, and there is one other difference: how much work it’d take to get up to speed. For a dumb-ass outsider, you do know a little about Delktu, whereas in my case, I’m the wisest man in the land, but I don’t know the first thing about the Abh world. Learning the ropes for me would take about as much work as adding the salt to all the seas.”

Though reluctantly, Jint nodded. After all, Jint himself had next to no experience with any of this administrative stuff. He had a vague understanding, but had no inkling of the finer points of magistrates’ work. That was the reason he was on the hunt for people who had technical know-how, if not experience.

“Besides, I haven’t got any intention of working in the Abh world,” said Durin.

“Then why didn’t you tell me that from the jump?” said Jint, raising an eyebrow.

“I hadn’t martialed my thoughts yet. But now I have.”

“You could’ve dropped me a line after you’d decided.”

“But I really did want to see ya, man. If I’d turned you down before, you

wouldn't have come, right?"

"Not at all. Work is work. I told you I wanted to see you just to hang out, too, didn't I?"

"Damn. And here I was pleased with myself, thinking I'd sent you on a fool's errand."

"Poor baby."

"In any case, if we're gonna be building a lovebirds' life together, you've gotta come here."

"A lovebirds' life with you is not on my mind," said Jint.

"I figured," said Durin, nodding lightly. "A man's gotta be proud of his work. All right, enough talk of work. Let's call the boys over."

"Sure thing, but first, let me hear why you don't want to become an imperial citizen?"

"I mean..." Durin faltered with uncharacteristic hesitation. "Have you got Abh friends?"

"Well, a few," he said, putting it mildly.

"Then promise you won't get mad at what I've got to say, all right?"

"As if you care whether or not you've pissed me off."

"You blockhead, we're having a party later. And you're our guest. If this were some snot-nosed kid's birthday party, the kids might be able to make merry even if the kid being celebrated got all sulky. But we ain't kids anymore. How're we supposed to let loose if the guest of honor's off fuming in the corner?"

"Okay, okay. I promise that even if I get upset, I'll just take it out on the cats after getting back. I'm going to be smiling like an idiot all party long, even if somebody sticks a finger in my food."

"Then I'd feel sorry for your cats."

"Don't worry, they're **Abh cats**."

"Oh, guess it's fine, then. They must be odious and revolting."

“Wanna see?” Using his **wristgear**, Jint projected a photo of Sercruca and her litter, right under Durin’s nose.

Durin instantly amended his previous statement. “Cute! You’re gonna take your anger out on *them*? After all these years, and right this second I learn you’re a complete brute bastard.”

“You’ve got it all wrong. I’d actually be taking it out on another cat that’s not as cute.”

“I don’t really think cuteness is the issue...” Durin took in the photo with his eyes, thoroughly enchanted.

When Jint switched out the photo for a video with audio, however, his friend’s expression reverted to normal.

“Whaddya think? If you work with me, you get to spend your days with these little guys.”

“It’s a mighty tempting offer... but I’m a man of my convictions.”

“Shame,” said Jint, switching off the projection.

“Wait, you can stand to show me a little more,” Durin objected.

“Say, why don’t you take one of the kittens off my hands?” said Jint.

“Dude, for real? I can?”

“Yeah. Not immediately, mind you. They’re still too small to want to leave their mother’s side, and ripping one away would put it in danger. But in around two months’ time, they’ll start being more independent, and once that happens, I’d be grateful if you could look after one of them.”

“You’re not trying to bribe me, I trust.”

“Nope. Like I said, taking one off my hands would help me out. Although I’m not above bribing you with a kitten if it’s that valuable.”

“I may be an idiot, but I’m not enough of an idiot to be deciding where the rest of my life takes me based on a kitten.”

“And what a boring, kitten-less life you’ll lead, Durin.”

“Just leave me and my life be, would you? So, are you really giving me a

kitten?”

“I certainly don’t mind. Which do you want?”

“Wait, wait. First I need you to tell me which are male.”

After a while, Durin selected a *ctilüarh* (striped-fur) that looked just like Dyaho.

“I’d have liked to bring him to you in person, but I doubt I’ll have time. I’ll send him over,” Jint promised.

“Thanks.”

“So why don’t you like Abhs, anyway? Especially when they raise such cute cats?”

“Their cats are cute, I’ll give you that. But I’m sorry to say Abhs have gotten really creepy to me.”

“I didn’t know that about you.” This wasn’t the first time he’d met somebody with prejudice against the Abh, so he was hardly shocked to his core. But there was something about the way Durin put it that drew his notice. After a moment’s thought, he realized: “They’ve *gotten* creepy? As in, they weren’t before?”

“Yeah. Used to be I was pretty much uninterested, in fact.”

“I see. So the enemy’s propaganda has had results.”

“Hey, man, it’s not like I’ve been brainwashed.”

“I don’t think you’ve been ‘brainwashed.’ But I will say it’s a little weird. You’ve never met an Abh before, right? So why do they feel creepy to you?” he asked, deciding not to go into the fact that he was technically an “Abh” now, too. After all, Durin clearly meant Abhs-by-birth. Bringing that up would just muddy the waters of their conversation.

“Lately, I’ve been taking an interest in a little thing called history.”

“I’m surprised. I thought for sure that for a meathead like you, even the contents of your skull were pure muscle.”

“You’re not wrong. But ever since I saw you off at the spaceport that day, the

clump of muscle in my skull started thinking about a bunch of stuff. You and me, we're carrying completely different histories on our shoulders. But if you rewind far enough, those histories converge. When I realized that, I got a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I started hitting books on the history of Earth. My mom was so shocked she nearly sent me to the hospital; I hate hospital beds, so I kept saying no. But who cares about that — the point is, the more I learned, the stranger it all seemed. Then your enemies came along. They were a depressing lot, and they claimed to be our dear friends even though they came without an invitation, but they did do one good thing for me. They cleared up something that had been gnawing at me. And it's not like I asked them about it; they told us."

"What was gnawing at you?"

"The fact that the Abh are so damned friendly with each other."

"Uh, duh. They're of the same race."

"People can be of the same race and still hate each other. Hell, sometimes people in the same family hate each other. My father got killed by his own brother."

"I didn't know that..."

"It happened before you immigrated. Everybody who's known me for longer knows, but they don't talk about it out of consideration. So the oldest brother killed the second oldest, and the third oldest, my uncle, is working me, the son of the one who got killed, like a horse. Obviously I despise my piece of shit uncle for killing my dad. A life sentence is way too good for him. I'd love to rip him to pieces with my bare hands. I hate my murderer uncle with every fiber of my being. But that's not the point. We're talking about the Abh."

"It's not that rare for an Abh to hate a blood relative, either, you know."

"Really? But then, where are the civil wars? The feuds in the imperial court? The only revolts that ever happen in the Empire are the ones Landers stoke from time to time. Abh history is so *dull*. It's like dinner without the spice."

"I guess you've got a point," said Jint, as conversation filler.

"Listen, my dad lost his life over who would take over the tiny-ass company.

The company whose only saving grace is that it's got a long history. But there are people out there who'd kill the little brother they grew up with just to get their hands on a company like that. Then you've got an entire *empire*. If you look through history, it's full of the kind of gruesome stories that are my cup of tea. Think about all the people who, to grab hold of a crown, killed their fathers, their siblings, even their kids. I think there was even this one awesome empire that had each possible heir to the throne slaughter each other for the right. And the new emperor's first task was to murder the little brothers and nephews who'd been too young to participate in the killing game. What I'm trying to say is, all the history surrounding thrones and crowns reeks of blood. Sometimes, they'll throw in a story of imprisonment or exile instead of murder, but I'm sure that's just out of regard for the reader. You've gotta punctuate all the bloodshed with some heart-warming fluff once in a while. Mind you, I dunno who 'they' are. In any case, that's the human condition. But the Abh, they never kick down their fellow Abhs in a bid for the throne. And that's unheard of in history; I've certainly never heard of such a thing. At first, I thought they were just really good at hiding it."

"In other words, since there's no conspiring for the throne, the Abh are creepy to you?" asked Jint, cocking his head. "I'd say that's just because the imperial system's that refined."

"That ain't it. The Abh, they're *born* that way. It's in their blood," spat Durin. "You know that, don't you?"

"No, what are you talking about?"

"They don't oppose their social superiors because they *can't*, on an instinctual level. That's why they're so powerful as a unit."

The Abhs that Jint had come to know came to mind. *No way that's true*. "You've got it all wrong. There's a ton of Abhs who make it a life mission to make fun of their social superiors. I learned during history class that an emperor way back when made it illegal to disrespect the crown. But if they actually enforced it, then half of all **gentry** and almost every **noble** would get arrested, so everyone pretends it's not on the books."

"Lynn Jint, buddy, making fun of someone is a sign of affection. Do you think I

tease you in order to hurt you?”

“Nah,” said Jint. “I realized your teasing is probably a sign of affection.”

“Right, see? That’s not the same as disobedience, or hostility. Or hurting someone deliberately. Lots of the time, people need to squash others lest they be squashed.”

Jint mulled it over. It was certainly the case that the Abh were, at root, orderly and disciplined. An Abh could stand face-to-face with the **Empress** herself and criticize or tease her, but that would never evolve into any serious opposition.

“Now do you see? It’s in their blood, man. Do you really not know that?”

“I never paid it much attention. I’m not that interested in history, myself. Besides, the society on my home planet was tiny. Any conspiracy on Martin would’ve been positively adorable in scope.”

“Well, you *should* pay attention. You’re the one who told me, on that day at the spaceport, that your kids would be blue-haired Abhs. That that was the rule.”

“I might’ve said that,” said Jint, who couldn’t recall all that clearly. “It’s true that that’s imperial law.”

“And you’re fine with that? Wait, don’t tell me you’ve already got kids?”

“Nope, not yet,” said Jint, smiling wryly. “Haven’t even really given the matter serious thought.”

“Give it some thought, then. They’re not just gonna be blue-haired. They’re gonna be genetically incapable of resisting authority. You sure you’re okay with that?”

“I...” Jint didn’t know what to say.

“You can’t be okay with that. It’s not okay. You know what those soldiers used to say? The Empire’s just a giant machine. And each individual Abh’s a component in that machine. I agree with those words.”

“They’re not, though,” said Jint, taking care not to raise his voice. Lafier and all the other Abhs Jint knew were unique human beings with personalities.

“Let’s leave it at that. Otherwise we’ll never stop,” said Durin, an earnest look in his eyes. “I don’t intend to convince you here and now. There are some who misunderstand my way of talking things out as pushy, but they’re all blind as bats. In reality, I hate pushiness. I’m just asking you to think about it. If you still think I’m wrong after giving it some thought, then I don’t mind if you come over and explain why that is. Maybe watching those kittens got me a little excited. But if you realize that you’re the one who’s wrong, then don’t forget that I, Que Durin, always have a place for you here.”

“I’m grateful for that,” said Jint, from the bottom of his heart. “But...”

“Good. You should be grateful. You should stay for a whole week, too. You can’t put on a game of minchiu in the Abh world. Let’s have ourselves a few amateur matches.”

If Durin had accepted his request, Jint had intended to stay for a while and recruit more people alongside Durin. After all, the *Baucbiruch* wouldn’t be back for another week. As such, Jint would have liked to take Durin up on his kindness, but...

“I can’t,” said Jint, Lafier’s face floating to mind as he shook his head. “I can’t afford to take it that easy.”

“Don’t be so vague. How about you stay for three days, then?”

All right, might as well meet him halfway, thought Jint. “Sure. If it’s not a bother.”

“If it’s not a bother? If it were, I wouldn’t have offered, stupid. I think you’ve got a bad case of space-brain.”

“I just forgot how Delktunians do things, that’s all,” said Jint.

“Yeah, and that’s what we call space-brain. Besides, what’s the rush? You got a lady waiting for you up there?”

“Kind of,” said Jint.

“Don’t front with me,” said Durin disbelievingly. “Admit it, you’re just bound up by some dumb schedule. You’re a fancy-shmancy noble and you can’t even make your own plans? What was the point of becoming a **noble**, anyway?”

“In the **Empire**, the higher up you are, the less freedom you have.”

“And you still want to be one? You’re a real dope sometimes.”

“I thought you said we ought to leave the subject at that? Otherwise we’ll never stop.”

“C’mon, man, are you really that dense? I swear, you’re so dense you can’t tell the difference between a dog and a hog. I meant we were leaving the *serious discussion* at that. What I’m engaging in right now is yet another *sign of affection*.”

“*That* was a sign of affection?” said Jint, feigning surprise. “You’ve lost your touch, Que Durin. ‘Dope’? That was so tame, it was barely mosquito bite-level.”

“I pulled my punches on purpose, on account of your space-brain. Tsk, tsk, you oughta express some gratitude for my thoughtfulness. Now then, I’m gonna call the boys. Wait here, will ya?”

While Durin got out his own mobile computer to contact the others, Jint turned his back and gripped the memchip in his hand tightly. All this time, Jint had operated under the impression that he could no longer live as “Jint Lynn” or “Lynn Jint.” And now that he knew that wasn’t true, he realized he wasn’t the least bit shaken by that revelation. He’d already resolved to live as *Linn Ssynec Raucr Dreuc Haider Ghintec*.

Lafier felt the flow of charged particles on the left half of her body as she spurred the ship on. She accelerated even more, wondering what would happen. Her back sank into her seat, and, fingers pinned, she found she couldn’t control the ship very well. This was the limit.

She let up on the acceleration, though she kept flying at a pace that would make any Lander lose consciousness. She violently changed course, hull screeching.

She was aboard the single-seat **intrastellar ship** owned by the **House of Vorlash**. Though an old model, it was in good condition, with both power capacity and responsiveness unchanged since the time of manufacture.

At first, she felt a slight bit out of place, since it was her first time piloting this

ship, but that discomfort had dissipated in a matter of minutes. After all, she'd been flying this type of traffic vessel since childhood. Now it fit her body like an extension of herself. When an Abh closed her eyes and switched to *frocragh slona* (beyond-ship spatio-sensory perception), a ship was like a piece of clothing.

Granted, compared to an **assault ship**, this ship felt lacking. Piloting an assault ship was akin to moving in a set of steel armor. Each maneuver was accompanied by a weighty reaction. This ship, on the other hand, was a gauze jumpsuit. One could drive it without feeling much of any push-back. And most saliently of all, there was none of the tension that came with having the lives of twenty people in her hands.

No tension didn't mean no fun, of course. She was enjoying this cruise, frolicking through space as though she were a tot once more. She set Delktu as her destination and pushed to maximum thrust. Immediately, her body became buried in her seat, and the air was pushed out of her lungs. She suspended the **main engines**, but her relative speed compared to the planet was still quite high. If she left it as is, she'd end up plummeting right into its atmosphere at an angle perpendicular to the surface.

She moved her left hand, the **control gauntlet** hand, and thus revved the **attitude control engines**, shifting course, and sweeping over Delktu. The atmosphere up here was so thin as to be nonexistent, but still it rebuffed the vessel, which changed course significantly. The joy engendered by the alterations in acceleration coursed through her body, and she was left gasping. In that moment, her body and soul knew that Abhs were born to soar through the heavens.

To the Abh, who had broken past their erstwhile status as mere bio-droids and constructed a mega-empire, spurring on ships was still a part of life, and she hadn't gotten a chance for a joy ride in quite a while. Having a good time making such rash maneuvers blew away the dregs of stagnation that had piled up in her heart.

Again she veered, commencing rapid deceleration. Might as well throw in a tailspin while she was at it, too. At the time she deemed appropriate, she stopped the engines and hitched onto Delktu's satellite orbit. She relaxed her

whole body as she perceived the **landworld** above her with her *frocragh*. The landworld Jint was on.

I wonder whether walking on a landworld's surface is a part of Jint's life.

She'd touched down onto a **landworld** only twice in her life, but she just didn't think she'd ever like it. The air *smelled*. Not unbearably, but once her head started worrying about it, it wouldn't stop. Probably because of the lack of proper purification equipment in the atmosphere's system of circulation. *How do you live on such an unregulated world without worrying?* It seemed to her that Jint only ever felt anxious when he was betwixt the stars, no matter whether he was on a ship or in an orbital building. If it was floating through space, it appeared he thought it unreliable. Jint wouldn't ever care to accompany her, even on a little stroll like this. Actually, he couldn't if he wanted to. Genetic Landers couldn't withstand such high acceleration. The fit and healthy would endure with their lives intact, but they couldn't be expected to remain conscious, and they'd have to spend some time in a regeneration vat afterward.

We really are a different race, she thought, casting her eyes down.

It was a pleasant exhaustion that enveloped her after pushing a ship to her absolute limits. The vessel zoomed from Delktu's day half to its night half. The shrill light of the sun of Vorlash that she'd felt underfoot fell away, along with the reflected light she'd felt overhead. Yet as always, the whispering of the distant stars filled her *frocragh*. It was a quiet, quiet world out there.

If I were able to weave through the stars like this at infinite acceleration, just how good would that feel? If she could continue accelerating indefinitely, space would continually shrink as she eventually approached the speed of light. She'd be able to zip through the insides of countless stars.

Alas, that dream was not to be. At near-light speed, the stress applied by the hydrogen atoms floating through the vast gaps between celestial bodies would stop being negligible, and the ship would burn blazing hot. Besides, the wee vessel's energy would expend itself far before it ever reached the speeds necessary to experience relativistic contraction.

Why do I feel so drawn to the stars? she wondered. It was a common Abh

desire to soar through 3-space at near-light speed. This enticement was referred to as “starlust.” Typically, Abhs who grew weary of living were prone to it. Some even went ahead with it, and few among them ever returned from their starlust jaunt.

Lafier was happy. Or at least, she figured she was.

“Oh,” she realized, muttering. “I’m stressed.”

A light and easy tune played in the **steering room**. It was her **wristgear** announcing the time had come. She snapped to, raised altitude, and aimed for the spaceport. An intrastellar ship was just departing from said spaceport. She reduced thrust and flew side-by-side with it.

She called Jint using her **wristgear**.

“Sup, Lafier,” said Jint, his voice a little strange.

“Are you feeling unwell?”

“Yeah, a bit. Actually, more than a bit. My head’s pounding.”

“That’s unusual. Are you sick?”

“I’m something like being sick, I guess. It’s a hangover. It’s not something you Abhs-by-birth will ever have to worry about, but I assure you, there are all sorts who are well-acquainted with hangovers.”

“We may not get hangovers, but we *do* at least *know* about them,” she replied, miffed. At the same time, she was confused: “Why don’t you take some medicine for it? Surely it’s not something you have no choice but to let pass? I’ve heard the sensation is quite off-putting.”

“Oh, totally. It feels terrible.”

“Then why?”

“They’re banned here. Sober-uppers.”

“Really? What an odd law.”

“They’re under the impression that if they don’t ban them, people will just gulp them down without restraint. Plus, they think that people ought to suffer the consequences for what they do to their bodies. Though it’s a different story

when lives are on the line.”

“Might you be aboard a ship at the moment?” she asked, as she perceived a ferry shuttle sailing a mere ten *saidagh* away with her *frocragh*. According to a prior message, Jint was supposed to be in transit.

“Yep, I am.”

“That law is a law of the **landworld**, is it not?”

“Yeah. The **landworld administration** passed it.”

“Then I don’t think you need to pay it any mind anymore. The laws of a **landworld administration** don’t extend to ship interiors. Or do they?”

“They don’t, but I used to be a Delktunian, too. So I end up in a weird headspace where I feel like punishing myself.”

“I see. Are you suffering a great deal?”

“You have no idea.”

“In that case, while my stroll was set to last a little while longer, I’ll return to the **Manor** a bit earlier than I’d scheduled.”

“Your stroll? Are you flying right now?”

“Yep. Right next to the ship you’re on.”

“Oh, there you are. At least, I can see something shiny.”

“That’s me, most likely. Don’t take any medicine until we meet.”

“You’re a cruel one sometimes, you know that?”

“Didn’t you say you were punishing yourself?”

“Showing you how I’m in such a sorry state doesn’t count.”

“Don’t say that. You know, you’re so—”

“Wait, something’s up...” Jint’s voice took a serious tinge. “It’s an emergency communication.”

Lafier, too, felt something alarming. Her *frocragh* was picking up the phosphorescent orb that was the **Vorlash Portal**, from which a small ship had appeared. It was a **conveyance ship**, the model widely used by the **Star Forces**.

One was supposed to be loaded aboard the *Baucbiruch*, but it was difficult to distinguish between individual conveyance ships using just her *frocragh*, given that they were mass-produced.

“Lafier,” said Jint, his voice normal — he’d taken the medicine.

“Is there some kind of problem?”

“Looks like it. The *Baucbiruch* came under attack.”

“Oh...” Lafier screwed her eyes shut and steeped her whole self into the murmurs of the stars. Suddenly, she felt as though the languid flow of time was *glimmering*.

Chapter 5: *Glamsaihoth* (Crest Bestowal Ceremony)

After the inspection, servicing, and repairs that followed their familiarization voyages, the twelve **raid ships** formed a single column, flying in the vicinity of the star of Abliar. At the head of the pack was the *Raichaicec doriac* (Commandant's ship), the *Lymcaubh*. Just because the Commandant was aboard the *Lymcaubh* did not make it the **flagship**. The reason behind this confusing appellation was that **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** had yet to be officially established.

The *Flicaubh*, Sobash's ship, was second in line, flying behind the *Lymcaubh*. Eventually, a **patrol ship** approached the line of raid ships. It was the *Glagac Glagalacr* (Star Forces Flagship) and the *Rüéreurh* (Imperial Empress's Ship), the *Gaftnochec*.

The *Gaftnochec* was of great ceremonial significance, but that was not all. If the **imperial capital** ever threatened to become a warzone, then the **Empress** would board it and lead the watchguard fleet to battle. The ship was no mere ornament; it was the ship slated to fight when the hour was most dire for the **Empire**. As such, it was customary for the designation to fall on the most state-of-the-art patrol ship of the times. The *Gaftnochec* was currently a *Caü*-class ship. And **Empress Lamagh** was, at present, aboard ship.

"Preparations are complete, I trust," came Atosryua's voice, reverberating through the **bridge**. "Soon we'll be honored with a **crest banner**. If anybody here doesn't take pride in their being here to bear witness, then keep it to yourself until after the ceremony's over. I'm trembling with excitement, and if someone were to ruin the mood for me, I vow to make mincemeat of their tongue for the cats to snack on."

Whenever a new **squadron** or **sub-fleet** was formed, the **Empress** herself bestowed the crest banner. Such was the **Star Forces** tradition... during peacetime. During a period of war, innumerable squadrons had to be formed,

and not always at the **capital**. The **Empress** could hardly afford to fly around the galaxy personally granting a crest banner to each one. Usually, *rüé tusaic* (imperial envoy) would do it in her stead, even for sub-fleets, let alone for squadrons. That the **crest bestowal ceremony** was being conducted as though it were peacetime was a sign of the hopes they were placing in Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 as a pillar of the **Empire**. None could blame Atosryua, who'd been chosen as the first **commandant** of this momentous squadron, for feeling honored.

The *Lymcaubh* veered to face the *Gaftnochec*.

"All ships, with great respect ought you to entrust control to the *Gaftnochec*. First, the *Lymcaubh* must prepare for external control, and conduct an information link with the **Empress's Ship**."

"This is the *Gaftnochec*. **Information link** online."

"This is the *Lymcaubh*. With reverence towards **Her Majesty the Empress** do we relinquish the right of control."

"This is the *Gaftnochec*. The *Lymcaubh* is now under this ship's control."

It went without saying that giving up control functions (such as piloting and weapons control) to another meant waiving the ship's independence. Doing so was, to the Abh, the deepest show of respect there was.

Following Atosryua's commands, each of the ships took it in turn to entrust control to the *Gaftnochec*. Soon, it was the *Flicaubh*'s turn.

"Information link with the *Gaftnochec* complete," reported the **Communications Officer**.

Sobash input the *saigh sarérr* (ship commander's key-code), switching the ship to external control mode. An ominous warning sound notified them that important functions such as steering, weapons control, and communications were no longer accepting input from within the ship. Now the *Flicaubh* moved as the **Empress's Ship** directed, irrespective of the will of the crew.

Deca-Commander Idlia jokingly raised up his hands in surrender, but it was out of place. Before long, all ships had shifted to the Empress's Ship's control. The single column then broke into cylindrical formation, after which the raid

ships were made to fire up their reverse thrusters and kill their speed relative to the *Gaftnochec*, which also decelerated. Shortly before entering the cylinder of ships, it ejected a cargo pod from the back. When the patrol ship did enter the cylinder, the difference in relative speed between it and the ships making up the cylinder was near zero. Slowly, the twelve raid ships passed the imperial flagship by.

“Communication from the *Gaftnochec* flowing into the ship’s memory net!” shouted the **Communications Officer, Rearguard** Yatesh, excitedly.

No need to get so worked up, thought Sobash. Though he was probably just trying to liven the mood, seeing as there was nothing for them to do.

“It’s the processing system instructions. The crypto-mode is ‘*saiceruc*’ (Eurasian jay).”

“*Saiceruc*” was used throughout the **Star Forces**. It was the level of confidentiality only those of **ship commander** rank or above were allowed to decipher. Sobash inserted the password and decoded the message.

FROM: *GLAHARÉRH BYRER CLAIÏAR* (TRAINING FLEET COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF)

FOR: **SHIP COMMANDER** OF THE **RAID SHIP** *FLICAUBH*

STARTING WITH RECEIPT OF THIS ORDER, YOUR SHIP OFFICIALLY BELONGS TO **TRAMPLE-BLITZ SQUADRON 1**.

THE PROCESSING SYSTEM YOU RECEIVED IN TANDEM WITH THIS DIRECTIVE IS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION AND DECRYPTION OF THE CRYPTO-MODE MEANT FOR **TRAMPLE-BLITZ SQUADRON 1**, NAMED *CAMRINIC* (HAMAZERI PLANT).

ACT AS A MEMBER OF THE **STAR FORCES** IS EXPECTED TO.

The **Communications Officer** continued, “The processing system has been automatically planted into the compucrystal network.”

This ceremony had taken place quietly, through the compucrystal networks of all of the raid ships.

“A communication from the *Gaftnochec* for all crewmembers,” reported **Rearguard** Yatesh. “The video will be shown through the main screen and open screens, and the audio will be transmitted through the onboard speakers.”

Sobash got to his feet. “All bridge personnel, stand up. All other crewmembers should listen in awe to the extent their current duties allow them to.”

Empress Lamagh appeared on the main screen. She was seated on the **Jade Throne**, the counterpart of the one in the **Audience Chamber**. The *Rüé Gahorh* (Empress’s Bridge) was around the same level of importance as the Audience Chamber at the **Imperial Palace**: so the emperors of imperial history had come to think, through the ages.

Lamagh spoke: “The Training Fleet Commander-in-Chief tells Us they’ve received the automated replies from the compucrystal nets of all of the raid ships, informing Us that your orders have been received. With this, **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** now exists on paper. As to whether it exists in reality, that rests on the blood, sweat, and tears you shed into shaping it. We do not know whether creating this new type of ship, this ‘**raid ship**,’ was a wise idea. We simply hope you will prove to us that it was. If only We could...” She cast her eyes down, a listless finger touching the circlet that was molded in the likeness of the eight-headed *gaftnohec*. “If only We could, We would have liked to verify the true worth of the **raid ships** alongside you. Instead, We shall envy you, and wait for good tidings.”

They heard Atosryua speak on behalf of the squadron’s crews: “It is truly uplifting to be the object of **Your Majesty**’s envy. We shall strive hard so that, when news of our squadron’s deeds makes it to **Your Majesty**’s ears, the fires of Your jealousy shall singe the **Jade Throne**.”

“Then go. Go, before We grow tired of the sheer comfortableness of the **Jade Throne**,” said *Lamagh*, a bitter smile on her lips.

“**Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** shall proceed forth, in humble compliance with Your imperial command.”

Lamagh gave a slight nod, and as soon as the feed cut out, the right of control returned to the ship. At that moment, the *Gaftnohec* had almost entirely overtaken the cylinder formation made up of raid ships. The imperial flagship then accelerated at a dash, almost as though the **Empress** wanted to shake away any lingering feelings of attachment.

The raid ships maintained their current courses and speed, with the *Lymcaubh* as the sole exception. It slowly picked up speed in order to retrieve the cargo pod that the **Empress's Ship** had ejected.

"I obtained the **crest banner**," came Atosryua's message, its design appearing on the main screen. The emblem of Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 was the numeral "1" on a *caubh* (venomous serpent). "From here on out, we'll be training to hone our group battle maneuvers. All ships head for the **Ileesh Portal**."

Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 reverted to the single-column formation, with the *Lymcaubh* once again at the fore. Together, they made for one of the eight **portals** that revolved in close proximity to the **imperial capital** of *Lacmhacarh*.

"I want to hold a meeting before we enter **planar space**," said Atosryua. "We won't need to gather together. Each **ship commander** is to open the confidential line in their quarters. Let's set the meeting to start at 1800 capital time."

Sobash had an orbital building of his own in the **capital**. If one were to search for a room in that mansion house of equal size to the captain's quarters of a *Caubh*-class ship, it would have to be the toy garage next to the children's room. Yet Sobash had come to like this little room. It was cramped, but functional, and it was bigger than the captain's quarters of a **supply ship**. Best of all, it was nice and new.

The mansion at the **capital** was built expressly for raising children. The days he spent with his two kids were more precious memories than the voyages of the most profitable merchant vessels in the history of commerce in the Empire, but now they were full-grown adults. Were he to return, he'd find only the maintenance automatons whirring more quietly than a bed of flowers.

Sobash sat down in his black leather chair and glanced at his **wristgear**'s time display. Shortly before eighteen o'clock, he opened the confidential line.

Window-screens popped open one after the other, and by precisely eighteen, **Commandant** Atosryua and the twelve **ship commanders** were assembled.

"About the space for our tactical exercises," started Atosryua, without preamble. "I was hoping for an **astrobase** somewhere."

“Sounds reasonable,” said *Deurec*, Ship Commander of the *Batcaubh*. An astrobase had everything ships needed, including resupply facilities, repair and construction shipyards, and recreation spots. As such, the best place to square off against one another was the **planar space** near the **portals** that led to an astrobase.

“That being said, **Military Command Headquarters** is ordering us to train at the **Countdom of Hyde**.”

The other ship commanders couldn’t hide their confusion. It seemed they all knew about the **Countdom**. It was exceedingly famous as a **territory-nation** on the very outskirts of the galactic map. Discovering a human society after such a long stretch of isolation had made quite the stir, and it was also the star system that was the cause for this war, albeit only as a pretext.

Sobash knew too, of course. Hyde was the **star fief** of a comrade with whom he’d fought side-by-side. Mind, he had no idea why they had to be training in that **countdom**.

He kept silent, thinking **Commandant** Atosryua was bound to explain it all. The other **ship commanders** didn’t say anything, either, awaiting the Commandant’s elucidation. Yet Atosryua appeared to be waiting for someone to ask why, so, sighing inwardly, Sobash reluctantly took it upon himself.

“Why are we to train at the **Countdom of Hyde**, ma’am? It can’t be undiluted training there, surely.”

“Ostensibly, we were given one reason,” she said. “**Military Command HQ** wants us to do training exercises that are a step above what I was expecting. They want us honing our *strategy*, not our tactics. Our training assignment is as follows...”

A window-screen showing the **planar space map** of the **Ileesh Monarchy** appeared. The **Ileesh Monarchy** was peculiarly shaped, compared to its fellows in the **Eight Monarchies**. It was circular. On the map, two points were flashing on the circle, the distance between them almost equal to the diameter of the circle.

“As you know, the **Hyde Portal** is the farthest from the **Ileesh Portal**,” she explained. “In other words, the time it takes to get there is near enough the

same, whether you go clockwise or counter-clockwise.”

Two luminous dotted lines extended from both sides of the **Ileesh Portal**, following the curve of the **Ileesh Monarchy** until they reached the point of light that represented the **Countdom of Hyde** on the opposite end of the circle.

“In short, the **squadron** will be split into two groups, which will compete to gain control over the **Hyde Portal** faster than the other. Then, whichever of the two couldn’t take it fast enough must attempt to recapture it. That’s our training assignment. The **Countdom of Hyde** was chosen due to the unique topography. No other **territory-nation** affords us the same opportunity. Usually, there’s only one shortest route to anywhere from *Lacmhacarh*. In Ileesh, we can have a fair race. Presumably, the **Countdom of Hyde** will be the place where newly born ships come of age in the future, too.”

“If that’s the ‘ostensible’ reason, then do you think there’s an ulterior reason, ma’am?” offered Sobash.

“That’s right,” she said, drawing up her shoulders with a self-congratulatory air. “Currently, there are riots occurring in the countdom of **Hyde**.”

That’s rough, thought Sobash, sympathizing with Jint, though he figured that it was only natural Jint had to face the various irksome obligations that came with reigning over a **territory-nation** now that he was an active **grandee**. Jint’s case was special, however, and deserving of his sympathy in one respect. After all, the young man’s father had acted irresponsibly when he himself became a grandee despite having only one child. That one child didn’t have much of a choice.

“So we’re to intimidate the **landworld**?” asked *Roïryac*, **Ship Commander** of the *Sircaubh*. He was one of the squadron’s two **Senior Ship Commanders**.

“I think it’s common sense to assume that’s what they expect from us.”

“Then there are no specific orders to do so?” he asked.

“It wouldn’t be an ‘ulterior reason’ otherwise.”

“But does the **Countdom of Hyde** have all the facilities we’ll need? From a cursory search, the system doesn’t even have proper fuel resupply,” said *Serboth*, **Ship Commander** of the *Lymcaubh*.

“Oh, we can’t complain about that,” said Atosryua. “These **raid ships** won’t always be fighting on battlefields with lots of facilities. In fact, we should probably think of places without such facilities as better for training exercises. Though that’s just my opinion,” said Atosryua.

“But we don’t have a supply corps accompanying us. Only an incompetent commander would ever send out a **trample-blitz squadron** without a supply corps,” she replied.

“It’s not impossible, you know. Coming under an incompetent commander. Besides, even a competent one might be compelled to issue utterly daft commands from time to time.”

“Getting forced into such a hopeless situation would have to be the work of an incompetent commander of higher rank.”

“Please, let’s drop this topic, **Vice Hecto-Commander Serboth**. Otherwise we’ll be here all day. **Planar space** is vast. There’s no way we can grasp every possible battlefield. Even if every **commodore** were perfect, a seam can open unexpectedly. And I don’t think for a microsecond that every commodore is, in fact, perfect at all.”

“So long as it’s an order from above, we can’t argue against it,” nodded *Serboth* begrudgingly.

“Exactly. Anyone else want to complain?” asked Atosryua. Her tone admitted no backtalk, but it wasn’t too hard to tell she herself was hiding how dissatisfied she was with their orders. “No complaints? Then let me split the **squadron** into two — the Red Team and the Blue Team. The Blue Team will be headed by me. The Red, I give to you, Roiryua.”

“Roger,” said Roiryua.

“You and I are now enemy commanders,” she said. “We each command half of the squadron. I’ve already selected which ships will be on each team. I grant **Hecto-Commander** Roiryua the right to choose which route each team will travel down.”

“Aren’t we already enemies, ma’am?” Roiryua pointed out. “I don’t need to be taking orders from you, **Kilo-Commander**. You’re the enemy.”

“I like that personality of yours, **Hecto-Commander**,” she said, putting a white hand on her forehead. “I have a leather sandbag. Whenever I’m irritated, I give it a punch or two, and let off a tiny bit of steam. I’m going to change that punching bag’s name to yours.”

“Thank you very much,” said Roiryua. “Incidentally, what is your favored punching bag’s current name?”

“This may be a confidential line, but I couldn’t divulge such a secret. In any case, let me amend my statement. You and I will be enemies shortly. As of now, you’re still my subordinate. Got it?”

“Roger that. Now then, I choose the clockwise route.”

“Very well. Now remember, the objective of the exercise is to take and maintain control over the **Hyde Portal**. The code to suspend the exercise will be the following phrase: ‘True solar flames are blue.’ If you receive the message ‘True solar flames are blue’ through the *Camrinic* crypto-mode, you will then revert to the original command structure immediately. Is that clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Roiryua nodded.

“This confidential line is now the line for the Blue Team. That means that the ships excluded from this line belong to the Red Team. Now then, off we go. From this second onward, you and I are enemies, **Hecto-Commander** Roiryua.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nearly saluted before stopping himself with a strained smirk.

Then, the video of six of the **ship commanders’** window-screens, including Roiryua’s, ceased to transmit.

I suppose this makes me a member of the Blue Team. Sobash didn’t feel strongly one way or the other about that. He didn’t know Hecto-Commander Roiryua well enough. Besides, this was just an exercise in the end. And he’d have to follow **Kilo-Commander** Atosryua’s **command baton** where it counted, too.

“Now then, we’re headed for the **Ileesh Portal** in a single column at maximum combat acceleration. Go to your respective **bridges** and issue your orders.”

Samson was in the *chicrh ruhyrr* (flotilla lessee's office) of the supply ship *Acrych Nata*. The **planar space map** on the floor of the office was showing forty or more **space-time bubbles**. Each of the bubbles contained only a single ship. Space-time bubbles had a critical mass, and the ships that comprised the *borh* (flotilla) were so huge they only barely skirted below that limit.

Paper cup in hand, Samson gazed at the **map**. The flotilla was sailing smoothly. Too smoothly. The man was bored.

Mechanics starpilots were usually needed as specialists of temporary repairs. When voyages were proceeding without a hitch, he had no role to play. Moreover, he was just aboard ship to serve as the **Count of Hyde's** proxy; each of those ships already had an **inspector supervisor** of its own. If issues did arise, they would deal with them. Worse yet, while those inspector supervisors were in the reserves, they were still Mechanics starpilots in rank, with quite a few outranking him.

He heard the sound of footsteps behind him. Samson may not have had *frocragh*, but he could tell who it was from the sound. He'd known Paveryua for long enough now. He was more than familiar with his subordinate's mannerisms.

"I really can't stand this 'boredom' thing," grumbled Samson. "I'm the kind of guy who always needs to be doing something."

"Don't complain," said Paveryua. "You were plenty busy before. Not to mention the reams of work that are waiting for you once we get there. Why don't you think of this as a chance to smell the roses?"

"Guess you've got a point," nodded Samson, on a bitter note. Samson *had* been a busy beaver up until the flotilla took off. It was his job to gather the materials and the personnel necessary to construct and maintain both the **antimatter fuel factories** that were to encircle Hyde's sun, and the **refueling stations** that were to be established on the gas planet apparently named "Behrgwit."

It didn't take too much doing to secure the materials. The **Empire** fervently desired for the **Countdom of Hyde** to become a stable strategic base, and spared no effort cooperating to make that happen. In fact, Samson hadn't

needed to do much of anything on that front. The **Star Forces** provided as many as twenty **mobile antimatter fuel factories** (which were perfectly functional, if old). Plus, he was able to purchase any other materials from the comfort of his room at the inn using his **wristgear**, and on a preferential basis at that.

It was the people that were the problem. The labor market at the **imperial capital** was a seller's market of unprecedented proportions. Societal analysts had determined that this was the point in time when supply and demand were most imbalanced. Since the pre-war years, **imperial citizens** were experienced technicians in all sorts of fields, and were therefore in great demand. Meanwhile, the imperial citizens who'd been trained in large numbers since after the war began were starting to spill out of the military, but they couldn't exactly be called rich in experience just yet. Collecting **servant vassals** through public recruitment was never going to cut it, forcing Samson to pull all the strings he could to gather the folks they needed.

Tinkering with machines was a great joy in life, and his hobby had turned into a job. But his work at the **capital** was different from what he was accustomed to. He'd endured, thinking he'd employ workers for his future farm, but his new mission had exhausted him utterly.

Upon turning to face Paveryua at last, Samson noticed his subordinate was holding a glass. He grabbed him by the arm to sniff the aroma of its contents. It smelled of wormwood and alcohol.

"Are you drinking on the job?" admonished Samson.

"I'm not drinking just yet. I don't smell of alcohol myself, see?"

"Then you were planning to have your fill starting now. And here, of all places."

"Aren't you drinking, too, **Inspector Supervisor**?"

"Yeah. Tea." Samson held out his cup.

"Yurgh, what is this stuff?" said Paveryua, after sniffing the way Samson had.

"Maxillon tea. I've taken a strange liking to it recently."

"That *is* strange," Paveryua concurred. "But never mind that stuff. How about

a little of *this*?”

Like magic, a bottle and a second glass appeared in Paveryua’s hands.

“I’m on the clock, my friend,” said Samson.

“Didn’t you say you were bored?”

“I was, of course. That’s what work usually is. Boring. Not that it’s impossible to have fun at work.”

“You don’t have to pull a face like you’re chewing on a fistful of coffee beans, **Inspector Supervisor**. The work that’s waiting for you on the flipside is the kind you love. You know, shouting at your poor, pathetic subordinates, kicking them in the backside, et cetera.”

“I have never kicked a subordinate.” Funnily enough, Paveryua’s words of consolation failed to lift his heart.

“What, really?” Paveryua gently pressed the glass in his direction.

“On my home planet, if you take care not to break any bones, we don’t call it a kick,” he explained, accepting the glass. “Once, when I was under pressure, I used my toes to catch the attention of a dimwit, but I didn’t ‘kick’ him.”

“I see,” said Paveryua, pouring booze with a knowing grin. “It’s true that if you hadn’t aroused his attention, neither him nor me nor you would be of this universe. I do think you could’ve been a bit gentler about it.”

“You think I had that kinda time? My life was on the line, too.”

“Are you saying you didn’t have fun, sir?”

“Oh, Paveryua, my lad, don’t misjudge me. I’m actually a very gentle man at heart. Would I ever lay a hand on another soul, or do something that could be misinterpreted as such?”

“You’re not *angry*, are you, **Inspector Supervisor**?” asked Paveryua, a worried look on his face.

“Why would I be angry? It’s not like anyone’s insulted my cooking.”

“I could never insult your cooking if I wanted to. The meals you made me all those times were great. Oh, that reminds me, I have to warn my new colleagues

never to speak ill of the meals you cook.”

“Don’t. I like it when people give their honest opinions. Complimenting me out of obligation won’t make me any happier.”

“But you said you’d get angry if your food was insulted, didn’t you?”

“If somebody tells me my cooking tastes bad, they are insulting something, but it ain’t the food.”

“What’re they insulting, then? Also, what do we toast to?”

“The **Countdom of Hyde**, obviously — the system of strange and bizarre creatures. Here’s hoping at least one species makes for some good booze.” They clinked. “And to answer your question, they’re insulting their own defective taste buds.”

“Gotcha.” Paveryua chugged, and mumbled to himself: “Glad I left the military. I’d never be able to stand above subordinates, not while I’m lacking your tremendous self-confidence, **Inspector Supervisor**. And I have a bad habit of viewing myself *objectively*, so I’m just not suited to rising in the **Star Forces** ranks. Actually, forget the Star Forces — I might not ever see a promotion anywhere.”

“Yep,” said Samson, drinking down his glass.

“I was kind of hoping you’d argue against that,” said Paveryua, visibly wounded even as he poured Samson some more.

“Argue against that? Why would I do that? You want me to say, ‘be more confident in yourself,’ or ‘three days and you’ll know the ropes of being a commander’? I don’t want you going back to the **Star Forces**! You know how hard it is to come by a subordinate like you? Look — with you, I don’t need to give you a love tap with my toes to get your attention, and you can handle the usual stuff fairly easily. It’s just that you tend to be slow to make decisions, so it’d be dangerous to make you a superior officer. And with the Star Forces in their current state, you probably would’ve made it to **inspector supervisor** rank on some small ship soon enough. So by retiring from service, you’ve avoided a disaster.”

“Please, could you stick to either praising me, or disparaging me, but not

both?”

“Hey, pal, I’m nothing if not consistent.”

“You certainly are.”

“Let me tell you, being an **inspector supervisor** isn’t just bossing people around. You’ve also got to take care of the folks with the blue hair.”

“Are you referring to the *Basrogrh*?” said Paveryua, looking distinctly skeptical. “You took care of *them*, **Inspector Supervisor**? I seem to recall one time when I saluted **Vanguard Starpilot** Sobash by your quarters, only to find he was carrying your dead drunk form. Is that what you call taking care of someone on your home planet, sir? Because on mine, it’s the opposite.”

Just as Samson was about to retort, somebody entered the office.

“Ah crap,” said Samson, ducking his head. “I can’t stand that woman.”

“I see,” said Paveryua, positively delighted.

“The ship **Her Highness the Royal Princess** was on was attacked! How can you be so relaxed!?” accosted Sehrnye. “And could that be *alcohol* I’m seeing? Unlike the Abh, you can get drunk, *ruhryh* (flotilla lessee)!”

Samson didn’t mind getting treated like some pale shadow of an Abh; there wasn’t the faintest fiber of him that bought into the delusion that he was an Abh in anything but name. The laws of the **Empire** could claim what they wanted — he was a proud man of Midgrat.

“That’s not entirely correct,” said Samson, ignoring the latter of the two questions. “The ship that got attacked was the one that was going to be the **manor** for the **House of Hyde**. But the **Captain** wasn’t on that ship.”

“I don’t know who this ‘**captain**’ is, but what do they have to do with *Fiac Lartnér*?” she pressed.

“Ah,” said Samson, smiling awkwardly, “*Fiac Lartnér* is the **Captain**. I’ve gotten so used to calling Her Highness by her military title.”

Even from just his recent, limited interactions with her, he could sense the sheer reverence this woman held for Lafier, so he braced himself to get shouted at for being too familiar when referring to royalty, but it seemed Sehrnye had

the common sense not to push her preferences on others.

“I’m just glad **Her Highness** is okay. That is, if what you say is true. All the same, this is a matter of grave concern, is it not?”

“It’s just as you say,” said Samson sincerely. Now there was the possibility they couldn’t enter the **Countdom of Hyde**. In all likelihood, they’d end up getting stuck in the system right before Hyde, this “**Vorlash Countdom**” or some such. And wasting hours and days doing nothing would eat into their funds. If they didn’t play this right, even payments toward the salaries of the **servant vassals** would get affected.

Yet another job I don’t know my way around, huh, thought Samson, disheartened.

On the whole, late pay wasn’t a thing in the **Star Forces**. Even if it had happened, it would’ve been incumbent on Samson to stand for his **NCC** subordinates and denounce his superiors. This was different, though. Even as the head vassal, he didn’t have the heart to pillory Jint. He’d probably end up taking the brunt of the vassals’ slings and arrows defending him.

And how could he possibly get through it all without an occasional pint? Samson thrust his empty glass at Paveryua.

Sehrnye raised her eyebrows, but didn’t bring it up. “Shouldn’t we be raising our speed?” she asked.

“What for?” said Samson readily, having anticipated that question. “You’re not saying you want to rush toward *Fïac Lartnér* as fast as physically possible, are you?”

“I am,” she nodded.

What good would that do, he nearly said, but he bottled that up and left it at: “Either way, the **flotilla** is already sailing at max speed. We can’t fly any faster.”

“Then I suppose I have to bear it,” she said, looking truly crestfallen. “If only our ship had **planar space navigation functionality**, then I’d have liked to rush over right away.”

Sehnye, Ltd. owned a Lander-pilotable **antimatter fuel tank inspection ship**,

also named “the Sehrnye,” but it, of course, lacked that functionality. That ship was packed somewhere in the hold of this ship, the *Acrych Nata*.

“Oh, I know!” she said, and Samson steeled himself for the needless toil that was sure to follow that statement. “How about we organize a guard garrison?”

“A guard garrison?” Samson was taken aback.

“In the **domain** I used to be part of, the **vassals** all received minimal military training. I mean, we were all women, but this flotilla has a lot of former **soldiers**, including you, sir...”

“Please, enough,” he said, promptly rejecting the notion. “According to our intel, the land army of the Three Nations Alliance is still on the planet of *Martinh*. A thrown-together unit isn’t going to help.”

Given how she’d asserted her own experience, he figured she might volunteer for the guard garrison herself; only, she’d want to organize a unit of guards specifically for the princess, not for the **Countdom of Hyde**. Sure enough...

“I’m not saying we gain total control over a **landworld**,” said Sehrnye, lips pouting. “I just want to protect *Fiac Lartnér* and *Lonh-Dreur*...”

“There’s already a guard unit for that.” It wasn’t a standing unit, but it would defend the facilities of the **House of Hyde** — which, for the foreseeable future, amounted to the **Count’s Manor** and the **antimatter fuel factories**.

“Wow,” she said, her face lighting up. “In that case, kindly add me to that unit. It’s our responsibility to protect **Her Highness the Royal Princess**.”

“I’m afraid we aren’t the ones in charge of guarding *Fiac Lartnér*,” he said, feeling weird every time he used that title. “We aren’t bodyguards. At the end of the day, we’re here to defend the facilities of the **Count’s House**.”

“I understand that. But as long as *Fiac Lartnér* is with *Lonh-Dreur*, is it not the duty of the **Count’s House** to safeguard Her Highness?”

“I guess that’s true.”

“In that case...”

Samson wondered how long this unproductive conversation would last, but at the same time, he was enjoying wrestling with this irrationality. It was a

lifesaver on this otherwise boring voyage. There was also the fact that Sehrnye's speech sounded rather like some fanciful background music — her Baronh had a lyrical, melodic accent to it. Her mother tongue must have been rich in intonation.

Sasmon would've liked to see whether the background music Sehrnye was providing him went well with his drink, but alas, his **wristgear** chose that time to beep.

"Sorry, just a sec," he said, tasting both relief and disappointment. "This is Samson speaking."

"**Flotilla Lessee**," came the voice of the *Drociac Borr* (Flotilla Communications Officer). "A **conveyance ship** is approaching."

It was an oft-heard notification. While the volume of traffic was low, this was the only major space route in the **Ileesh Monarchy**.

"Do we know what it belongs to?"

"To the **raid ship** *Flicaubh* of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1**, sir. It seems they're currently engaged in the task of advanced coordination."

"**Raid ship? Trample-Blitz Squadron 1?** When'd they come out with those?"

"I don't know either, sir. All we know is the squadron it belongs to. The **conveyance ship** will merge with this ship's space-time in ninety-two minutes, so we'll learn more then..."

"Looking forward to it." Samson dropped the call. *Now I can make her go away.* "Did you hear that? It appears a mighty **Star Forces** armada is headed towards the **Countdom of Hyde**, shrouded though it is in clouds of darkness. We're just a collective of engineers. We'd be hard-pressed to be the heroes of some adventure story. As long as the **Empire's** on the job, then there's no place for us to intervene."

"Yes, of course," she bowed, frowning for some reason. "Sorry for intruding. Please, don't let me put a hamper on your little drinking party."

After she left, Samson put the question to Paveryua. "Did I offend her somehow?"

“**Inspector Supervisor**,” he said icily, (despite drinking more himself). “Whenever you say stuff you don’t mean, your acting is always so overblown. You could stand to take it down a notch — or at least, drop all the *mighty* modifiers.”

“They’re here,” said Lafier.

“And right on time, huh,” said Jint, staring at the video of the outside. No need to squint; the *Baucbiruch* just so happened to plunge into **3-space** head-on from their perspective.

The two were on an **intrastellar ship** borrowed from the **House of Vorlash**. *Dereuzz* had tried to give them a steerer as well, but Lafier had shot the suggestion down. She would equip the **control gauntlet** herself.

As for why they were going out of their way to go meet the *Baucbiruch*, they wanted to see its damage status for themselves, and as soon as they could. They’d heard from the conveyance ship that had returned a little while earlier that the damage was minimal, but nonetheless, they couldn’t help feeling worried.

Lafier steered near the *Baucbiruch*; focusing on her *frocragh*, she closed her eyes and made several rounds around it. “Where did it get hit? I can’t tell,” she said.

“Well, if you don’t know, then I definitely don’t.” He was looking at the **interstellar ship** through the video of the outside, but spotted no sign of damage by fire anywhere on it.

Yet the fact remained it had been shot at. And that fact was nothing to scoff at.

“Oh well. We’re going in.” Lafier pulled up communications with the **bridge** of the *Baucbiruch*.

Yestesh came to greet them on the arrival deck. Hurriedly, they exchanged the formal salutations, and then the two stepped aboard a **personal transporter** headed for the conference room.

“The attack was so feeble as to leave something to be desired,” said Yestesh.

“No harm was done to our navigation capabilities, and we managed to enact all repairs on our own.”

“Did you do the repairs while in **planar space**?” asked Jint.

“No. We did them while in orbit over the **landworld** of *Martinh*.”

“Why did you have to do that? Wasn’t it dangerous?” *Is this Abh sarcasm?* he wondered.

“Needless to say, we paid due attention to remaining safe. We slightly raised our orbital altitude.”

“But if there was no impediment to the ship’s navigation, then...”

Yestesh gave Jint a puzzled look. Lafier, too, stared at him searchingly.

“Did I, uh, say something dumb, or...?” he asked the **Royal Princess**.

Lafier let out a little sigh. “Don’t you see? If they’d entered the **portal** as soon as they got shot, it would appear as though they were *fleeing*.”

“Sure, it might be misconstrued as such, but...” Jint was confused. He’d thought the Abh wouldn’t hesitate to circumvent avoidable adversity. “I know the **Star Forces** aren’t afraid to retreat. Plus, this ship’s almost unarmed.”

“We retreat when we absolutely have to,” said Lafier. “If there isn’t any impediment to navigation after sustaining a surprise attack, there isn’t any need to flee, either.”

“But you don’t know that for sure, do you? It could’ve just been a warning of more to come. There’s no telling if a full-scale assault is coming for you later.”

“You are correct. I simply made a judgment call,” said Yestesh.

“What judgment did you make?”

“I figured that if we retreated after taking such a small attack, we might be giving the enemy a false indication. And if they underestimate us, then the situation might deteriorate.”

“What do you mean...?”

“I know you understand the **Star Forces**’ maxims of conduct, *Lonh-Dreur*. You are a member of our armed forces, after all, and have aided us in battle. If the

mistaken notion that the Star Forces flee at the meagerest provocation takes root, what consequences do you think will result?”

Jint understood what Yestesh was getting at. The maxims of conduct of the **Star Forces** were extremely simple. In short, they aimed to repay all damage received ten times over. The Abh were a mercantile race, but this was the one instance they spared no expense, the one instance they didn't consider profit margins. Jint had always thought this lust for revenge quite childish of the Abh, but it wasn't about to change. It had been this way since the founding of the Empire — no, since before then, when the Abh were itinerant spacefarers. Moreover, upon some consideration, there was a logic to it. It was not uncommon for Abh ships to become isolated, in times of war and in times of peace. The **Empire** needed only put up with their reputation as savages, and regard their gruesome and dazzling orgies of vengeance as an unfortunate obligation, to dramatically elevate the safety levels for all lone Abhs everywhere. Or at least, that was the Empire's take on the matter.

“I don't mean to be rude, but might it be the case that the fine people of **Your Excellency's** home world don't well know how the **Star Forces** behave?” asked Yestesh, dealing the final blow.

“That's... that's maybe true,” Jint acknowledged reluctantly.

It was known throughout the galaxy how the **Empire** behaved. Otherwise, the safety of Abhs in places the Empire's tentacles didn't reach couldn't be safeguarded. As it stood, it was deemed a fool's endeavor to take an aggressive attitude against Abh ships without resolving to go to all-out war. However, it was highly questionable whether the Martinese, who hadn't even known of the existence of the **Empire** until a mere decade prior, knew any of that. In fact, if they had known, they wouldn't have attacked the *Baucbiruch*.

“So, were there any casualties among the crew?” asked Jint, changing the subject.

“None whatsoever. Ninety percent of the crew didn't even realize we had gotten attacked to begin with.”

“That's a relief,” he replied, though his self-esteem as a Martinese did get wounded. “Did you get attacked out of nowhere?”

“Yes, we did. They gave us no warning.”

“Why in heavens did they go and...”

“Perhaps they found our continual low-orbit revolutions trying for negotiations objectionable,” said Yestesh calmly. “We were attacked from the surface.”

Jint had already been informed of this through the report he’d read. He reckoned this was a half-baked state of affairs — if the attack had come from a force up in space, then they would’ve riled the ire of the **Star Forces**, which would then attempt to eradicate all hidden enemy fleets. An attack from the surface, however, wasn’t liable to change anything at all.

“Even if that’s the case, I still don’t get it,” said Jint. “Don’t they know attacking a ship from the surface isn’t going to have any effect...?”

“I was secretly hoping you would be able to explain it to me, Lonh-*Dreur*.” Yestesh’s tone was dripping with low-key disappointment.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t live up to your expectations.”

The **transporter** arrived at the conference room. They moved to the table in the center, and listened to the official report.

Above the flower garden that extended across the room, the map of *Martinh* was suspended in the air.

“The numbers of hostile forces on the surface is estimated at around twenty thousand,” began Yestesh. “They are principally composed of the Ma’tye 12th Division of the People’s Sovereign Stellar Union.”

“The PSSU, huh,” said Jint, a little surprised. He was aware that the **Empire’s** enemy was the Three Nations Alliance, which included the PSSU. But he always ended up chalking up the nations besides the United Humankind as the UH’s second bananas. Plus, it would have been less surprising if they’d been troops from the Greater Alkont Republic.

Each of the interstellar powers found securing the loyalty of their constituents a significant challenge. The **Humankind Empire of Abh** alone was totally unconcerned, expecting no loyalty out of the **landworld citizens** of its star

systems. On the contrary, they wanted the land peoples under their rule to spend no time thinking about the world beyond their planets, and to focus on making their respective **landworlds** as wealthy as possible. Those oddballs who did care about worlds beyond had a place in the Empire as **imperial citizens**.

Unlike the Empire, the other four nations did worry themselves over questions of nationalist loyalty, each trying to solve the issue in their own ways. The UH was the most zealous, as they were expending almost *poignant* amounts of effort attempting to homogenize the culture of all the planetary societies under them. Then again, only outside observers were so prone to deem such efforts moving. There were many among the direct recipients of the zeal of the UH's interstellar government who cringed and recoiled. Various currents of strife and dissension existed, especially in the star systems that joined the UH in recent times.

By comparison, the Greater Alkont Republic was a rather more compact nation, yet even they had not succeeded in painting all their systems in a single stroke of homogenization. They were only barely managing to maintain interstellar hegemony through the prominence of the politics, economics, culture, and sheer population of its main star system (named "Alkont").

The **landworlds** of the Hania Federation were made up of settlers from the Sumei Star System and their descendants. They didn't need to put in much effort for cultural homogeneity to persist. They did, however, have a small number of systems with heterogeneous cultures, and moreover, the localism of each star system was on the rise as of late, chipping into the overall homogeneity.

Finally, there was the People's Sovereign Stellar Union, which had given up on arousing patriotic sentiment toward the interstellar government among the general public. In other words, they were the Lander interstellar power that ran things under the most Abh-like philosophy. Each star system had great autonomy, and the coalition was a loose one. Each star system even maintained its own army. The PSSU was, in essence, a mere mish-mash of affiliated systems. Of course, this made its confederate-style military less cost-effective than a single overarching military force would be, but it seemed they put up with that as part and parcel of the concept of a federation.

From what Jint's **wristgear** was telling him, the Ma'tye 12th Division was officially the "Ma'tye Star System Land Army 12th Division." He also learned that Ma'tye was a run-of-the-mill system of around two hundred million.

According to **Star Forces** analyses, the PSSU was the most lacking in enthusiasm for the war. It looked as though they were only participating because they felt the UH more of a threat than the **Empire**. If they'd refused to enter the fray alongside the UH, they were risking war *against* the UH.

In any case, it was incomparable in terms of strength. It would've gotten crushed as a side note in the war, if the UH weren't doing most of the fighting. If the UH were to win this war even without the help of the PSSU, then the UH would at some point wage battle against the PSSU due to breach of treaty, which would inevitably lead to the PSSU's defeat and forced homogenization. On the other hand, if they lost the war against the **Empire** fighting alongside the UH, the lives of ordinary people across all of its various **landworlds** would remain unchanged. And while war was a detestable institution, if they had to fight someone no matter what, they decided they'd rather face off against the **Empire**.

Given all that, Jint couldn't grasp why a stranded PSSU division wouldn't surrender. Of course, this didn't mean that the PSSU had officially made that tough decision. This was based on one-sided speculation on the part of the **Empire**. Even if it ended up being true, it was just the general opinion. Upon reflection, it was comical to assume that every single soldier was weary of war. It wouldn't be outlandish to assume the opposite — that the Ma'tye 12th Division was composed almost entirely of troops who saw the value in fighting the Empire. It would certainly make sense of the desperation of their struggles.

"I don't know how seriously to take the possibility, but perhaps the administration is in effect under military occupation," said Yestesh.

"Is it the enemy commander who's speaking on behalf of the planet?"

"No. Formally, it's Corint Till," said Yestesh, saying Till Corint's name in the Abh order. "But there's a chance he is acting as a puppet."

Till? A puppet? Yeah, right, thought Jint. But ten whole years had passed since his and Till's tragic parting. People change, and he didn't delude himself that

he'd known every inch of the man when they were together. Jint had been a child, and he'd only ever known "home-life Till."

"I hope that's what's going on," said Lafier. "If the **landworld** says they want to be left alone, it will be put off for later. But if they're being forced to say that by another nation's military, the **Empire** can't let that stand."

"It'd be convenient for us, that's for sure," he said. His voice had come out so tight it startled even him.

Lafier looked suspicious. "Are you angry?"

"I'm just worried." Jint faced Yestesh: "They may be a PSSU land division, but even they must know shooting a ship in orbit from the surface is futile. It wouldn't even serve as a warning."

"Yes. That's why we regard the possibility as low. Civilized people with common sense with regards to how the galaxy functions wouldn't do this. The attack was the sort of folly a land people long isolated from the rest of humanity might perpetrate, however."

Ouch. They've forgotten I'm a member of that long-isolated land people, the two of them, thought Jint.

"Now then, here is where the **laser cannon** was fired," said Yestesh, as a point on the map flashed.

"Beeg Charl." Jint smiled bittersweetly, and explained to the investigator what that peculiar phrase meant. "It's the name of the **laser cannon**. Well, one of the four laser cannons — the 'Forr Da Antohbeeta,' in Martinese. There's also Beeg Al, Beeg Bill, and Beeg Dew. We constructed them before our world had even learned of **planar space navigation**. I thought they'd have dismantled them ages ago, but I guess they're still around."

"It must be because there was no hurry to do so. They can't have felt them a threat."

Once again, Jint's patriotic heart took a stinging hit, but he couldn't let that show. "Could you recreate this ship's trajectory on the map?"

"Certainly."

A curved line appeared on the map, representing the *Bauchiruch's* course. Its altitude was also displayed.

"If that's the course the ship took, then three of the Forr Da Antohbeeta would've been able to attack simultaneously," said Jint. "But they didn't, which I think means they weren't aiming to completely destroy the ship."

"So it was a warning after all?"

"If that's what the **landworld administration** is thinking, then this is an indication that they either can't or don't want to turn back."

"I see," said Yestesh, nodding. "But isn't that what you would call a warning?"

"Not necessarily," said Jint, shaking his head. "They weren't expressing their will to the Abh. They were expressing their will to *themselves*."

"But what makes you say that? And I'm afraid I don't understand what you're saying to begin with. Why would they need to express their will to themselves? I know that I, at the very least, don't need to."

"The head of the government... that is to say, *Martinh's Landworld Citizen Representative* was never an autocratic ruler, and I'm betting that hasn't changed since I lived there. There may have been strong opposition to maintaining independence. I think it's pretty safe to assume there was, actually. So firing Beeg Charl was probably effective in silencing the opposition. It wasn't meant to sway us — it was meant to sway other planetary factions."

"I just can't understand it," said Yestesh, utterly perplexed. "Isn't an act on the level of firing at a foreign vessel something that should be carried out only after securing a consensus?"

"That would have been the wiser way to do things," said Jint, smiling. "But that's the way it's done on my home planet. Creating fait accompli, that is."

Lafier looked bereft of words.

"Well, if **Your Excellency** says so, then let's take it as true," he said, not looking particularly impressed. "Setting that aside, let's focus on the future. If the **landworld administration** has made up their minds — which, to be quite honest, it didn't even occur to me that they might not have — but either way,

what do we do from here?”

“I think our first step is to tell them this isn’t the fait accompli they want it to be.”

“It’s true that this ship’s scars are so slight as to not warrant retribution.”

“Exactly. And I don’t think *Martinh* has the firepower to dish out damage serious enough to ever warrant any retribution.” Jint kept the word *unfortunately* to himself. “Not that I know anything about the Ma’tye 12th Division’s firepower, obviously.”

“If they’re furnished with specialized equipment, then it’s a different story, but as it stands, I don’t believe they have the ability to shoot ships out of orbit, either.”

“In that case, I’ll go talk to them. But I want to go with the minimum possible number of people. The **antimatter fuel factory** construction team’s scheduled to arrive shortly, but I’ll put this here.”

“Of course.”

“But I can come with you, can’t I?” asked Lafier.

“Sure. ’Cause this time, I’m probably not leaving the ship anyway.”

“I wouldn’t let you. Nothing good ever happens when you touch down on a **landworld**.”

“I came back safe and sound from my visit to Delktu, didn’t I?”

“You spent all of your time there tormenting your own liver,” she pointed out.

After a while, Yestesh finished his briefing and exited the conference room. Another job was apparently waiting for him. Jint remained there, gazing at the map of Martin. Would the day he could once again walk the land of fantastical lifeforms ever come?

“Jint,” Lafier called from behind.

“What?”

“I must apologize to you.”

“You mean for saying it’d be better for us if the planet was under military

occupation?” he said, looking back at her.

“Right,” Lafier nodded. “It was thoughtless of me. I know this **landworld** was your home, but sometimes I forget.”

“I do, too,” Jint smiled. “But it is my home, nonetheless. I don’t want a ground war to happen here. Of course, a ground war would be the pits anywhere else, too.”

Space battles were different. The vast majority of people in ship-on-ship combat were **soldiers**, and those that weren’t were there to serve. Sure, levels of enthusiasm varied between them, and some may have entered the army thinking there would never actually be a war, but at the end of the day, space battles were waged between those who resolved to fight. Ground battles, however, inevitably involved innocent civilians.

“Yes, naturally. I don’t like ground wars, either. Just the thought of enemies and allies fighting while breathing the same air makes me shudder.”

Jint had a feeling Lafier disliked ground wars for very different reasons, but he decided not to pursue it.

“But for argument’s sake, what would you do if they were under an occupation?” she asked.

“That’s a tough nut to crack,” he replied. “If they’re still under occupation, we can’t exactly choose to leave them be. But then that’d lead to a ground war on my home planet.”

“What’s your ultimate goal for your **star fief**?”

“That’s easy. I wanna just forget about the wider galaxy and live a peaceful life on my **landworld**. So, if we don’t attack the space-bound facilities of the **Empire**, I don’t need to worry myself about trading, either.”

“What a waste. By not engaging in commerce, you’re throwing away ninety percent of your potential wealth.”

“And be stinking rich with just ten percent. Besides, having loads of money doesn’t mean a thing if you’ve got no way to spend it.” Jint snapped his fingers, having remembered something. “Oh yeah, I’ve gotta repay my debt to the

House of Clybh. But there's no rush, right?"

"Not in my eyes," said Lafier. "The best client for a money lender is one who pays their interest and borrows for a long time."

"Good." Jint's eyes returned to the map. "Why's **planar space navigation** gotta exist, anyway? If the speed of light were the absolute limit, then I and the people of my planet wouldn't have had to suffer so."

Lafier chuckled. "My father often makes the same sort of remarks."

"**His Highness the King of Clybh?** But why? If it weren't for **planar space navigation**, the **Empire** couldn't keep going."

"If there were no **planar space navigation**, then we wouldn't have *needed* to build the **Empire**. He claims we would still be roaming the galaxy like our ancestors."

"Is that a more blissful existence?"

"My father seems to find the idea charming enough. It's like he was born too late."

"Born too late, huh? I think the same could be said for the people of my home. But while *Fiac Lartr Clybr* is pining for the distant past, the Martinese are pining for an age all of the adults experienced directly. That's why they may be super fixated on it."

"And you mean to turn back the clock for them?"

"That's not in the cards. There's no way we could ever return to total isolation. But we can give them that illusion. If we don't trade with other systems, the people won't ever lay eyes on products from other **territory-nations**, and if we block information, then they can live without the fear that comes with the active awareness of being a tiny corner of a vast interstellar power."

"Would that bring your **landworld citizens** true happiness? Let me assure you my father's nostalgia for a bygone age is a quirk of his own. I, for one, don't believe for a second that the Space Roving Age was better, and most Abhs don't, either."

“It’s not at all a rare opinion among my **landworld citizens**, though.”

“But if they wish to wrap themselves in a happy fiction, then everyone must constantly make sure reality never pokes a hole in the veil.”

“I know. There must be loads who prefer reality — especially the generation born after mine. And for their sakes, I’ll give them the opportunity to face it. That’s the best idea I could think up, anyway. The best, for my fellow citizens.”

“I see you’ve given it a lot of thought,” she said admiringly.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but could you do me a favor and acknowledge I’ve got enough grey matter to squirt out a thought or two once in a while?” he sighed, poking at his head.

“Your gray matter occasionally produces some erratic ideas.”

“Really?”

“Yep. That’s why I sometimes have to wonder whether you’re thinking anything at all.”

“Well, you are observant. There are those times,” he admitted. “But this is my home. Trust me, I’ve thought about it. A whole lot, actually. I feel I’ve got a life mission here.”

“And not in the **Star Forces**?”

“If I stay in the **Star Forces**, I’d just be one of tens of thousands of **quartermaster starpilots**. I’ve done a decent job of it, but there’s any number who can easily replace me. But as of now, there’s only one **lord** who knows the ins and outs of *Martinh*.”

“You have a point. I can’t speak for other worlds, but for this one, you are qualified in a way that’s hard to come by for **lieges** the galaxy over. I’m sure everyone will look on your work with gratitude.”

“I doubt it,” said Jint, his heart cold. “My father and I must be in the textbooks as traitors. He, the man who sold out the planet he was born and raised on to the **Empire** to become a **noble**, and his son, the brazen-faced child who’d wield the scepter after him. I don’t know which of us is more hated, but at the very least I know I’m Villain No. 2 in this story.”

“You’re such a pessimist.”

“No way. I’m looking forward to it. I think I might live to see my name used in a spicy proverb.”

“All right then.” Lafier stared him in the face.

“What?” he said, unsettled.

“It’s nothing much. I was just thinking I’m glad I took leave.”

Planar space navigation ain’t all bad, he thought. Without it, I would never have met Lafier.

Jint’s **wristgear** beeped. He peered at the lines of text that floated on screen. It was a short message from the captain, bidding him to come to the bridge at once. Which was all well and good, but there was a phrase in the message he’d never heard before. “Lafier? Do you know what a **‘trample-blitz squadron’** is?”

Chapter 6: The *Saibec Cimecotr* (Military Confidentiality Barrier)

From the bridge of the *Baucbiruch*, Jint gazed on as **warship** after unfamiliar warship emerged from the **Vorlash Portal**.

“Could you get me in touch with the **Commandant** right away?” he asked the **Ship Commander** of the *Baucbiruch*, *Logdonh*.

“Let’s try.” *Logdonh* nodded at the **Communications Officer**.

“**Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** is currently in communication with the **Vorlash Count’s Manor** using all lines except for the emergency line,” reported the officer. “Shall we use the emergency line?”

Logdonh shot Jint a questioning look. Jint mulled it over. He had something to grill **Commandant** Atosryua about, and preferably sooner rather than later. But did it warrant using the emergency line?

The reason **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** was using up the regular lines was to make arrangements for supplies. They must be in quite the hurry to resupply. And that wasn’t all — exchanging such huge amounts of information meant that not only were they rushing, but also that they were going to receive massive shipments of supplies. Resupplying at normal volumes already took time. Jint was a **quartermaster starpilot**, so he knew that better than most.

In any case, he’d have plenty of chances to talk up until the time **Squadron 1** finished resupplying and left the **territory-nation**.

“Let’s wait,” said Jint. “As it stands, the **Commandant** must be busy. Just let her know that I’d like to speak with her, through the **Vorlash Count’s Manor**.”

“Then shall we wait for a message from the other end to respond to?” asked *Logdonh*.

“No. I just expect the **Commandant** to be curious enough to reach out to us in between calls with the **Count’s Manor**.”

*Come to think of it, he thought, there are two counts' manors in this **territory-nation** now: the one that's supposed to be here, the **Vorlash Count's Manor**, and also the **Hyde Count's Manor**.*

"Dropping them a line first is the thing to do. As soon as a line becomes free, try calling the **Commandant**. I'll be waiting in the conference room."

"Do you want to make the call confidential?" asked the captain — the final question.

Jint nodded. "Please do. Can't hurt to play it safe."

And so he waited for Atosryua in the conference room, together with Lafier and Yestesh. The air was heavy and awkward, as none of them were conversing. At last, Jint's **wristgear** rang.

"The line has been put through. Are you free?" came **Ship Commander Logdonh's** voice.

"Of course." Jint got to his feet.

Lafier and Yestesh also got up and straightened their postures. At once, a hologram of Atosryua appeared.

"I apologize," said Atosryua. "I should have prioritized paying you a call, but it's all been so hectic I neglected to do so."

"We're just pleased to see you in good health, *Lymh Faibdacr*," said Lafier, calling her by her **noble rank**.

"I thank you kindly, **Your Highness**. It's lovely to see you in good health as well."

"It's been too long, **Commandant** Atosryua," said Jint, calling her by her military title and bowing before the hologram.

"It hasn't been so long," she said, shrugging slightly and staring at them in turn. "I did expect to meet you again someday, but I didn't expect it to happen so quickly."

"Me, neither," said Lafier. "What a huge coincidence."

"Coincidence?" Atosryua suddenly laughed. "Well, I suppose you can certainly

think of it that way, **Your Highness.**”

“What other way is there to think about it?”

“I can’t say. There’s no punching bag here for me.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jint, but all she returned was a smile, so he dropped the subject. “Congratulations on your promotion.”

“Thank you,” smiled Atosryua. “It’s such a pleasure to see my former subordinates are doing well out there, and that’s all the more true with you two. I’m reminded of the dinner we enjoyed together; it almost feels like I’m paying a social call to a couple of friends. Like the war is over. The idea we’d cross paths so soon after never even crossed my mind. By the way, who is your companion?”

Yestesh introduced himself.

“A pleasure,” said Atosryua. “Now then, on to business. I have an idea what you’ve called me for, but allow me to ask.”

“First, a question,” said Jint, keeping it brief. He knew she was busy. “Entry to the **Countdom of Hyde** has been cut off. Could you tell us why?”

Jint had actually been happy to hear this “Trample-Blitz Squadron 1” was going to resupply at the **Vorlash Countdom** before setting out for Hyde. Jint had been planning to revisit his home aboard the *Baucbiruch*, but only because he’d had no other choice. *Martinh* likely lacked the firepower necessary to take down the *Baucbiruch*, but he couldn’t shake his anxiety completely. But now he’d been told Squadron 1, a corps comprised of bleeding-edge ships, would be stopping by as well. The *Baucbiruch* had been a first-class **patrol ship** before the lion’s share of its armor and armaments had been removed, but he felt much safer on a state-of-the-art warship, and for good reason. The safer the ship, the better. In fact, if at all possible, he’d have liked the “raid ships” to accompany the *Baucbiruch* so he could use one when communicating with the **landworld**. Alas, the **conveyance ship** that had brought them news of the coming of Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 also notified them that entry into the **Hyde Countdom** was forbidden for the time being. Those orders came from **Military Command Headquarters**, lending them the same weight as an edict from the Empress herself. Even Jint, as **Lord** of the **Countdom**, couldn’t overrule it. To

make matters worse, they had been given neither a reason nor a timeframe. And needless to say, knowing when they could enter was crucial, as they had schedules to draft and plans to implement. If they were barred from entry for a sufficiently long period, then they had no choice but to board one of the ships of Squadron 1.

Unfortunately, because they didn't know the purpose behind the squadron going there, they didn't know whether there was even time to talk, either. For all they knew, the squadron's objective was to launch a space-raid on the planet. Maybe they were to burn down the hybrid-functionality buildings all Martinese lived in. If so, they had to prevent that at all costs.

"Your **soldier number-codes**," said Atosryua.

"Huh?" Jint hadn't expected that.

"Pull yourself together. You're not currently my subordinate. In other words, you're an outsider to me. I can't just chuck out military secrets like they're nothing. I need to check your clearance."

"01.00.093768," said Lafier.

"21.17.839951," said Jint.

"It'd be pointless for me," said Yestesh. "I'm a reserve officer, so I'm not privy to military secrets except in special circumstances."

"I'm sorry, **Investigator** Yestesh," said Atosryua.

"Please, don't mind me. If I can't enter the **Countdom of Hyde** and fulfill my work duties, then so be it. And it's the job of Lonh-*Dreur* to speak to the **Commandant** at any rate."

"I'm afraid it seems I'm not allowed to tell Lonh-*Dreur Haïder*, either," said Atosryua. "**Quartermaster Rearguard Starpilot** Lynn isn't cleared to know. We can tell you after we've entered the **Countdom**, though."

"You can't be serious," said Jint, astonished.

"I'm really sorry. But I know you realize there's nothing to be done. You're a **soldier**, too."

"What about me?" asked Lafier.

“You’re an **Imperial**. You’re cleared to know, **Vice Hecto-Commander** Abliar. More so than me, even. If you were to ask after the old name of my punching bag, I’d be forced to spill.”

“I see,” said Lafier, who faced Jint: “What do we do? Should I hear what she has to say, even though by all rights, you should be the one talking to her?”

“I’m sure I don’t need to tell you, *Fiac Lartnér*,” said Atosryua, “but just in case — you’re forbidden to tell *Lonh-Dreur*.”

“I know that. I’m a **soldier**, too.”

Jint hesitated. He trusted Lafier, but he couldn’t entrust everything to her. The lives and livelihoods of the people of his home were on the line. “Let me ask you one question.”

“You’re free to ask.”

“You’re not going to launch space strikes on the planet, are you?”

“Is that why you’ve been glaring like that this whole time?” said Atosryua, a smile playing on her lips.

“Am I not cleared to know the answer to that, either?” he remarked.

“No,” she replied without hesitation, but not in a cold or cutting way. “Maybe **Investigator** Yestesh can ask me a question I’m allowed to answer?”

“Yes,” said Yestesh. He cleared his throat. “The **Empire** holds to a handful of general principles. One of them is that unless there is some pressing urgency, the celestial bodies belonging to a **star fief**, especially a **landworld**, cannot be attacked without the approval of the system’s **liege**. To your knowledge, has that principle perhaps been revised?”

“It hasn’t budged a micron,” she declared. “Does this assuage your concerns, *Lonh-Dreur*?”

“Not quite yet,” he persisted. “Do you believe my **territory** to be in a pressing state of emergency?”

“Not at the moment.”

“And further down the line?”

Atosryua furrowed her brow. A moment later: “How nice it would be to see the future, Lonh-*Dreur*. But much to my chagrin, I can’t.”

Jint stared hard at Atosryua’s face. She still looked as gorgeous as all Abhs, but he thought he saw a tinge of woe in her expression. He hoped it was nothing, but...

“I beg you,” Jint whispered to the **Royal Princess**. “If there’s a chance of a space strike, you’ve got to put a stop to it, no matter what.”

“I don’t have that authority,” Lafier whispered back. “But I’ll try.”

“I’m begging you,” he reiterated.

Jint understood full well that, **royal princess** or no, she didn’t have the power to block a military program. But he was out of options.

He faced Atosryua again: “Before you leave, I have a favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

“Please drop us off at the **Hyde Countdom**,” he requested.

At present, the only way to enter the star system of his home planet was to hitch a ride with Trample-Blitz Squadron 1. Alongside the raid ships, they might be able to cope with any unforeseen contingencies. It could be the case that he’d have his hands totally tied, but it sure beat stewing over the circumstances of Hyde from the next system over.

“I don’t mind. But you won’t be allowed to touch down on the **landworld**, Lonh-*Dreur*.”

“I know. I just need to get permission to communicate with the **landworld** from orbit.”

“I can’t promise you’ll be allowed to.”

“But it’s not impossible, right?”

“All I can promise is that I’ll try my best to create an opportunity for you.”

“That’s enough for me.”

“But how will you return? There’s no guarantee we’ll come back here.”

“When the order to unseal the **Hyde Portal** arrives, it’ll reach this place, too, won’t it? I’ll have them keep this ship on standby here. If you could have it come give us word when the time comes, I’d be fine with that. I’ll have you pick us up.”

“We might not be able to wait until your ship comes,” said Atosryua. “You might end up having to spend two or three days in an escape pod. Is that okay with you?”

Jint winced at the prospect, but immediately snapped to. “Well, if I could get you to drop me off at the Duchy of Estohto, I can catch a flight from there.

Atosryua nodded. “Understood, Lonh-*Dreur*. I’m permitting you to hitch a ride. You can use the *Flicaubh* — there are acquaintances of yours aboard that ship who I’m sure you regard fondly. And there’s already someone who’s hitching a ride on it, too.”

“Who, ma’am?”

“I can’t say.”

“Is that confidential, too?”

“Heavens no. I just don’t want to ruin the surprise. Just because I come from a noble house without a pedigree doesn’t mean I’d be so gauche.”

“Oh, okay. Understood,” he replied tersely, not really in the mood to trade quips with the **Commandant**. “Now then, I’ll take my leave.”

“See you some other time, **Quartermaster Rearguard** Lynn. I really regret that I can’t give you the details of this little trek at this stage.”

“Me too.”

A while later, and Lafier alone was left in the conference room, facing Atosryua’s hologram. “Now then, let’s hear it, **Baroness of Febdash**.” *I’m fairly certain Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 just aims to do training exercises there*, she thought. It would provide the finishing touches on their familiarization voyages. While the **Hyde Countdom** was a frontier **territory-nation** that couldn’t provide much in the way of support, this was a time of war. Perhaps the military brass wanted its ships to train in sectors more akin to actual warzones.

“Our squadron’s objective is to conduct combat training exercises in the **Countdom of Hyde**,” said Atosryua, her tone stiff and formal. It appeared as though she’d decided, at this juncture, to place more importance on imperial court hierarchy than on **military rank**.

Lafier felt a wave of relief. At the same time, she had to wonder whether this was worthy of confidentiality to begin with.

“However, our **squadron** consists of twelve ships.”

“What do you mean?” She tilted her head in puzzlement, but soon hit on what Atosryua was insinuating. There were only six ships in Vorlash.

“You split the squadron in two?”

Atosryua nodded wordlessly. “The purpose of the exercise is to bring the **Hyde Portal** under control and defend it from the other half.”

“So the other six ships are the ‘enemy’ of the assignment, heading towards the **Hyde Portal** from the opposite direction.”

“That is correct.”

“There’s no contact between halves?”

“We can’t exactly be in communication with the enemy, no.”

“In that case...” The worst possible outcome came to Lafier’s mind. “The other ships, the ‘enemy,’ might reach the **Hyde Portal** before you.”

“If they’re not doing everything in their power to do so, they would have to be charged for insubordination.”

“But what happens if the ‘enemy’ enters the **Portal** first, and gets attacked by the **landworld**...”

“I don’t know,” said Atosryua, shaking her head. “But a counterattack is very much in the realm of possibility. In fact, so long as their level of firepower is unclear, a counterattack would be the obvious course of action.”

“According to Jint, the **landworld** can’t have enough firepower to be a threat.”

“But there isn’t a way for us to make that judgment. Not for me or for my

‘enemy’ ships.”

“Can you not afford to take more discretion than normal?”

“I’ll have the **Count of Hyde** submit the relevant information to us. I don’t have the power to compel him to do so, but the circumstances being what they are, I’m sure he’ll be happy to oblige my request. Then I will make my judgment. Either way, we can’t inform the enemy unit about this.”

“You can’t get in touch with them, whatsoever?” Contacting them would mean canceling the exercise, but the **Commandant** had that authority.

“I cannot do that,” she told her, in no uncertain terms. “I believe this **squadron** can shift the tides of this war. And I’ve already sunk so much time into this exercise. Once you suspend it, you have to start all the way from the beginning. Given we’re at war, I’m afraid I must say that that’s just taking things too easy.”

“But if an unexpected contingency were to happen, then—!!”

“Delaying the deployment of this class of ship will have an impact on the war at large.”

Atosryua’s tightly pursed lips were sign enough this subject was over.

“Understood,” said Lafier, hanging her head. “I just want you to make sure to affect the **landworld** as little as possible.”

“Of course. A **landworld** is an asset to the **Empire**, and the **Star Forces** aiming their cannons against **landworld citizens** is the most reprehensible of misdeeds. Every **starpilot** should know that much,” she said, a faint smile on her lips. “The enemy commander, **Hecto-Commander** Roiryua, knows that slaughtering land peoples would tarnish his name. His counterattack would be carried out so as to yield as few casualties as possible.”

Jint eyed the flowers in the garden. They were bryanflowers.

They really are lackluster, he mused again. They were a rather depressing dull purple.

Then Lafier came along. “Don’t you need to prepare to transfer ships, Jint?”

“I’m ready.” Jint kept staring at the flowers. “What about you?”

“I’m ready, too. Do you want to bring these flowers with you?”

“Didn’t cross my mind,” said Jint. He put a hand to his forehead. “Nah, let’s leave them here. There are tons in bloom on the other side. Probably too many for anyone’s liking, in fact.”

“Do you plan to touch down onto the **landworld**?”

“If possible.”

“But...”

“What sort of exercise is **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** going to do?”

For a fleeting moment, a look of anguish flashed across her face. “I can’t say.”

“Is my asking some kind of hindrance?”

“Of course not,” said the **Royal Princess**, shaking her head.

“Then why...”

“You know why. Because it’s been made confidential.”

“You know what my Delktunian friend told me?” he said bitterly. At the moment, he didn’t care if this sparked a fight between them. “He said the Abh can’t flout the established order on a genetic level. Guess he was right. Can’t you think about it with your own damned head?”

“There is a tendency not to defy the established order, that is true,” she said, calmly intercepting Jint’s anger in a way that surprised him. “That is our lot in life.”

“Doesn’t that get under your skin?”

“Our fates are encoded in the four bases of our genes. That has never made me feel any lesser a human,” she asserted. “Is that not true for you, too?”

“I don’t have genes that define my fate.”

“So is your fate unrelated to your genes?”

Jint struggled for words. “...I can’t say for sure.”

A whistle resounded in the landing deck.

“I’m honored to see you here, *Fiac, Lonh.*” **Ship Commander** Sobash and the line of *Flicaubh* **starpilots** standing by his side saluted simultaneously.

“I thank you for giving us special permission to board, **Ship Commander,**” said Jint, with an air of solemnity.

“I give you my thanks as well,” said Lafier.

“I never dared to dream I would one day greet **Your Highness** or **Your Excellency** onto my own ship one day,” said Sobash.

“Please, don’t call me ‘*Lonh,*’” said Jint. “I may be on leave, but I’m still a **quartermaster rearguard.**”

“Then I suppose I should address you as **Quartermaster Rearguard** Lynn,” said Sobash, wasting no time reverting to his old way of speaking.

“I would be grateful if you could.”

Sobash turned to Lafier. “I can’t call you ‘**Ship Commander,**’ though. That’s my **title!**”

“Then it can’t be helped,” said Lafier, looking unironically rueful.

“Allow me to introduce you to the crew,” said Sobash.

“Of course,” Jint nodded. Apart from Ecryua, he was meeting them all for the first time. After he heard their names, Jint noticed something: “There’s no **clerk.**”

“That’s right. Unfortunately, the **clerk, Quartermaster Vanguard Starpilot Direrh,** is currently indisposed.”

“Ah, that makes sense. They’re in the middle of handling the big resupply.”

Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 was restocking all the more here in the **Countdom of Vorlash**, since they couldn’t exactly hope to resupply at their destination, the **Countdom of Hyde.**

“Even so, things seem awfully hectic,” said Lafier. “Are you working the **crewmembers** without break?”

“I’m afraid so. We simply don’t have a second to waste.”

“In that case, we might be imposing on you,” said Jint.

“Oh, not at all. You were a **clerk** yourself, so you probably aren’t aware, but non-clerk **starpilots** are actually rather free during resupply procedures. We’re just pretending to be busy with the **NCCs**. Although, we are busy compared to when we’re just cruising.” Sobash dismissed the rest of the crew besides Ecryua. “I’m sorry, but I must return to my work tasks for a moment. Let’s have ourselves a nice long chat after leaving port. **Vanguard** Ecryua, please show them around.”

Ecryua just saluted — her silent “roger.” “This way,” she said.

Jint and Lafier looked at each other, and ambled after her. Ecryua led them to the starpilot mess hall. Though **raid ships** were bigger than **assault ships**, it appeared they didn’t have the space for a lounge.

The moment they opened the door: “*Fiac Lartnér!*”

Immediately, a woman stepped forward and bowed deeply. Very deeply.

She’s got good balance, thought Jint, impressed.

She looked up, but Jint didn’t recognize her. Lafier, on the other hand...

“You’re that **imperial citizen**, ‘Sehrnye,’” she said, tentatively.

“I’m absolutely honored you remember me!” said Sehrnye, eyes tearing.

“What are you doing here?” asked Lafier.

“I heard **Your Highness’s** ship was attacked, so I couldn’t just stand there. There was a conveniently-timed flight, so I got aboard without a moment’s delay. Nothing could make me happier than seeing Your Highness is safe and sound with my own eyes. I’m so happy!”

Guess she hasn’t got any business with me, thought Jint, who took that as his cue to enter the mess hall. There were no **starpilots** to be seen, as they were still engaged in the work of resupplying, but there were two people, quietly sipping their drinks. “**NCC Leader** Paveryua!” he said, startled. He ended up asking the exact same question as Lafier: “What’re you doing here?”

“Hey there, **Quartermaster Starpilot**. It’s been a while,” said Paveryua. “Why am I here? Well, if you have to ask, I guess I’m just an extra.”

“What, you’re not gonna react to me being here?” complained Samson, who was seated beside him.

“I mean, I half-expected you to be here,” said Jint, making to take a seat alongside. “**Commandant** Atosryua did tell us we’d bump into old acquaintances.”

“No sitting,” muttered Ecryua.

“Huh? How come?”

“I’m taking you to your room.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I can spot it using the map of the ship,” said Jint.

“You can guide me, then,” said Lafier.

“Allow me to serve Your Highness on your way there,” said Sehrnye, to no one’s surprise.

Jint still couldn’t remember who she was. He tilted his head to the side as he watched the three ladies leave, before finally sitting down.

“What happened to the flotilla?” asked Jint, leaving the woman’s identity for later.

“I left it to the **Senior Ship Commander**,” said Samson. “Didn’t have a thing to do during cruise time anyway, so it worked out. It’s headed this way. It’s not as fast as this **squadron**, but it’s coming as fast as possible. I told everyone to park the ships here — as in, the **Vorlash Countdom** — unless ordered otherwise. Was that okay?”

“Yeah, of course,” Jint nodded. “So, did you leave to give the area a look-see?”

“Not as much as I did to see you. I’ve heard our new workplace isn’t exactly the picture of stability, so if I don’t talk it all out with **mine lord**, then I can’t post my subordinates at their stations. When this ship happened by, I took my chance to board, and here we are. Hyde’s their destination, too, they’re here in Vorlash resupplying, and they’re way faster than our flotilla.”

“I don’t mind talking, but I myself need to go see what it’s like out there.”

“I know. We’ll go together,” nodded Samson. “By the way, what happened to Mr. **Investigator**? I thought he’d be with us for sure.”

“I’m having him on standby. Looks like he doesn’t care for voyages where we spin our wheels without a timetable.”

Yestesh had mountains of work on the *Baucbiruch*. If the *résic mura* (former patrol ship) they were on had been cleared to accompany the *Baucbiruch*, it would have followed, but given the situation, it was more expedient to stay in the **Vorlash Countdom**. They didn’t know when they’d be able to return to the **Hyde Count’s Manor**.

“By the by,” said Jint, lowering his voice, “do you know what this exercise is about?”

“No,” said Samson, at normal volume. “I asked, but their lips were zipped. Are you saying they wouldn’t even tell a **lord** like you? Small wonder I’m out of the loop.”

“You can’t speculate?” Samson had been in the Forces for longer, and he’d been going alongside this squadron all this time; Jint figured he must have some idea.

“You want what my gut says?”

“By all means.”

“Well, as far as I know, there’s only one exercise that involves blockading a **territory-nation**. I reckon it’s a mock battle.”

“I know that much,” said Jint, slightly disappointed. “Any other thoughts you might have?”

“What are you so afraid of, **mine lord**? Don’t tell me you suspect this is an attack force set to strike *Martinh*?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” said Jint, shaking his head. Atosryua had at least done him the favor of shooting that possibility down. “I’d be more at ease if it were just this corps doing the mock battle; if they were to get attacked by the **landworld**, we could ensure the counterattack would be minimal. But if the other, ‘enemy’ corps gets to the **countdom** first, then the worst might happen.”

“I think you’re worrying over nothing,” said Samson. “I heard the *Baucbiruch* got attacked from the surface, too, of course. But the damage was barely notable, wasn’t it? Any **Star Forces** commander with their head screwed on is gonna ignore an attack that weak.”

“How can you be so calm? Guess it’s got nothing to do with you, huh?”

“Course it’s got to do with me. It’s the place that’ll be giving me work.”

“Yeah, you’ll have plenty of work up in space,” said Jint, his tone getting sharp.

“Sure, but having a **landworld** nearby to get away from it all is pretty indispensable,” replied Samson, pretending not to notice the barbs in Jint’s words. “Come to think of it, I’ve been meaning to ask you — has *Martinh* got any good booze?”

“I’ve got no idea,” he said, not having been there since early in his life. “What does it matter!?”

“Calm down already,” said Samson, his voice low but carrying. “I get how you feel.”

Jint was aware he was losing his cool. That didn’t mean he could just swallow down his crescendo of emotion. “Is that right?”

“If I ever had the slightest misgiving that my beautiful planet of Midgrat could be in harm’s way, I’d blow my lid, too. By comparison, you’re actually keeping it together, **mine lord**.”

“Please stop poking fun at me.”

“I’m not. It’s the honest truth. You seemed so composed when you entered that I thought you might not have realized there was a chance they were gonna run a training exercise in the **Hyde Countdom**. Though it didn’t take long to see through that veneer of calm.”

“Was it that obvious?” said Jint, finally beginning to pull himself back together again.

“Why do you think I’m praising you? And let me tell you, I’m truly ecstatic I get to wait upon mine wise and great lord.”

“I’m getting a feeling you’re poking even more fun at me.”

“I lack your shining virtue.”

“Never mind — what do you think I should do? Is there anything I *can* do?”

“Sorry, that’s not really a question I can answer.”

“So there really is nothing I can do, in the end.”

“I’m just saying, don’t ask me. I’ve got no clue if there’s even an ‘enemy’ corps, let alone which’ll get there first. But you’re on this ship right now. If this ship gets there faster, you may be able to prevent an attack from happening to begin with. That’ll cut the probability of an incident in half. And wouldn’t that be amazing?”

“But can we really put a stop to it?”

“If push comes to shove, are you willing to mutiny?”

“Mutiny?” Jint was dumbfounded. The idea had never occurred to him.

“Mutiny. How about you take the **bridge**, and attack the **flagship**? They really won’t have time to care about surface strikes then.”

Jint interpreted this as a joke, and smiled. “Would you be a pal and back me up, if that happens?”

“I dunno,” said Samson, tilting his head in doubt. “Guess it depends on the circumstances. Don’t wanna start a fight we can’t win.”

“Please don’t expect suicidal levels of loyalty from me,” said Paveryua. “I’d really hate to get tossed into the **Abh hell**.”

“Oh, there’s no need to fear the **Abh hell**.”

“What makes you say that?”

“**Ship Commander** Sobash is a sensible man. He’d grant us a painless death before we ever got dragged to the **Abh hell**.”

“You plan on imposing on **Vice Hecto-Commander** Sobash to the very end? When did you get to be such a degenerate, **Inspector Supervisor**?”

“‘Get to be’? I was just holding myself back in front of my subordinates.”

“You sure pulled the wool over our eyes.”

Samson looked Jint’s way: “In any case, this is where this chat ends. Maybe you’ll be able to do something. Maybe you won’t. You’re the **Lord** of a frontier **territory-nation**, we’re just your **servant vassals**, and you’re squaring off against the **Empire**. You don’t have all the power. If, in the end, you don’t do what you could’ve done, then you can gnash your teeth all you like. But only after.”

Chapter 7: *Bainecoth Üécr Sauder Haïder* (Hyde Portal-Sea Training Exercises)

“Attention. This is your **Ship Commander**,” came Sobash’s voice. “Just now, the training exercise has been declassified. Crewmembers should check the details through their **wristgears** as soon as they’re free to.”

Jint heard the announcement, ears pricked up, while lying in bed in his starpilot quarters. He activated his **wristgear**.

“To summarize,” continued Sobash, “it’s in the flow of things to follow up the navigational exercise with a battle exercise. I believe you’ve all cottoned onto the fact that half of our fellow ships aren’t with us. The other six were headed to the **Hyde Portal** from the opposite direction. Our first assignment was to see which half will reach the **Countdom of Hyde** first. I regret to inform you we were beaten to the chase.”

Jint leapt out of bed. The details of the exercise were displayed on his **wristgear**, but they were no longer a priority to read. Closing that file for now, he promptly initiated the procedure to ask permission to enter the **bridge**, then threw on his clothes as he waited for approval.

“In other words, our ‘enemy’ has already made it to the **Countdom**. As such, for the second phase of the exercise, we will be the ones attacking them. Do not be upset simply because we lost Stage One. Stage Two is where our mettle will be tested. We are scheduled to arrive at the **Hyde Portal** in twelve hours. This will cap off this round of training. All hands, rest your bodies in preparation, and treat it as though it’s an actual battle.”

Before the broadcast was over, Jint was already headed for the bridge. He had yet to be granted permission. Around the time he arrived, permission came.

Jint used the one-time-only temporary **EM wave crest-key** to open the door.

“I’m sorry,” said Sobash as soon as he saw Jint’s face. “We don’t know what’s

going on in the **Hyde Countdom** yet. All we know is that the ‘enemy’ is already there.”

“I see,” he said. He could feel himself deflating. *Let’s look at it optimistically. If there was some kind of emergency, the exercise would get canceled. And it’s not, so Martin must be safe.*

Sadly, this wasn’t quite enough to assuage himself. What guarantee was there that swatting down a **landworld** would even register as an “emergency” to the **starpilots** of the **Star Forces**?

“I don’t want to be presumptuous, but could I please be allowed to stay here on the **bridge** until the end of the exercise?”

“Presumptuous? Why would that be presumptuous?” he smiled. “Are you saying you didn’t board in order to view and study the exercise? We don’t mind one bit, naturally.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“I’ll have a chair arranged for you. Why don’t you go eat breakfast in the meantime? I’m sure you just got out of bed.”

One hour until they reached the **Hyde Portal**.

“**Ship Commander**,” called **Rearguard** Yatesh. “An **inter-bubble communication** from the **flagship**. ‘Send a **conveyance ship** to conduct reconnaissance.’”

“Reply with a roger,” said Sobash. “**Vanguard** Ecryua, I’m making you the **conveyance ship**’s **Skipper**. Prepare at once to depart.”

Ecryua stood up to salute, and turned heel in a manner strictly in line with military etiquette.

“Mr. Sobash,” said Jint, who also lifted himself from his seat. “Do you mind if I go, too?”

Sobash knitted his brows, but soon he nodded. “I’ll allow it, Lonh-*Dreur*.”

“You’re the best,” said Jint. He then told Ecryua, “I’m in your hands.”

“I’m just carrying out my mission,” she stated. “I’m not doing anything for

you.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I’d also like to come. Can this ship’s **conveyance ship** only seat two?” asked Lafier.

Ecryua nodded in reply.

“Then I’m out of luck,” said Lafier, before facing Jint: “You had best be careful, and return in one piece.”

“Thank you.”

“Do be careful,” said Sobash. “And don’t forget to pack motion sickness drugs.”

“What do you mean?”

“It might not have been wise to give you permission after all,” he said, assessing Jint’s body. “Your skeletal frame is too brittle.”

“Uh... huh...” Jint cast his eyes at Ecryua. She was as expressionless as always. “Um... Is her piloting style really that...?” he asked Sobash.

“It is,” he said, looking concerned. “I should probably warn you not to go.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m going,” said Jint.

Upon exiting the bridge, Ecryua muttered: “What was the **Ship Commander** so worried about?”

“Beats me,” answered Jint.

Including the *Flicaubh*’s, the Blue Team of **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** sent out a total of three conveyance ships.

“**Hyde Portal** in E-minus five minutes,” murmured Ecryua. “We’re set to **split space-times** one minute later.”

Guess she’s paying her passenger a little consideration, mused Jint.

The space-scenery was then projected on the surrounding walls.

“Thank you,” said Jint, believing it was another act of consideration for him.

He had no *frocragh* to perceive the vicinity, after all.

“It’s not for you,” said Ecryua. “I just like this view.”

The inside of the space-time bubble was always gray. Their two fellow conveyance ships could be seen amidst the gray, with theirs, the *Flicaubh*’s conveyance ship, right in the middle. The vessels to the left and right were gradually flying apart from each other.

“Space-time splitting.”

The two ships got swallowed by the wall of gray at separate points and disappeared. The places where they got swallowed shone in rainbow colors. Ecryua looked with fascination at the rainbow shafts of light on either side. And she had every right to — the circular rainbow that manifested when large amounts of space-time particles collided blew the rainbows over the surfaces of planets out of the water. As the bands of light spread, the colors progressively faded, until at last, they became indistinguishable with the gray. But that whole process was breathtaking.

“Hyde Portal in E-minus one. Accelerating.”

“Ah, hold up!” Heeding Sobash’s warning, Jint tried to check whether his **seatbelt** was securely fastened.

“No.”

The conveyance ship commenced acceleration. Jint’s body dug into his seat. His delicate Lander bones started creaking in short order. He tried to object, but his voice died in his throat.

“Thirty seconds... twenty seconds...”

Ecryua’s countdown was the height of serenity. It couldn’t be clearer this level of acceleration was as nothing to her. On the contrary, she seemed to be enjoying it.

“Ten, nine, eight...” With each passing second, she started sounding more amped.

Oh, she’s enjoying this all right.

“Passing through!” In that moment, she shouted with pure joy.

Suddenly, Jint's body flew to the right.

In a small corner of his mind, Jint recalled the modest battle he'd been a party to in the **Febdash Barony**. Lafier's piloting had been rather more delicate back then, compared to this rough-and-tumble ride.

Thankfully, his seatbelt had been on right. Otherwise, Jint would have been bouncing around the steerer's room like a rubber ball. At the center of his blood-engorged field of vision was the bow of a giant **warship**. It was a **raid ship**, and it was *rotating*. Jint could tell it was Ecryua's strange trajectory — he might not have *frocragh*, but he could still feel the acceleration forces. In fact, Jint had always had a feeling his sense for levels of acceleration surpassed that of the Abh, who were mostly unaffected. Otherwise, why would she be going overboard on this **gravity control system**-less ship?

The raid ship's prow drew closer.

We're gonna collide! he tried to say, but his tongue was no longer cooperating.

Then, as suddenly as it began, his punishment came to an end.

"This ship has exploded. This ship has exploded," repeated the machine voice, which was even more monotonous than Ecryua's voice.

"We got hit?" asked Jint.

"Yes. We've failed the mission," she replied, utterly calmly. "So unlucky."

*I dunno, you did get awfully close. I guess it is pretty unlucky that we happened to emerge from the **portal** near the 'enemy,' though,* he thought, as he stared at Ecryua. She seemed no different than usual. *Was all that in my imagination?* When the acceleration halted, he'd heard obscenities the meaning of which a guy like him, who'd learned Baronh in school, only vaguely understood. And even as he sat there in the **steerer's room**, he heard the lingering echoes of the bizarre song whose meaning he didn't understand at all, but through which he could tell she was enjoying herself. There was no way Ecryua could be the one singing that song, was there?

Without exception, Abhs had perfect pitch. And it would be impossible for somebody with perfect pitch to stand such off-key noise escaping their own

throat.

“Uhh, so, what’re you gonna do now?” Stupidly, Jint hadn’t considered the possibility they’d get shot down during the recon trek. “Guess we return to the *Flicaubh*?”

“We’re killed in action,” she declared solemnly. “The dead can’t return anywhere.”

“Then what’ll we do?” said Jint, out of sorts. He’d been planning to return to the *Flicaubh* as soon as he could after seeing the situation.

“We float here on standby.”

“Just the two of us?”

“Don’t like that?”

“No, it’s not that... you know what I mean...”

“Yes. It’ll be extremely boring.”

“We really can’t do anything besides wait here?”

“What do you want to do?” said Ecryua, cocking her head.

Jint verged dangerously close to saying *let me hear that song again*, opting instead for: “Can we find out how the **landworld**’s doing?”

“Only a little.”

“A little’s fine. C’mon, let’s probe the planet.”

Ecryua gazed at him, as though in anticipation.

“Uhh... what is it?” asked Jint, confused.

“Say ‘please.’”

“Huh?”

“You’re being bossy.”

That was when he realized his request had come across as a command.

“Please,” he tacked on.

Ecryua nodded without another word, unequipped the **control gauntlet**, and

began working the controls. The main screen zoomed in on *Martinh*. Unfortunately, night obscured the hybrid-functionality buildings of the city of Crandon.

The look and feel of the **landworld** hadn't changed from what he remembered. It was a globe of ferocious green, covered in specks of white.

A communication piped in: "Calling the spirit world. Greetings to a wandering soul."

Many Landers believed the Abh were cold rationalists due to their complete lack of religion. Others thought the Abh class system was so held together by unrefined superstition that it may well be called a religion. And, as extreme views tended to be, both takes were false. While the Abh didn't believe in life after death, they were familiar enough with the concept of the spiritual to mine it for humor.

"This is the wandering soul speaking," said Ecryua. "What is your business?"

"No 'business,' just want to tell you that you can dock. Or are you planning to cruise through inertial navigation until the exercise ends? Please reply quickly; the exercise is ramping towards the main stage, so if you want to dock, it's now or never."

"No need. The dead rest in the dead of space."

"As you like. Enjoy your dally with death. Over."

The line dropped.

"Why did you turn it down?" asked Jint.

"Because I want to be alone with you," said Ecryua, looking him in the eyes. "If I said that, would you be happy?"

"I suppose," he said, not taking it at face value for a second. "But why, actually?"

"Because it's not fair."

"What do you mean?"

"Our weight will hamper the ship's mobility."

“Our weight? Have we been putting on the pounds?”

Ecryua looked at him scoffingly. “The **conveyance ship**,” she grumbled.

“Ohh.”

Just as she’d brought to his attention, the mass of the conveyance ship was non-negligible even for huge raid ships. Of course, the crew aboard the raid ships knew that, too. Jint didn’t quite buy that logic.

“By the way,” said Jint, “can we communicate with the **landworld**?”

“No, of course not.”

“No?”

Ecryua nodded. “We can only place a call during an emergency.”

It appeared they could only send a message after the exercise was lifted. In point of fact, it was probably loopy to expect to communicate with the **landworld** using a conveyance ship. In any case, it wasn’t exactly an atmosphere conducive to calmly resolving the challenge facing them.

The image of a zoomed-in *Martinh* was still visible on the wall in front. Jint leaned forward. “Could you enlarge the picture a little more?” he asked, pointing at a place on the screen. “Just make that bit bigger.”

Something was rising up from the blanket of green. It was very low-orbit, and looked as though it might stop at the tropopause. “Could you enlarge it more?”

Ecryua did so without complaint, perhaps because of the urgency in Jint’s voice. Due to the thin-but-extant atmosphere, the object was distorted as though viewed through a shimmering haze. Still, it was clearly a raid ship. What was it doing near a **landworld**?

“Message that ship!” shouted Jint.

“I already told you why I can’t.”

“This is an emergency!”

“Why?”

“Because it might be striking the surface!”

“No, it’s not.”

“Based on what!?”

“It’s *leaving*.”

It was as she said. The raid ship was about to break away from planetary orbit. Had it already launched anti-surface strikes?

“Let’s get closer to the **landw**—...” But he thought better of it. He yearned to see what had become of the surface, but so long as he was in the dark regarding whether the Forr Da Antohbeeta were fully operational, it was just too dangerous. For a small vessel like a conveyance ship, it would be one-hit-and-lights-out.

“Second thoughts?”

“Yeah. It’s too risky,” said Jint, though his anxiety hadn’t gone anywhere. “When’s the exercise gonna end, if I may ask?”

“Dunno. Hungry?”

“Who, me? Oh, are you in for a meal break? Sounds good, actually,” he replied. He wasn’t that hungry, but some food would help turn his mood.

“Kay.” Ecryua got up, and it wasn’t long before she was back with combat rations.

Jint thanked her, took his portion, and stuffed his cheeks. After all, “eat” was about the extent of what he could do at the moment.

“The only one that’s yet to return is the *Flicaubh*’s **conveyance ship**,” said Atosryua. “We sustained less ‘damage’ than I was psyching myself up for. Of course, in an actual battle, we want that percent to be zero.”

Why did the damage, however small, have to be in the form of my subordinates? Did I pick the wrong people? Sobash felt slightly attacked, but naturally, he was overthinking it. Atosryua was not the type to mince words.

At any rate, the *Flicaubh* was now forced to fight without its **navigator**. That being said, the navigator didn’t usually have much to do while in **3-space**. Assisting a busy **Deca-Commander** Idlia and the **Communications Officer** was

the name of the game. And he had ordered her to serve as the conveyance ship's Skipper.

The Blue Team of Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 had **fused space-times** right before passing through the **portal**, and conducted the necessary **information link**. So far, they'd released several waves of conveyance ships to scout out the other side of the **Hyde Portal**. According to the first recon trek, the six "enemy" ships were spread out, but no sooner did they receive the report than the ships began to gather, already assuming the formation to intercept them.

"It seems the enemy's decided to intercept us in **3-space**."

"Then should we plunge in without **splitting space-times**?" said **Vice Hecto-Commander Direrh**, **Ship Commander** of the *Batcaubh*.

"No, let's **split** for the time being," said Atosryua, shaking her head. "**Hecto-Commander** Roiryua isn't about to wait."

In **3-space**, a **portal** looked like a big phosphorescent orb. In **planar space**, it existed as a curve in the cosmic fabric. There was no connection between any given point on the sphere and a specific point on the curve. Practically speaking, that meant that one could have no inkling which specific point on the planar space side they'd emerge through when entering a portal from 3-space, and vice versa. Even if they entered the portal in an orderly line, the formation would inevitably be broken up on the other side. This wasn't much of an issue in times of peace, but it was a huge liability in a space battle — it could make for easy pickings for the enemy.

However, this did not apply to groups of ships within single space-time bubbles. It was the bubbles that got scattered, not the ships inside them. A corps that shared a bubble could maintain formation while passing through a portal. However, space-time bubbles had mass limits. It was impossible to encompass a large fleet in a single bubble... but six raid ships could be managed. The problem was that bubbles that were that close to capacity were sluggish things. In order to speed things up, they would need to split space-times and advance toward the vicinity of the **portal** before re-merging.

"The reassembly point is here," said Atosryua, a blue blip lighting up on the window-screen showing the **map of planar space**. It was a point right by the

Hyde Portal. “After that, we just fight. No specific strategy — we fuse space-times, we run the info link right after, and I’ll give you your alignments then. That is all. I’ll see you at the rendezvous. All ships, split space-times.”

The six raid ships fused once again.

“Information link completed,” reported the **Communications Officer**.

That moment, something came flying from out of the **portal**. It could only be an enemy raid ship.

“Judging by its mass, it’s a single-ship bubble.”

“What are they playing at!?” Atosryua placed a hand on her forehead. “Oh, I get it. Wonder if they’re planning to use the same tactic in actual war? Oh well, for now we need to deal with what’s in front of us. *Flicaubh*, split away.”

“Do we intercept?”

“No need. Unless, that is, the enemy picks a fight with you. If that happens, we won’t be able to swoop in to rescue, so please beat them.”

“Roger that,” said Sobash. He looked at the unoccupied **Navigator’s** Seat, before turning his gaze to **Rearguard** Yatesh, who was filling in for the role. The way Sobash had shifted his glance was smooth enough to obfuscate the fact that Ecryua’s absence had temporarily slipped his mind. “Split us off, if you would.”

And so the *Flicaubh* left its comrades’ side.

He understood both the enemy ship’s intentions, and the point of Atosryua’s orders. A seventh raid ship would exceed the mass limit of the bubble they were in, spurring the physical laws of **planar space** to rupture the **space-time bubble** without mercy. The raid ships did each have their own **space-time bubble generator engines**, so it wouldn’t spell their doom, but it would serve to throw off their formation if they transitioned through the portal individually like that. Which must be what the enemy was plotting.

There was a number of measures they ought to take. The first was to split off and intercept. For example, they could split into groups of three — that way,

they could fight in an advantageous position even if the enemy ship were to merge with one of the bubbles. Yet three-ship bubbles were slower than single-ship bubbles. The enemy had stolen away the initiative as to whether or not to split space-times. Moreover, the enemy ship had only to predict whether they'd be in an inferior position if they fused with its potential target; there was nothing forcing it to do so. If the Red Team passed through the **portal** in the form of three-ship bubbles, they could just wage battle here in **3-space** and have the advantage. And if the Blue Team set about recombining, then the Red Team would poise themselves to follow suit.

Ultimately, the Blue Team had two options: pass through in groups of three, or surrender. Splitting into single-ship bubbles was a recipe for defeat. They would gain speed, but whether they fled into the portal or had a scrape with Red Team ships was, again, in the enemy's hands. The Red Team was running the show now.

There was one other option — forcing space-time fusion. With this method, no one knew what would happen after the bubble ruptured. How many lesser-mass bubbles would it divide into? How many raid ships would be in which bubbles? They could only guess in terms of probabilities. The enemy wouldn't seize the initiative, but neither would the Blue Team. Control of the battlefield would fly off like a ball glancing off athletes' grasping hands.

Taking into account various factors, having just one ship split off could just have been the best maneuver. If the enemy fused into five bubbles, they could easily pick off one such bubble's worth of enemy firepower. If they fused into a single bubble, they could fight on equal terms.

Sobash had also surmised the reason his ship was chosen to break ranks — because the *Flicaubh* was down its conveyance ship, it was lighter than its fellows. This made it faster, which more than made up for the absence of the **Navigator**.

The *Flicaubh* **split space-times** from the Blue Team bubble.

"Ship Commander Sobash," said Lafier, rising to her feet.

"I'm not giving you the captain's seat, *Fiac*," he joked.

"No, not that," she pouted, taken aback. "I was going to suggest I stand in for

Vanguard Ecryua.”

“Is that so? Well...” Sobash shook his head. “If this weren’t just a training exercise, I’d take all the hands I could get. But **Your Highness** isn’t a participant in this exercise. You’re an observer. If I let you pitch in, it wouldn’t be as fair.”

“I understand, but this training exercise is extremely realistic, and in a real battle, there’s a multitude of uncertainties at play. There is no ‘fair’ in war.”

That is one way to look at it, thought Sobash, very near to giving her the nod. But ultimately, he waved off the idea. “I’m afraid I won’t allow it. I’d like to see how we fare without a core crewmember.”

“I see. Then there’s no helping it,” she said, backing down.

Sobash was relieved. To tell the truth, he couldn’t imagine what having Lafier as a subordinate would be like, temporary or otherwise.

He positioned the space-time bubble surrounding his ship behind the one surrounding the rest of the Blue Team. Then he eyed the movements of the enemy on the **planar space map**. They were veering his way, but the *Flicaubh* was right next to the larger Blue bubble, so there was no telling which was their target. Either way, the *Flicaubh* would be drawn into combat maneuvers. After all, if the enemy fused with the Blue bubble, Sobash was duty-bound to fuse and join the fray.

“This is your **Ship Commander** speaking,” announced Sobash. “There’s a possibility the ship will enter a combat exercise. Unfortunately, it’ll be single-ship combat. I know you’ve likely had enough of this, but give it a hundred percent. Now then, all hands, ready for battle.”

He seated himself back down in the Ship Commander’s Seat and switched to out-of-ship *frocragh* mode. “Check the safeties on all of the firearms,” he ordered **Deca-Commander** Idlia.

“Checked the safeties, sir.”

“Excellent.” Sobash entered a passcode into the **control console**, informing the ship’s compucrystal network of the imminent combat exercise. This allowed him to pull the trigger of the **laser cannons** despite the safety being active. The cannons wouldn’t fire destructive death beams, but rather just concentrated

light. When that light hit its mark, one or more of the receptors laid throughout the surface of the hull of the targeted ship would cry out and count it as a blow received.

“Space-time fusion in three minutes,” reported the **Communications Officer**.

“Release the safety on the *irgymh faina* (mock EM cannon),” he told **Deca-Commander** Idlia.

“**Mock EM cannon** ready to fire,” came the immediate reply.

Mock EM cannons were wonderful devices attached to the muzzles of real **EM cannons**, and about two *dagh* in length. They shot *spytec faina* (mock shells). These mock shells were smaller than the **nuclear fusion shells** fired by EM cannons, but they ripped through space at the same speed. Again, they effected no harm whatsoever to the defending ship; it was all about what the receptors read.

“Ignite the **main engines**.”

“**Main engines** ignited.”

The *Flicaubh* was going through all the necessary steps for the combat to come.

“Space-time fusion in one minute.”

Now that the enemy had come this close, their quarry was clear — it was the *Flicaubh*.

“**Communications Officer**, turn eighty degrees to the left, then engage.”

While Atosryua had told them intercepting the enemy was unnecessary, now that it was obvious the enemy was targeting them, that no longer applied.

“**Gunner**, upon fusion, fire without delay. All hands, prepare for **EM cannon** fusillades.”

Mock EM cannon recoil was beyond paltry. The crew wouldn’t feel a thing, not even from a barrage of simultaneous fire. That was where the **compucrystals** came in. When they fired, the reverse thrusters and **gravity control system** were used to simulate the recoil of the real thing.

“E-minus ten seconds. Seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, fusion!”

The range of Sobash’s *frocragh* widened as soon as the *Flicaubh* rocked from the recoil. Needless to say, the enemy was firing at them, too. A head-to-head shoot-out.

At this rate, we’re not likely to get much out of this exercise, thought Sobash. “**Gunner**, I won’t give orders. Fire at will.”

“All ships ready for combat,” said the **Senior Staff Officer, Hecto-Commander Semlaich**.

“Very good,” said Atosryua, giving *Semlaich* a light nod before announcing to all ships under her command: “Attention. This is your **Commandant** speaking. The field of battle’s at our doorstep. It may not be playing host to a heated exchange of death lasers. It may be virtually flashlight-level beams and harmless pellets flying out of our cannons. But make no mistake — it is a battlefield. Those of you who are familiar with zones of war, remember that driving fire within. I’m sure it will be plenty heated enough for the young ones who haven’t seen actual battle yet to appreciate. Heads in the game, everyone.”

Atosryua pretended to be relaxed and comfy in her **Commandant’s Seat**. In her heart, however, she was seething with a level of rage one wouldn’t expect even toward the enemy on the real field of battle. Most Abhs conceptualized war as a stripe of natural disaster, and Atosryua was no exception. As such, she knew no hatred against the enemy.

No, the cause of her ire was **Hecto-Commander Roiryua**’s stratagem. It was a workable idea, there was no doubt about that. If it went according to plan, sacrificing a single ship could well halve the fighting capabilities of the target. Unfortunately for Roiryua, she’d managed to crawl out from under that fate, but unfortunately for her, that didn’t put the Red Team at any particular disadvantage.

What she wondered was whether he’d be willing to employ that tactic in the real world. In a scenario where both sides were of equal strength, and the total mass of the corps wasn’t just under the capacity limit of a single space-time bubble, the strategy wouldn’t hold. Plus, it was casting one ship as a nearly-

suicidal decoy.

The Abh tended to view combat as a form of play. The thrill of a battle with lives on the line mirrored that of a game with points or prestige in the balance. But it wasn't just one player's life at stake. One could toss their own life on the wager board, but with subordinates' lives to consider, contestants had to play prudently and with all seriousness. And mightn't this be showing Roiryua to be lacking the proper discretion? Perhaps he couldn't tell the difference between a gambling match over everything one was worth, and a game of chance played over a piece of candy with a child. Or perhaps he was simply taking this exercise as a light-hearted affair.

Ever the social butterfly, Atosryua had yet to feel the call of motherhood, but she did have an interest in the life-forms known as children. She'd even, at times, initiated the kids of friends into the fun of betting. She'd go a little easy on them, naturally. But if she felt that the kids, who were supposed to be avidly learning from the opportunity, were instead using it as a chance to take it easy, she was the type to have to resist the urge to spank them.

She didn't feel as though she was teaching Roiryua the way of the game, but at the same time, she wasn't here to get schooled by him. There was still a raft of unknowns when it came to operating raid ships and **trample-blitz squadrons**; this was the stage where they had to work hard to figure things out and rack up findings to spread to all the other **starpilots**. Even if post-meal dessert was all that was at stake, Atosryua intended to treat this seriously, and she expected the same from her opponent.

"Hyde Portal in thirty seconds," said the *Rilbigac Glagar* (Flagship Navigator).

Yes, in thirty seconds' time, all chance at a breather to go kick the punching bag would vanish.

"...Five, four, three, two, one, passing through!"

At once, her **beyond-ship frocragh** expanded. It just so happened Hyde's sun was burning bright ahead of them.

Where's the enemy? Atosryua focused her *froch* organ.

"Ship spotted. Azimuth: 54-121, distance: 0.12 light-seconds," said the

Drociac Glagar (Flagship Communications Officer). “Another ship at azimuth: 177-133; distance: 0.29 light-seconds. Another at azimuth: 298-57; distance: 0.09 light-seconds.”

Well, that’s not good. Atosryua bit her lip. She had, of course, considered the possibility Roiryua had scattered the ships under his command this way, but he’d distributed them more skillfully than she’d imagined.

She raised her **command baton** in the air. Then she closed her eyes to cut off her vision, perceiving only the space outside the ship through the input of her *froch*. The sensation was akin to floating amidst the stars. She knew the **gunners** of each of the ships under her command (connected via information link) were experiencing the same brain illusion. And she knew that thanks to the information link, those gunners were receiving the movements of her baton. If she used it to point at a specific point in space, they’d understand what she was drawing their attention to.

The closest of the three ships within range of her *frocragh* was gaining distance, in the process of changing course. The farthest was coming their way, but was still out of firing range. Due to microgravity, **EM cannon** fire had theoretically infinite range, but it would be too easy to dodge at this distance. The third ship, meanwhile, came to face them after a slight course correction, and was now firing its **mock EM cannons** with abandon.

Atosryua thrust her **command baton** at it. “All ships, attack.”

But as soon as the words came out of her mouth, they were hit with bad news.

“The *Cancaubh* reported down, ma’am.”

“The *Srumcaubh* reported heavily damaged, **EM cannons** unable to fire.”

With just a single attack! Atosryua clicked her tongue.

Warships freshly emerging from a **portal** had a distinct weakness — despite rushing through at all speed, their velocity in relation to the portal started off at zero upon reaching the other side. For a small while after transitioning to **3-space**, the ships were virtually stopped in place — lambs for the slaughter.

*Maybe this is because I haven’t shaken my **assault ship** habits,* reflected

Atosryua. A shot from a single assault ship anti-proton cannon wasn't that damaging, but a raid ship's **EM cannon** was lethal. *It might've been a better idea to pass through the **portal** in single-ship bubbles. If we'd done so, that would have spread out the damage.*

But she'd save the analysis for later. She had a situation to claw her way out of.

The two ships they'd lost had begun attacking even before she issued the command. The brunt of five ships' worth of **EM cannons** concentrated on the enemy.

"Enemy ship reported down."

Their next prey was the ship in the process of correcting course. The powerful, roaring propulsion engines kept pushing Atosryua's ships to greater speeds. Three ships charged at the flank of the new target.

The enemy ship at the rear was also speeding up, but it wouldn't be able to close into firing range before they could finish its friend off. Pelted by **mock shells**, the ship "exploded."

This time around, the damage to the Blue Team was nil. At first, the enemy had gotten the drop on them, but after they'd regained their footing, it was now all about defeating each ship one by one.

"All ships, reverse course," said Atosryua, pointing with her **command baton**. Their next target was the last of the initial three ships, which was still hot on their trail from behind.

But it wasn't just one ship remaining. There had to be two more somewhere. Sure enough, one of those two appeared, hurtling their way. Now it was three-on-two.

The fact that the enemy was scattered apart gave Atosryua's team the advantage. Despite the newcomer's arrival, she planned on chasing after the other enemy ship to the last. The three Blue Team vessels turned their bows and revved their engines to max thrust. Since this was in the direction opposite their inertia, they slowed down.

Their target also stopped accelerating.

Planning to buy time until the newcomer reaches firing range, I see, mused Atosryua, the gears in her head spinning on overdrive. *At this rate, forget about getting picked off one-by-one — we'll have a pincer attack on our hands. And the other remaining ship being around is ominous.*

“Where’s the other one!?” Atosryua asked the *Roïcasariac* (Deputy Staff Officer). “Widen your *frocragh* range and search.”

“Roger that.”

Oh well. We can't pick them off one-by-one, but there's always next time. She swung her **command baton** once again. “Turn towards that direction, keeping thrusters at max.”

The Blue Team shifted direction away from the **Hyde Portal**. The Red Team gave chase, while the four ships that had been deemed “destroyed” were left to drift near the **Portal**.

Atosryua noticed something smaller than a raid ship was in a place far removed from the zone of the mock battle. The conveyance ship of the *Flicaubh*, most likely.

By the time Atosryua ordered another about-face, the opposing ships had already marshaled and dressed ranks. Now neither side had an advantage. The propulsion engines of the three Blue Team ships were still at full throttle, yet the battlefield pulled away from the **Hyde Portal** at a snail’s pace.

Then, a raid ship began to emerge from the **Portal**, leaving her taken aback. “Whose is it!?” she asked.

The answer didn’t come instantaneously, since they were already more than a light-second away from the **Portal**.

“It’s the *Flicaubh*,” reported the **Deputy Staff Officer**.

“Quick, the information link,” she said, before realizing it was impossible at this distance. “Scratch that. Open the comms. Give me **Ship Commander Sobash**.”

Before long, Sobash’s hologram was standing on the bridge. He didn’t wait to be asked questions before speaking, in consideration of the time lag. “Our

damage is minor. One of the **laser cannons** is down, but our navigation and **EM cannons** are totally unimpaired.”

“I’m glad,” nodded Atosryua. “Now, you know what to do. Go kick Roiryua in the back.”

Two seconds later, and Sobash saluted. “Roger that. Please shoot without worrying about us.”

“We will.”

Sobash waited for the hologram to cut out before saying: “All ships, reverse course. Keep engines at full throttle. We’re going for the pincer.”

Now what will Roiryua do? Sobash folded his arms. And where is he hiding that last raid ship? Surely at this stage of the game he can’t go without it?

“There it is,” reported the **Deputy Officer**. “327.55, distance: 7.11 light-seconds.”

Why so far away? Atosryua was dumbfounded. “Where is it going?”

“It seems to be in inertial navigation. It must have been ‘destroyed,’ ma’am.”

“When did it get attacked? You know what, never mind.” If it was that far away, it might as well have been in the next galaxy over for all the impact it would have on this mock battle.

The enemy ships altered trajectory. By the looks of it, the Red Team had decided to aim for the weaker opponents first — and so they reversed course.

“The enemy has reversed course. They’re headed our way,” said Yatesh.

That makes this two-on-one, thought Lafier. Sobash’s skill as a **ship commander** had exceeded her expectations. Upon entering battle, he entrusted the piloting of the ship entirely to the **Gunner**, which was something anybody could do, but not just anybody could give detailed instructions and make an easier environment for gunners to do battle. *If I were captaining, Lafier couldn’t help but reflect, I wouldn’t have been able to entrust all of the fighting*

to the **Gunner**, which would have left me too distracted to get to other things.

But now she knew better. She was absorbing a lot from Sobash's battle. If she were to be the one sitting in the **Ship Commander's Seat** now, she was confident she'd do far better than she would have a day prior.

Soon they'd enter the **EM cannons'** firing range. They were already primed and ready for combat.

"We break past the enemy and rejoin the rest. **Gunner**, our allies will be firing in this direction without restraint, so I trust you'll do me the favor of making sure we don't go down by friendly fire. That would be unsightly."

"Roger that. But that'll be... difficult, sir," replied Idlia.

"Just think of the battle as the real thing, and that will take the stress off," said Grinshia, intending to console.

"What do you mean? I get *more* nervous during the real thing."

"Really? But if you lose during an exercise, you get evaluated. If you lose during the real thing, you don't have to worry about evaluations. You just die," she explained.

"I'm afraid I fear death more than an evaluation."

Listening to this exchange, Sobash was smiling (though he didn't know why exactly), but he did have to interrupt: "A fascinating conversation, but get back to work, would you?"

"Roger."

"Speed relative to the opposing units now at zero. Distance: 0.11 light-seconds."

Still too far to be shooting the **EM cannons**. Yet Sobash ordered the attack to commence. The strategy was seemingly a curtain of fire. At any rate, the distance between them was closing rapidly.

Now the enemy began firing. Lafier pulled out her circlet's **access-cables** and switched her *frocragh* to beyond-ship mode. However, since she was merely an observer, the seat she'd been given didn't have a terminal for **beyond-ship frocragh**. She felt very stupid.

“Distance: 0.05 light-seconds.”

At this distance, she knew the attack should be intensifying. Yet to her irritation, without **beyond-ship** *frocragh* she couldn't tell for sure. She gauged Sobash's expression — he didn't seem particularly nervous. Until, suddenly, he winced.

“Hold your fire and evade!” he cried.

But it was too late. “This ship has exploded. This ship has exploded...” announced the ruthless mechanical voice, informing the *Flicaubh*'s crew of their “deaths.”

“I'm sorry, **Ship Commander**,” said **Deca-Commander** Idlia.

“There's nothing to apologize for. You did admirably. And I expect you to do much the same in the combat to come,” he said, consoling the **Gunner**. “Now then, we need to bring back our prodigal child. Open the comms for the **conveyance ship**.”

The line opened immediately.

“**Vanguard** Ecryua, we have joined you in the ranks of the dead. Come back for docking.”

“Roger,” said Ecryua.

“Can I say something?” came Jint's voice.

“Go ahead,” she replied, and as soon as she did, Jint's face came on screen.

“Please contact **Commandant** Atosryua as soon as possible,” he asked Sobash.

“I can't do that, *Lonh-Dreur*,” said Sobash, expression gloomy. “This ship may not be participating anymore, but the exercise itself continues.”

“When will it be over?”

“I don't know. Though of course, given the current situation, I don't think it'll last too long now.”

“I understand,” said Jint, readily backing down. “Please inform me as soon as the situation changes.”

“Sure. I promise I will. But why do you want me to do so?”

“Well...” Jint was about to explain, but... “actually, I’ll tell you later. I want some time to gather my thoughts.”

“No problem.”

The line dropped.

Lafier could bear it no longer. “**Ship Commander** Sobash.”

Sobash sent a quizzical look.

“I’d like to know what’s happening outside. If the exercise is over for this ship, then do you mind if I sit in the Navigator’s Seat?”

Sobash smiled. “By all means, **Your Highness.**”

Lafier took Ecryua’s seat. Still stewing from her earlier blunder, she inserted the **functionality crystals** at the tips of her access-cables into the terminals on the armrests. The sensation of becoming one with the ship came over her with a wave of nostalgic contentment.

Five ships were currently engaged. A pair of ships moving forward, with three in the back (which were likely Atosryua’s team, the Blue Team).

The exercise really will be ending shortly, she thought. Then she searched for Jint and Ecryua’s conveyance ship.

She was finding these ordinary, everyday operations too fun for words. It had been too long.

Chapter 8: The *Lapainec Martinr* (Pride of Martin)

Two hours after the *Flicaubh* had picked its **conveyance ship** back up, the message “true solar flames are blue” resounded across the **Hyde Countdom**. Following her announcing the exercise complete, **Commandant** Atosryua summoned the **Ship Commanders** to a meeting, to be held at the commander’s quarters of the *Lymcaubh*.

Owing to the mock battle, the **squadron** was scattered wide. It would take more than twenty-four hours to re-assemble.

At the meeting, evaluations would take place. And the evaluator would be none other than the **Commandant**, Atosryua. As such, she was busy processing the data in her head. She was obligated to look into not just the actions of the opposing units, but those of each and every ship in the exercise.

Few were as busy as a commandant between the end of an exercise and the beginning of an evaluation meeting. First up was **Hecto-Commander** Roiryua’s report. Knowing what he’d been thinking and planning to do was the most important thing. Atosryua pulled it up in window-screen form. At the head was a memo:

“Regarding the **landworld** incident, I was thoroughly deceived. I do not plan to raise an objection to it; it was a combat simulation, after all. There were, however, some particular details I found unsatisfactory. Please allow me to bring them up during the meeting.”

Atosryua frowned. What was Roiryua talking about?

The Commanders’ Meeting is going to be a thorny tangle, she thought, grinning hollowly. There were quite a few things she wanted to tell him, too.

As she read through Roiryua’s report, Atosryua realized at last what he’d misunderstood.

Just then, a call request came from the **Count of Hyde**.

“I apologize, I know you’re busy,” said Jint.

“It’s okay. I myself was trying to get in touch with you,” she replied.

“Thank you for going through that trouble for me.”

“No, it’s quite all right, **Your Excellency**. It’s a breather for my own sake. I think I know why you’d want to call, too. You’re worried the Red Team attacked your **star fief**, isn’t that right?”

“Exactly, ma’am. So I —” Jint had been about to talk a mile a minute, but Atosryua put up a hand.

“You have nothing to worry about,” she said. “A small amount of damage may have been dealt, but I don’t think it’s anything serious.”

“A small amount of damage!?” He wasn’t consoled by this at all. He knew in his bones how big a gap there was in the way some things were perceived by the Abh and by Landers. He had no idea what the bar for “serious” was for an Abh. For all he knew, that area of the planet was in a wretched state. “May I ask you to fill me in?”

“You’d best talk to **Hecto-Commander** Roiryua about it. It looks as though he’ll be raising an objection about the incident.”

“An objection? What about?”

“The **Hecto-Commander** has gotten the wrong idea. Just talk to him. If you could clear up the misunderstanding for me, that would spare me some trouble.”

“Understood.” The haze of uncertainty hadn’t gone from his heart, but he nodded.

He asked Sobash to call the *Sircaubh*, the ship Roiryua was on. Sobash nodded, and after giving the **Communications Officer** the order, he whispered into Jint’s ear: “I checked on your home city.”

“You did a ground scan for me?”

“I did. It’s not that labor-intensive to do so.” Sobash pulled up a hologram of *Martinh* at the center of the **bridge**. “This is the town of your birth, correct? We couldn’t ascertain the exact extent of the damage, not from orbit.”

Crandon City looked exactly like what he remembered. For the time being, he

was relieved.

Roiryua appeared on the main screen. After getting the usual first-meeting pleasantries quickly over with, Jint brought up the burning question.

Roiryua looked puzzled. “I did indeed attack the **landworld**. I just fail to grasp why it is **Your Excellency** is interested.”

“Because I’m the world’s **Lord**,” said Jint. “Of course I’d be interested if my **landworld** got attacked.”

“But as far as I understand it, *Lonh*, you weren’t a participant in the exercise.”

“No, you’re right, I wasn’t a participant. I’m asking you as the **Count of Hyde**.”
Talk about off-track, thought Jint.

“Ohh. How careless of me. Of course this would be relevant to you, *Lonh-Dreur*.”

“Yes. ‘Of course’ is right.”

“So **Your Excellency** participated in the conspiracy, correct?”

Roiryua was clearly half-joking, so he didn’t seem to be criticizing Jint. But why was he supposed to be accused of any such thing to begin with?

“I don’t understand. What’s this about a conspiracy...?” he asked, well and truly confused.

“Am I mistaken? Are you saying **Your Excellency** had nothing to do with the attack we received?”

“**Hecto-Commander**, I’m sorry, but are you unaware that the **landworld** doesn’t actually belong to the **Empire** yet?”

“Yes, that is what I heard,” Roiryua nodded. “To have set up this ‘**Hyde Countdom** in rebellion’ scenario and made it seem so true to life, that in itself is to be lauded. We were completely fooled, but it’s not unusual for information in the zone of war to be conflicting, so I’m of the opinion that that made the exercise all the more true to life. I’m just displeased that the weapons didn’t meet the standards of a Star Forces exercise. In addition, it’s a disciplinary offense, and decidedly unfair, that the weapons didn’t cease functioning after getting hit with a mock-attack from our end. I plan to lodge an objection on this

point, and if it comes to it, I'm prepared to take the case to our higher-ups."

"I honestly have no clue what you're talking about, sir," said Jint, more bewildered than ever.

"I'm talking about the mock-attack we received from the **landworld's** surface, naturally. I do think it was quite a novel element for a training exercise..."

Jint finally realized Roiryua's misinterpretation. He was under the impression the Forr Da Antohbeeta, the pride of the Martinese people and the administration of the Hyde Star System, were merely mock-weapons for use in warship training.

"So you don't believe it to have been an actual attack, sir?"

"An actual attack?" Roiryua raised an eyebrow. "*That?*"

"You may find it hard to believe, but that was an attack against the **Star Forces**," said Jint, miffed.

Roiryua really didn't believe it at first, but Jint exhausted every means to explain it to him, eventually getting him to accept that it was, in fact, an attack meant to do harm (though he still looked somewhat dubious).

"If I may, **Hecto-Commander**, what sort of strike did you launch against the **landworld**?"

"We shot **mock shells** at first. They burned up in the atmosphere, of course, but even so, the attack should have registered as hitting the target. Yet the surface kept firing. Which I suppose makes sense if they truly thought they were doing battle. We could have ignored it, but they did have some punch for mock-weapons, and there was a possibility it would hinder the **conveyance ship**, so I chose to forcibly remove it for the sake of continuing the exercise as normal. That is to say, we issued an evacuation advisory, and then made use of the **EM cannons**."

"Did you shoot **nuclear fusion** shells!?"

"No, we wouldn't go that far. We used non-exploding *irzamh* (mass-shells). And extremely lightweight ones, at that."

"Did the **landworld citizens** heed your warning to clear out?"

“That, I’m sorry to say, I do not know. I can tell you we gave them six hours before attacking. I judged that to be enough time to properly evacuate.”

Jint thanked him for his time, and dropped the call.

“Were those anti-orbital weapons manned?” asked Lafier.

“No. Or at least, they weren’t before the war.”

“That’s good, then. No lives were lost — only objects.”

“That is a relief, but those cannons were a comforting presence for us. Though I did leave the planet soon after it happened, so I’m not totally in the know...”

“After what happened?”

“Oh, sorry, I mean after you peo — er, after the **Empire** annexed the **Hyde Countdom**. My father took the Empire up on a deal — he handed over control of the anti-orbital weapons in exchange for being made the system’s **Lord**. The most powerful of the anti-orbital weapons were the Forr Da Antohbeeta. The people of the planet had pride in them, I think, not to mention how reliant they felt on them. They were the Forr Da Antohbeeta, the dread weapons even the massive and powerful Empire feared! That they were misconstrued as fake little playthings meant for combat exercises comes as a pretty huge shock.”

“I don’t claim to understand, but surely there’s nothing for you to get so upset over,” she said, trying to be nice in her own Lafier way. “It’s not as though you created them yourself.”

“I didn’t create them myself, no. But it’s only natural I’m upset. My dad became a **noble** thanks to the Forr Da Antohbeeta. Which means I have them to thank for my being nobility, too.”

“You can look at it that way,” she replied, though not without feeling somewhat uncomfortable.

“Lonh-Dreur,” said Sobash. “Would you care to speak to the **landworld administration**?”

“I can?”

“Yes. I just got the **Commandant**’s permission. All that’s needed now is your

and the **landworld administration**'s consent."

"Well, you know I definitely consent. Please, go ahead."

Sobash nodded lightly and signaled to the **Communications Officer**.

"This is the **raid ship** *Flicaubh* of the **Imperial Star Forces**," started the **Officer**. "I'm calling on behalf of the **Count of Hyde**, who would like to speak with the **landworld administration**. If you wish to speak with the Count, please reply through this frequency. This is the Imperial Star Forces..."

Given the lead-up to this moment, Jint wasn't holding his breath for a reply. Yet his pessimism was turned on its head quite readily.

"This is the Government of the Hyde Star System," came a woman's voice, speaking in eerily fluent Baronh, "calling in reply. Please bring the one who was given the **title of Count Hyde** by your polity."

Sobash beckoned, and so Jint now stood before the receiver. "This is *Linn Ssynec Raucr Dreuc Haider Ghintec*. May I ask who's speaking?"

"First, I would like to verify your identity. Are you *the* Jint Lynn? Son of Former President Rock Lynn?"

"I am," he said. *Man, how long's it been since I last got called "Jint Lynn"?*

"I shall hand the call to the President of the Hyde Star System."

After a brief interval of silence...

"Long time no see, Jint."

Jint had no need to ask who this was. That voice made it all too clear.

"What's wrong? Don't tell me I need to say who I am?"

"Oh, no worries there, Till." Speaking in his native Martinese caused him difficulty speaking.

"Hey, is that really you, Jint? Your voice is totally different, and you've got a strange accent."

"My voice broke, Till. I'm not a kid anymore." The banter of the man who was a father to him remained as clumsy as he remembered. "And it's been such a long time since I've had to speak Martinese."

“I’m relieved. Now, the two of us talking are Jint Lynn and Till Corint. Not ‘His Excellency the Count of Hyde,’ and not the ‘President of the Hyde Star System.’ Am I wrong?”

“This call is pretty cost-intensive for a family chat, Till.”

“Are you *really* Jint? The Jint I know wasn’t the type to be talking money.”

“I’ve lived alone for a long time. I don’t think getting a sense for the economic side of things is too far out of left field.”

Jint scanned the **bridge**. While it didn’t seem as though anybody was eavesdropping, the place was nearly silent apart from the faint hum of the machines. They’d overhear. Putting aside the standards of Abh culture, engaging in a family chat while getting overheard was not exactly pleasant according to his own standards — despite the fact he knew nobody here would understand what he was saying.

“I think it’d be prudent to shift this conversation to my personal quarters,” said Jint, half to himself.

“I don’t mind,” said Sobash. “However, as the call is linked to **Star Forces** operations, the contents will be recorded, and later translated.”

“That’s fine. I’m not trying to keep the conversation confidential. It’s more just the mood of the room that’s the problem.”

“Hey, Till,” called Jint, who’d withdrawn into his quarters. “How’s Lina doing?”

“She’s doing great. She wants to see you, you know,” he replied, with nary a pause — as though he’d been anticipating the question.

“Really?” Old memories resurfaced, driving pins into his heart. But he couldn’t sit here and bawl, or cry *liar*! That was a privilege he lost when he grew up.

“Really,” said Till. “We’ve been looking back ever since it happened. If I don’t get to tell you anything else, know that, at least.”

Jint listened raptly.

“Something had gotten into us. There was no reason to be lashing out at you.”

“It’s okay, Till,” Jint forgave him. “Nobody could’ve come to grips that quickly.”

“Thank you for saying that, Jint, but I fell into a hole of sin. I thought I’d held you in my heart as my own son, but then I went and treated you so shamefully.”

“It’s fine, I’m telling you.”

“Rock was my best friend. I thought I knew every facet of the man. But when I heard his plan... it was like he’d morphed into some stranger. I thought that Rock would never fraternize with the invaders, even if it was an expedient maneuver. Which is why some recess of my brain lumped his son — which is to say, you — in with him. That’s why, in my head, the boy I knew since the day he was born stopped being my Jint Lynn.”

“I daresay we can talk about all of that at our leisure some other time,” said Jint, interrupting when a small break in speech presented itself. “I think the current situation’s more than alarming enough to warrant discussion, Till. Is this the time to be bringing up ancient history?”

“I was against it. Rock’s was an act of betrayal, pure and simple. He needed to be brought to court for it. But it’s not possible to punish Rock via Martinese law. He’d made the decision through all the proper channels. But the reps, they drafted special legislation just to...”

By now, Jint had gotten a vague idea why Till had got on the line with him.

“...There was nothing I could do. The sentence was carried out without delay, and didn’t require the System Premier’s approval. This was the law of the United Humankind. Albeit, the head of government didn’t have veto power under the Hyde System’s old set of laws, either. But even so, I had every intention of letting your father escape. If he escaped with nothing else to his name, I at least wanted him alive. I acknowledge we had to surrender, but I still think his becoming an imperial noble was a massive mistake. But everyone makes mistakes, and he was still my best friend. Do you believe me?”

“Of course I believe you. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Good. Listen, you don’t have to forgive me. If I went so far as to request your forgiveness, God would throw me in hell for that overreach, citing the sin of

greed. But despite that, I just wanted you to know.”

“I’ve already forgiven you,” said Jint, and he meant it. All that mess in the aftermath of the birth of the **Hyde Countdom** was, to Jint, akin to an act of nature. Granted, it was trivially easy to point the finger at the one responsible. But to an eight-year-old child, it was nothing more than a sudden-onset flood of surreality. He’d felt no urge to hold a grudge against anyone.

“Hearing that has lifted my heart,” said Till. “I suppose this is it, then, Jint. I don’t believe we will ever speak again. I would like you to speak to Lina, though. I’m going to transfer the line to her, so do you mind waiting a bit?”

“Why don’t you let me see her? I mean, this call is audio-only.”

“Ahh... if only. I’m sure you look like a fine young man. If we could see your face, I’m sure she’d be elated, too.”

“Then it’s settled,” said Jint, relieved. “I’m wearing **Abh noble** clothing at the moment, but I’ll change for a private visit, so you don’t have to worry.”

“You can’t.”

“Can’t what...? You mean the **imperial noble** getup?”

“No. We can’t meet in person.”

“Why not, Till!?”

“Because I refuse to let you people set foot on our wife-land.”

Martin wasn’t the motherland, as Earth was, but rather the ‘wife-land.’

“Us people, as in Abhs?” asked Jint, discomfited. “The Abh don’t set foot on planets.”

“Stop evading! You know what I mean.”

“You’re not going to surrender...”

“Right. We’ve declared independence once again.”

“But you’ve still got Three Nations troops down there, don’t you?”

“Troops that used to be part of the Alliance, yes. But their former allegiance isn’t important. They’ve already acquiesced to following the orders of the

Military of the Hyde Star System, and to becoming members of our society. It seems they were never too enthused by the war, and those soldiers are now model citizens of Hyde that we Martinese accept with open arms.”

“Can they be trusted?”

“Is that a question you’re asking the **landworld administration**, Lonh-Dreur?”

If Jint answered yes, Till would drop the line immediately. Which didn’t mean Jint had to bend himself into a pretzel lying, either.

“No. I’m just worried about you, and Lina... and also about...” Jint tried to speak the names of his friends from childhood, but it was no use. He saw some of their faces, but their names didn’t come to him.

“You don’t need to worry about us, Jint. We’re worried about *you*. All this time, we’ve been worried — how they’ve been treating you. We’ve looked on Rock, Count of Hyde with cold eyes for a very long time.”

“I can imagine.”

“I think you might not understand the full extent of it. There was animosity towards Rock himself, but that was outweighed by the suspicion against the Abh. When Rock was successfully given patronage as the wee little aristocrat he became, many were shocked the Abh kept their word. They’d thought the Abh would simply ignore their ‘promise.’ I was of the opinion that they’d keep their promise if for no other reason than to earn our trust.”

Jint, of course, was aware that the idea of earning the **landworld citizens’** trust wouldn’t cross the minds of the Abh, but he kept mum.

“But following that, the situation shaped up into what you know today. I thought for sure that though you were left inside the **Empire**, your position would scatter by the wayside. When I learned you’d become the next **Count of Hyde**, it was a greater shock to me than what Rock did.”

“I get it,” said Jint, talking fast. If he didn’t hurry, he was sure the line would get dropped forevermore. “But I’m both the **Count of Hyde** and Jint Lynn, a born Martinese. I can do right by the system. I can work with you, and with your successors. It doesn’t even have to be a ‘surrender’ in the eyes of the Hyde government. We’ll just revert things back to the way they were. If intergalactic

trade's a no-go, I'll suspend it. Lifestyles will suffer a bit, but the planet's not that poor at the moment."

"I have no intention of discussing such far-reaching matters," said Till. He sounded truly displeased.

"But Till—"

"No buts, Jint."

"I can't just leave it at that."

"Then it would be wise of me to simply hang up right now. But I really don't want that," he said, his tone softening. "We parted on such terrible terms last time. I'd like our last parting to be more upbeat."

"That's asking too much, Till," he groaned. "Do you even understand how I feel? I was looking forward to seeing you and Lina. Obviously, given the current situation, I wasn't overjoyed... to tell you the truth, I was more scared than excited. But still, I was looking forward to seeing you. Actually, I was scared *because* I was looking forward to it. And now, here you are, telling me you won't even deign to meet me. After which you tell me you'd like to part on sunnier terms. The Till I knew wouldn't be that unreasonable."

But that was a lie. The Till he knew as a child was, from time to time, a ball of irrationality. Of course, to Martinese children, most adults were like that.

"There is a way we can meet," said Till. "If you stop being an Abh, and defect as a Martinese citizen, then we will welcome you whole-heartedly."

A faint smile cracked his cheeks. He thanked the God he didn't believe in that no one was here to see.

"Jint?" came Lina's voice.

"Ah, uhh..." Jint's mouth apparently didn't want to produce words.

"What Till said is true. We can't exactly throw together a big to-do for your return, but I'll whip up a fun dinner party, just us and our relatives. I'll even make you your favorite, Melohn Oh Shoo."

"I'd have loved to have some," said Jint. "But it's no use. I've got my own responsibilities to deal with."

“What responsibilities? Your responsibilities as an Abh? As a conqueror? As an invader? Are they more important to you than us, Jint?”

“Lina, I’m sorry,” said Jint. “I really can’t come back.”

“Tell the truth. You met a girl you like.”

“That’s not it!” he lied.

“No? Because if you did, I’d be relieved.”

“So you’re saying you’d understand if I couldn’t come back just because I met a girl I like?”

“That’d be far easier to understand,” said Lina. “You are at that age.”

“Easier to understand than having responsibilities?”

“You need to be responsible when it comes to your girlfriend, too.”

“I’m talking about bigger stuff, here. You’ve gotta know where I’m coming from.”

“I suppose, but you don’t need to worry your head about the big stuff just yet. You’re in the prime of your youth. Don’t you want to let loose?”

“I know you still think of me as a little kid, but...”

“It’s fine. Say no more.”

“You’re never going to stop treating me like your little one, huh. I’m already grown enough to be having kids of my own, you know.”

“But you don’t have any, do you?”

“Well, no, but...”

“You are once and forever our baby boy, Jint.”

“That’s no fair, putting it that way, Lina.”

“But it’s true!”

“Let’s table the family talk for now — there’s something more pressing to go over,” said Jint. “You’re listening, right, Till?”

“I’m listening all right. But I’m not about to talk politics. Not while you’re still

an Abh.”

“Then let’s talk as fellow Martinese. I’m already voting age.”

“Abhs don’t have the right to vote,” said Till bluntly.

“I know that. But I am old enough to talk politics. And while I may be an Abh, I love the Martinese wife-land, and the people who live on it. I don’t care if that love is one-sided. I love every place the light of Hyde’s sun shines upon.”

“Then why do you refuse to come back to us?”

“Argh!” Jint shouted in pent-up frustration. “Because if I switched sides, there’d be no one left to stop the Hyde System from collapsing!”

“I see you’ve made quite some headway in your career,” he said scornfully.

“I don’t want to hear your sarcasm. What happened to the Forr Da Antohbeeta?”

“That is an internal affair for the government to worry about,” said Till, after a moment’s pause. “I can’t leak that information to outside agents. Plus, it’s not exactly a topic for family to be getting into.”

“It *is* family talk. The **Star Forces** didn’t even attack the Forr Da Antohbeeta with anything close to their real firepower.”

“That wasn’t their real firepower?” A note of surprise in his voice. “Are you saying it was a limited strike? I mean, we know they could have bombed more —”

“No, as in, it wasn’t even a ‘limited strike.’ All that was, was a little show of annoyance. They thought you were throwing a wrench into their training exercise. I’ll give you all the details next time — that is, if you give me a next time. But let me ask you something — if the same level of attack that destroyed the Forr Da Antohbeeta were to hit Crandon, what would happen?”

“I never said the Forr Da Antohbeeta were destroyed.”

“It doesn’t matter whether or not they got destroyed. I’m asking you what would happen if the **Star Forces** were to vent their annoyance on Crandon?”

“Many citizens would die,” he admitted (reluctantly, if his tone was any

indication).

“And among those dead might be my family. That’s why this *is* a topic for family!”

“I see you’ve become quite the sophist, Jint.”

“That’s a bad habit of yours, Till. As soon as you’re about to lose an argument, you call the other guy a sophist.”

“Only if the ‘other guy’ is a kid. Logic doesn’t go down with kids.”

“Lucky I’m not a kid. I’m all for logic.”

“All right then. Fine. Let’s talk. I just can’t talk about it right this second. I haven’t prepared myself to talk to you — to **Count Hyde** of the **Empire** — in an official capacity.”

“Not a problem. I want some time, too. I’ll call again sometime soon. Then we can find the best way forward for our system together.”

After dropping the line, Jint called together the interested persons of the **Hyde Countdom**.

“How did it go?” Lafier asked him.

“I managed to make a bit of progress,” he said, shaking his head, “but we ended up just talking about *family* stuff.”

“Nothing more important than family,” said Samson. “That said, is that really making progress?”

“I got them to agree to meet with me in person.”

Samson raised an eyebrow. “You’ll be representing us by your lonesome?”

“That, I don’t know for sure yet. I do think that’s the best way to handle this, though.”

“Where will you meet?” asked Lafier.

“That hasn’t been settled yet, either.”

“We can’t just let you go to the surface by yourself,” said Lafier.

“Whoa, **Your Highness**, you took the words right outta my mouth,” said

Samson. “I can’t let my young Lord betake himself to the lap of danger.”

“Uhh, guess this where I say I’d follow **His Excellency** through a towering inferno?” said Paveryua.

“If **Her Highness** decides to go, then I will accompany her,” said Sehrnye flatly.

“Thanks, you guys,” said Jint. He organized his thoughts. “First thing’s first, we call over the *Baucbiruch*. Is its **conveyance ship** already out and about?”

“I imagine so,” said Lafier. “It went right after the exercise ended.”

“When’s its next scheduled fligh— ah, wait, hold on a sec.” Jint realized there was no point asking the people here, so he took a peek at the conveyance ship service schedule using his **wristgear**. Fortunately for them, now that the exercise was over, the schedule was no longer locked behind a firewall of confidentiality, allowing an outsider like Jint to access it without any issue. And evidently, the next flight would depart in around an hour.

“I’m taking the liberty to board this **conveyance ship**. The *Baucbiruch* should be arriving in three days’ time. Let’s decide on our policy in that time.”

“Spoken like a true **lord**, Jint,” said Lafier.

Jint had to wonder whether that was a compliment.

Chapter 9: *Cipath Ésarr* (Dinner With Family)

Just as Jint expected, the *Baucbiruch* arrived at the **Countdom of Hyde** three days later.

In the meantime, **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** was busy with bringing matters related to the exercise to a close. The **starpilots** were swamped analyzing all of the information, while the **NCCs** were occupied running checks on the ships. It was **Star Forces** tradition to cut loose in any post-combat feast, and the post-feast clean-up was perhaps the most vital of all of the copious things to do. With that, too, over and done with, Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 was returning to the **imperial capital**, thereby switching places with the *Baucbiruch*.

Before transferring to the *Baucbiruch*, Jint paid a visit to the captain's quarters to offer Sobash some parting greetings. If he'd wanted to, he could've gotten Sobash to see him off at the point of transfer, but he figured the man didn't have the time for a leisurely chat.

"We'll miss you," said Sobash. "**Vanguard** Ecryua included."

"Her, too?"

"She did seem awfully taken with your cat. If you leave now without giving them an opportunity to reunite, she might be a little sad. Not that I ever truly understand what's going through that woman's head."

"Ah, I see." A wry smile. "Dyaho is on the *Baucbiruch*. He has a litter now, and one of the kittens looks just like him, so it's obvious who he'll be going to. The other kittens are really cute, too, though, so if you're interested, I'd actually be thankful if you could take one of them off my hands."

"I'm afraid I don't find the prospect of bringing a cat into a warzone particularly admirable. We head into battle knowing what we're getting into, but it's rather rare for a cat to understand just what sort of sorry state of affairs it's been dragged to."

"Ah, right, sorry," he apologized. While this particular voyage hadn't been to

an actual field of battle, his proverbial ledger was stained by a prior bringing-a-cat-into-war offense. And he'd been told off by Lafier in much the same way.

"Oh, there's no need to apologize. I also love doing things the people around me are unamused by."

"I mean, I didn't bring a cat onboard just to grate on people's nerves..."

"I will say that if **Vanguard** Ecryua takes responsibility, I won't object."

"Understood. I'll try asking her later." Then something dawned on him. "Are you not interested in them, Mr. Sobash?"

"Interested in cats, you mean?" Sobash shook his head. "I have a great deal of interest, but I've decided not to raise any."

"...Ah. Why is that?"

"It's a long story. Let's save it for another time," said Sobash, changing the subject. "In any case, it will be a slight load off not to get glared at by *Fiac Lartnér* any longer."

"Glared at? By *Fiac Lartnér*?"

"Yes, that's right. You haven't noticed her glaring at me occasionally?"

"Nope. Not at all," he replied diffidently. "Did something happen?"

"I wager it's because I've become a **ship commander**."

"This raid ship's?"

Sobash nodded.

"Is it... envy?" Jint blinked.

"Saying I'm envied by **Her Highness the Royal Princess** may come across as my ego inflating, but, well, I don't know how else to put it. It's not me, specifically, she's jealous of, of course. It's all *Caubh*-class **ship commanders**. Though perhaps 'envy' isn't quite the right assessment after all," he corrected himself. "In all likelihood, she simply can't grasp why she isn't a *Caubh*-class **ship commander** herself."

"Now that you mention it, that may just be the case."

Sobash's words did ring some bells. Lafier was exceptionally averse to voicing anything that might resemble what she'd deem an idle complaint, but it was apparent through her attitude that she felt her being aboard this ship as a mere passenger was nonsensical.

Am I holding her in place? He shuddered at the thought. There was no way that was true. A prideful **royal princess** like her, committing herself to a set of circumstances she didn't care for, while not obligated to? The thought wouldn't even cross her mind.

"When all is said and done, **Her Highness** is caught in a love triangle."

"A love triangle!?" That was an opinion of consequence.

"In short," said Sobash, smiling, "she doesn't know whether to choose you, or the **Star Forces**."

"Ah." Jint nodded, not sure how to feel about this. "I guess I should feel honored?"

"I would feel very honored if I were in your shoes, but to each their own." Sobash sipped his tea. "Especially since your rival in love is the **Star Forces**. You have no chance of winning, but you're putting up a strong showing just by hanging in there."

"Are all Abhs like that?"

"Huh?" Sobash looked slightly mystified. "I'm not talking about Abhs. I'm talking about Abliars."

"So that's not necessarily true among most Abhs, then?"

Sobash's expression turned yet more puzzled. "Just think about your own case. From where I'm standing, you aren't the type to prioritize military matters over your crush."

"Well, you've got me there." Once again, Jint had ended up forgetting he himself was technically Abh.

"At any rate, I wish you the best. And I hope your **star fief** becomes stable," smiled Sobash. "Let us meet again on the battlefield, *Lonh*. That is, if I live to see that day."

If I'm still alive, let's meet again — Jint used to employ that turn of phrase all the time when he was on Delktu. But in that context, it was just tongue-in-cheek hyperbole. On Delktu, people Jint and his friends' age didn't usually die. In war, however, that phrase reflected a fact of life. Descending from a world where the specter of death was ever present, to a world where that phrase was bandied about as a joke, Jint had felt a tad conscience-stricken.

"Let's," he replied, doing his best not to let his innermost thoughts leak out. "Best of luck in battle."

Jint hadn't needed to seek Ecryua out. He bumped into her on his way to his quarters.

"Are you leaving?" asked Ecryua, expressionless as usual.

"Yep," Jint nodded. "It'd be great if we could meet again someday."

"Great for who?" said Ecryua.

Jint needed a beat to bounce back from that, after which he asked her whether she'd like to adopt a kitten.

"I don't want to raise a cat," she replied immediately. "It's more fun to look after other people's cats."

"Gotcha. Oh well," he said, surrendering just like that.

There was no need to push the kitten on Ecryua. Jint turned to leave her.

"Wait," she said, grabbing him by the arm. "Is that cat cute?"

"Yeah. Super cute. Among the kittens are *raigh* (pure white), **striped** just like Dyaho, and *cnasraigh* (black-and-white) fur patterns. But the **striped** one already has someone lined up."

"Did you name them?"

"No, not yet. I think their owners have that right."

Ecryua was staring a hole into him.

"Do you, uh, want one?"

"No," she said, letting go of his arm. "I'll be able to see your cat again soon."

“I don’t know if you will, actually...”

They were called “**Abh cats**,” but they lived no longer than other cats.

“I know I will,” she declared.

“What makes you say that?”

“**Vice Hecto-Commander** Abliar will soon return, which means you’ll also soon return. Along with your cat.”

“That’s silly. Lafier reenlisting is her business, and me reenlisting is mine. I’m not Lafier’s accessory.”

“You just don’t understand.” And with that, Ecryua turned on her heels.

Jint watched as she walked away. The **Star Forces** was a vast institution. Jint figured that even if both of them ended up returning, there was no guarantee they’d be able to be together.

“Forgive my sneaking suspicion, **Your Highness**, but might you want to stay here, deep down?” asked Samson.

“Huh?” Lafier turned to look at him. “No, that’s not true. Why do you think that?”

“It’s just a hunch.”

“I got the same feeling,” said Sehrnye, concerned. “Your Highness seems listless, somehow. Is the current situation not to your satisfaction?”

“Your concern is unnecessary,” she said sternly.

“Three minutes until abordage,” announced the ship speakers. This time around, he was scheduled to transfer directly from ship to ship, as opposed to boarding a **conveyance ship** as a ferry.

“What is Jint doing?” said Lafier, happy to use the announcement as an excuse to change the subject.

Jint was here now, accompanied by his **automated luggage**. The **starpilots** of the *Flicaubh* assembled for a *patfocechoth* (gangway sendoff). After exchanging some ceremonial remarks, the **Hyde Countdom** group transferred to the

Baucbiruch.

Over on the *Baucbiruch*, **Investigator** Yestesh and his subordinates, the top officials of the ship, lined up to salute him. Lafier stole a peek at Jint, who was standing beside her. He seemed a touch dispirited. Anger flared inside her; had it been a mistake, for her to be here?

“Chest out, Jint!” she whispered. “This is *your* battlefield.”

“My... ‘battlefield’?”

“Isn’t it? If it’s not, then I’m going back,” she said, and she meant it.

“No, you’re right,” said Jint, sticking his chest out. “If I fail here, I won’t *die*, but others might. And if my thoughtlessness ever makes victims out of decent people, then I’ll spend the rest of my life hating myself. I’m not going to live as long as you, but I still plan on living a hundred more years. And a century of misery is a long, long century.”

“I don’t need a soliloquy.”

“Right, right. But thanks for reminding me. The **Countdom of Hyde** is absolutely my battlefield.” His expression now cheerier by half, Jint strode forward. But Lafier got the sense both his face and his gait were a brave front.

Atop the chaise, the kittens were a tangled ball of frolicking fur. Meanwhile, their mother, Sercruca, was grooming on the carpet. It was difficult to believe that until very recently, the members of that litter would mewl betrayal when taken mere inches from their mother. Their father, Dyaho, was napping on the table. Jint reckoned he was overthinking it, but damned if it didn’t look like Dyaho was *sulking*.

One of the kittens slipped down from the chaise. With the typical **Abh cat** cry that so tickled the soul, it called out — for what, Jint didn’t know.

A hand reached for the kitten. The hand of a certain Abliar, who was seated beside the chaise.

The **Royal Princess** didn’t even look at it as she carried it back up onto the chair. It carried on playing with its siblings, evidently forgetting its embarrassing

slip-up in a matter of seconds.

“If that isn’t the picture of peace,” said Jint.

“This isn’t ‘peace,’” Lafier stated, not taking her eyes off the screen projected from her **wristgear**. “This is just time in need of killing.”

“Oh, c’mon. A little leisure time’s a good thing.” Jint gazed out the window at the snowy scenery.

Suddenly, Sehrnye’s face took up part of the wall. “**Your Highness, Your Excellency**. A reply has arrived from the **landworld administration**.”

“Please send it to my **wristgear**,” said Jint.

“At once, sir,” she said, lowering her head. “Do you have any other requests?”

“Call Mr. Yestesh to the office, if you could. That’s it.”

“Understood,” said Sehrnye, before disappearing.

“Has that woman become your personal secretary?” asked Lafier.

“Yeah, but only temporarily,” said Jint. “Her job is **antimatter fuel tank** overseer, but here in ‘mine **countdom**,’ there aren’t any to oversee, so she’s got nothing to do. So she’s playing messenger for me, just to kill time.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Lafier. “I should have been the one doing that.”

“You?” said Jint, startled. According to most, Lafier would have exhibited much less psychological resistance to the idea of just barging in on him unannounced with whatever news, rather than playing messenger.

“What will you do now?”

“Work, of course.” Jint operated his **wristgear**, and the window, the snow, and the brick wall vanished, replaced by an inorganic wall and door. Beyond that door lay the office. Jint stepped through.

“An orbital tower construction base, you say? Oh, of course,” said Yestesh. “I forgot, this **territory-nation** doesn’t have an **orbital tower** yet.”

In the **Empire**, every **landworld** had an orbital tower, save for one. But the construction plan was exceedingly concrete. It was why the construction base existed. The war started right around when the base was completed, and it had

been summarily abandoned. Martin's star system government had proposed the construction base as a meeting place.

"I've never been there, but it seems like it ticks the boxes for a conference venue," replied Jint, perusing the files attached with the proposal document. "The orbital tower construction plan is alive, and the base is being maintained, so it remains airtight. It also seems easy enough to guard.

"So you don't have any objections to the meeting place, correct?" asked Lafier.

"Uh-huh. It may be a facility of the **landworld administration**, but it's the closest thing to a neutral zone in my whole **countdom**."

"I don't have an opinion regarding the meeting place. But this..." Yestesh tracked the strings of characters on the screen embedded in the desk with his eyes. Just that moment, the **landworld administration** had sent a message detailing their conditions for giving sovereignty to the **Empire**, and the **Investigator** was processing them as he read.

Finally, after devouring the missive, Yestesh raised his head. "Do you intend to accept these terms?"

"Do you have any objections to that?" asked Jint, out of courtesy.

"Well, this is a matter between the **landworld administration** and the system's **Lord**, so I can't interpose. But I must tell you, it's an exceptional case among exceptional cases," he said, a tad pompously.

"I thought as much. Is it viable in the eyes of the law?"

"It should be. One of my subordinates is a specialist in that area; if you so desire, shall I have the terms scrutinized?"

"Please, by all means."

"And if the terms are, in fact, legally valid, you *will* accept them?"

"I plan to, yes," replied Jint.

"Not to overstep my bounds yet again, sir, but I don't think that's very wise. Isn't this a tad weak-kneed of you?"

“It might be, but I believe it to be the best way.”

“I see...” Yestesh looked unconvinced, to say the least, but he sent the file to his legal specialist. “Now, allow me to make a suggestion to you as an official of the **Empire**.”

“Suggest away.”

“It would behoove you to add one more provision to the text.” Yestesh proceeded to explain how the **landworld administration**’s sovereignty should be limited to just the **landworld** of *Martinh*. It was de rigueur among the Empire’s territory-nations for the administrative domains of landworld administrations not to extend past their respective planets’ atmospheres. As such, in the star systems like the **Archduchy of Laitpanh** with three inhabited planets, each planet had its own landworld administration for a total of three in the system. In general, space, the stars, and uninhabited planets belonged to the Abh — that was the **Empire**’s fundamental policy.

“Far be it from me to thrust my nose into the finances of the **House of Hyde**, but if you do not make it clear that priority over the resources outside the **landworld** belongs to the **Lord**, it could hamper the operations of various imperial institutions, to say nothing of the **Star Forces**.”

“I understand. Let’s work out a draft,” said Jint, but there was no need. The phraseology was all boilerplate stuff pulled from a collection of legal ordinances. The specialist finished looking it all over within the space of about an hour. The **Empire** did not forbid any of the **landworld administration**’s proposals. The text was altered with a single amendment, and then sent back to the **landworld administration** as the final response of the **House of Hyde**.

The attack on the Forr Da Antohbeeta must have been effective, for the government of Hyde proved amenable to the added stipulation. With this, a meeting was no longer necessary, yet Jint wanted to go through with it anyway, for no other reason than to meet his family.

“Jint. You’ve gotten so big.”

“And you got older, Till.” Jint shifted his gaze on his other surrogate parent. “You haven’t changed at all, though, Lina.”

“When did you become such a flatterer?” she smiled.

“Since I was born. You never noticed?”

“I suppose.”

The place they were currently at was slated to become a worship chapel once the base became fully operational. As of now, however, it was all but empty. No cross, no pulpit, no pews. The stained glass images depicting religious icons and mysteries were all that hinted at the building’s future. Jint had his doubts the place would ever actually play host to hymns or homilies.

The system government arranged for a table and chairs for them.

“Let me introduce my companion,” said Jint, pointing at her. “This is a **royal princess of the Empire** by the name of *Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Bærh Parhynr Fiac Lamhirr*.”

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” said Lafier in Martinese. She said it fluidly, but that was the extent of the Martinese she knew.

Till and Lina were visibly surprised. Till recovered from his surprise faster. He clumsily bowed his head and said: “We welcome you to our sector, Your Highness.”

“I give you my gratitude,” she nodded.

“You really did move up in the world, huh, Jint,” said Till, impressed.

Jint nodded in reply, and left it at that.

“Please kiss Her Highness’s hand!” called out a sudden voice.

“What the?” exclaimed Jint.

“It’s the press,” Till grinned, abashed. “There’s no way they wouldn’t want to cover such a historic moment.”

“Isn’t this kind of a breach of our agreement, Till?” Jint protested. “It’s supposed to be us only: the President of the Hyde Star System, the Count of Hyde, and his companion.”

“I know. They’re not here at the base. All the equipment is remote-controlled.”

“I mean, be that as it may...”

“Please, Mr. President, you’ve gotta,” said a reporter, their tone of voice decidedly on the fresh side.

“Never mind. Just understand that Abh ladies don’t go around giving people their hands to kiss,” said Jint. The **Royal Princess** would hardly be elated to press part of her body against the lips of people she’d just met.

“Okay.” Till crossed his arms toward the ceiling.

“May we ask you to cooperate?” pressed the voice.

“How rude,” said Lafier. She wasn’t using the simplified version on her **wristgear**, but rather a specialized translation device mounted to her ear. She couldn’t speak Martinese, but she could understand it perfectly.

“Her Highness stated that you’re being rude!” shouted Till.

“Wow,” said Jint. “I guess the Abliar reputation for unholy wrath made it all the way out here.”

“You **idiot**. That has nothing to do with this.”

“Now then, let’s get the work over with. There’s no need for pomp and circumstance between us two,” said Till, taking out a sheet of paperwork. Unlike the Abh, the Martinese couldn’t give up their love of paper.

“This really is for the best, in the end,” said Jint, after rereading.

“I don’t think so at all,” said Lina.

“You’re not a government official, so you’re not allowed to speak on this affair,” said Till, without looking at her.

“Till’s only ever this strict when it’s convenient for him.”

“You think this is convenient for me?”

The paper was a consensus document. The Hyde government was to cede its sovereignty and become a **territory-nation** of the **Empire**, but on the proviso that the one who currently held the **title** of **Count of Hyde** and all who held it in the past were never to enter within a one light-second radius of *Martinh’s* center. Nor was the Count allowed to stay in the entire **Hyde Countdom** for a

period of ten or more days, or communicate with the landworld.

Naturally, the **House of Hyde** would have to dispatch a **magistrate** to do the Liege's work in their place, but the selection of that magistrate was also stipulated to be the **landworld administration's** right. In other words, by signing this document, Jint was nixing any chance of ever returning home. But in exchange, the Hyde Star System would be as close to independent as possible.

"Is our conversation being recorded?" asked Jint under his breath.

"No. Words spoken between leaders are top secret, for the government's eyes only."

"Then I'll be bold and say I'd have liked to walk the Exotic Jungle one more time." The second he said it, his eyes grew teary. He felt a drop run down his cheek, but he didn't wipe it away.

"This is your last chance. Don't sign; you can defect to our side, or seek asylum."

Jint glanced at Lafier. "No, I can't mess up my home planet's future out of personal sentiment. I don't think my replacement as count would be as generous as me."

"Liar," said Lina, laughing through her tears.

"I'm not lying. And that's not the only reason, either." Jint pulled a chair and sat down.

He waited until Till was seated to sign. The man who was President signed as well, and they exchanged documents.

"Now, this agreement won't take effect until it's approved by Parliament. This place may be within a light-second from Martin's center, but I won't cry foul until the agreement becomes law."

Till put out his right hand. Jint took it, and mused that this was probably the first time he'd ever shaken hands with his de facto father.

"Now it's private time for us!" Till shouted. "So please, enough recording!"

After a bit of a back-and-forth, Till's will held sway.

Lina started arranging the dishes on the purely functional table. “I made you your favorites. Eat up, Your Highness.”

“Ah, yeah,” said Jint, too shy to string together a proper reply.

“Thank you for the meal,” said Lafier, though she didn’t partake right away. Her eyes wandered all over the table.

“You eat with your hands,” said Jint, who realized she was searching for chopsticks. To show her how it was done, Jint took a bite out of his portion of “quinzbehr” — a sandwich with beef and white cabbage.

The signature Martinese sweet-and-spicy style of seasoning was so nostalgic Jint couldn’t get enough. Lafier looked on with astonishment, and nibbled at her own quinzbehr.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, but what’s with that luggage thing?”

“Oh. I just thought I’d bring it along, seeing as this is family time,” said Jint, putting down his food to open the carrier.

“What’re those?” said Till, taken aback.

“Cats,” said Jint, holding Dyaho and Sercruca’s children in arm. One was a pure-white *raigh*, and the other a black-and-white *cnasraigh*. “Care to raise them for me?”

“So *that’s* a cat. I’ve seen them in videos before,” said Lina, reaching out a timid hand. Jint handed her one. “I’m sure the ones I saw in the video were bigger than these little guys.”

“They’re still young.”

“And they get *that* big?”

“How big do you mean?”

“They were the size of humans.”

“Oh, those must’ve been tigers or lions or some such. These are house cats. They only get around this big,” he said, showing them a picture of himself with Dyaho. He hadn’t brought Dyaho with him; there were too many crevices for him to hide in at this base. It’d be a pain to try to find him if he ran away.

“Can I get this picture off you?”

“Of course.”

“We can’t take the cats, though,” said Till. “You may have forgotten, being off-world for so long, but we can’t take in anything that could upset the ecosystem.”

“I didn’t forget, I just thought that old law might’ve changed.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“That sucks.”

Lina was absorbing the photo while, right beside her, Lafier was trying Melohn Oh Shoo with a stiff and solemn expression.

“How do you say, ‘it’s delicious’ in your home language?” she whispered.

“You don’t have to force yourself. I know it’s not to your taste.”

“That’s not true. Just tell me.”

Jint told her.

The time they spent together was lovely, but it had to come to an end.

“Be safe, you two,” said Jint.

“We will. I’m sorry for everything, Jint. Glad we could meet again,” said Till, who hugged him.

“Took the words right out of my mouth,” said Jint.

Lina couldn’t bring herself to say goodbye; she just put Jint’s hand against her cheek and sobbed. It was when she turned to Lafier that words finally came. “I implore you, Your Highness, take good care of him.”

“Stop it, Lina.” Jint was red in the face. “I’m not a kid.”

“I don’t think you are,” said Lina.

“But...”

“How do I say, ‘leave him to me’?” asked Lafier.

Jint gave her a long stretch of words.

“That many words for ‘leave him to me’?” Though suspicious, she repeated the sentence.

Jint smiled. He hadn’t lied to her; Till and Lina most likely received what she wanted to convey loud and clear. He just couched it in a Martinese-language expression. Lafier’s phrasing was too blunt to be taken as anything but perfunctory by a Martinese speaker.

The direct translation was as follows: I will be his soil to stand on, and I shall make him my soil to stand on.

Chapter 10: *Abdardaünsec* (Re-Formation)

From the **Hyde Portal**, **supply ship** after supply ship emerged into **3-space**. The flotilla had finally made it to its destination, materials from faraway *Lacmhacarh* in tow.

Jint was staring absently at the wallpaper of the office inside the *Baucbiruch*. *Guess it's time to bid this room goodbye.*

The *Baucbiruch* was currently the **manor** of the **House of Hyde** in both name and substance. He'd never planned to sit at this desk forever, of course, but he hadn't expected to part with the ship in such short order, either. Life was such a series of surprises.

His **wristgear** rang.

"Lonh-Dreur," said Sehrnye. "Mr. Swohsh has arrived."

"Thank you. Please send him my way. Also, please tell Mr. Samson to come here, too."

"Very well, sir."

This would be the last time Sehrnye would act as his secretary, too. The employees and materials Sehrnye's company needed were here now. She could go do her real job. Though to his surprise, he did feel she made for a pretty good secretary.

The door opened, and an old man came in. A tall old man. He was Swohsh, the **magistrate** of the **Hyde Countdom**, as selected by the **landworld administration** of *Martinh*.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," said Jint, standing up and offering a hand, as was the Martinese custom.

"This isn't our first meeting, Lonh-Dreur." Swohsh gripped Jint's hand in his own leather glove-like hand. "I've bumped into you a number of times when **Your Excellency** was a lad. I owed your father a lot."

“Oh, I see.” Now that he mentioned it, Jint did have a feeling he’d met the man before. “Our lives have taken various strange turns to get to this point, but thank you, and I look forward to working with you.”

They exchanged a handful of pleasantries, but the entire time Jint was doing his best not to let the pain in his hand show on his face.

Then Samson came in. Jint introduced the two to each other. Surprisingly, Swohsh greeted him in Baronh (albeit heavily accented Baronh).

The **Hyde Count’s Manor** was floating 0.8 light-seconds from *Martinh’s* sky. Consequently, if the accord went into effect, he would be obligated to distance himself.

The way Jint remembered it, Parliament was sure to work slowly, yet the representatives had ratified the agreement with alarming speed. Had politics changed while he was away, or was this a special exception?

Jint could only stay here for another twenty hours. And he could only stay within the **Hyde Countdom** for another two hundred and sixty hours. After which he’d have no choice but to hand the management of the **countdom** to Samson and Swohsh. Their cooperation was essential. Jint was their Lord on paper, but for all intents and purposes he was an outsider.

Once the two were finished with their rote salutations, Jint decided to make himself useful by offering his hospitality. He brought them tea and chairs.

“I have a personal request of you...” said Swohsh, reluctant to bring this up.

“What is it?” said Jint.

“This means I’m going to have to live here, right?”

“Not necessarily. While I think it would be more convenient on a practicality level, I don’t mind if you work in Crandon City if that’s what you want to do.”

“No, I understand the benefits of working at the **manor**. May I use this room?”

“Yes,” Jint nodded. “If that’s what you want, Mr. Swohsh.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll keep it tidy.”

Jint smiled wordlessly. There was an almost zero percent chance Jint would ever use this room again, so he didn't particularly care how tidy Swohsh kept it, but he understood this was a thoughtful gesture. It did warm his heart.

To tell the truth, Jint didn't expect much out of whichever **magistrate** the Martinese decided on. He'd steeled himself to be viewed as "the enemy" by the de facto overseer that was the magistrate. And Swohsh could be an enemy, but he was a pleasant one as far as enemies went.

"Well," Swohsh continued, "you see, I, uh, took a look at the photo the Corints showed me, and..."

"Huh?"

"So, if I could make a personal request..."

"Yes? What is it?"

"It's just, I heard you were looking for someone to raise the kittens, and if it's all right with you, I'd like to humbly throw my hat in as a candidate. Cats might cause disturbances to the ecosystem, but there should be no problem whatsoever if I were to raise a cat here in the manor."

"I'd be delighted," said Jint. "I have to warn you, though, cats don't really help in the tidiness department. If you mean to keep this room tidy for me, you may have to keep out any cats."

"I see. It seems there's much you must tell me; I don't know a thing about raising cats."

"I can help you with that," said Jint. "Of course, there's usually a lot of people in any given group of Abhs with many years' experience raising cats, so you might not need my help in the end. I have two kittens left; would you like both of them?"

"No, thank you," said Swohsh, shaking his head. "This will be my first creature, so tending to the needs of just one is likely challenging enough. And I'll be fairly busy for a while, too. I'd like to take the pure-white one, if there's no issue in doing so."

"No, no issues. Please cherish it and make it feel loved."

“Thank you so very much,” said Swohsh, expressing his overflowing gratitude before leaving the room with a spring in his step. The man hadn’t touched his tea.

“So that’s one kitten you’ve got left,” said Samson.

“Yep,” Jint nodded. But he hadn’t forgotten the terror of the dish called “lutimond.” “Don’t tell me YOU want to ‘raise’ a cat, too, Mr. Samson?”

“You don’t have to give me that look,” grumbled Samson. “I know how to love a living creature, too, you know.”

“So do you want it?”

“No, it’s fine. I don’t want to give **mine Lord** something extra to worry about.” Just then, a call-received beep sounded from Samson’s **wristgear**. Samson squinted to read. “Oh, it’s a letter from **Vice Hecto-Commander** Sobash.”

“His pen’s always at the ready.”

“Actually, I heard about this letter directly from the **Vice Hecto-Commander** himself. Was wondering what became of it, since it was taking so long to arrive. I’m sure it traveled far, and for no reason.”

Just like my journeys, you could say, mused Jint.

When **Trample-Blitz Squadron 1** returned to the **imperial capital**, dozens of mass-produced *Caubh*-class **assault ships** were already off on familiarization voyages.

The two **Senior Ship Commanders** and the **Senior Staff Officer** of Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 were promoted to **Kilo-Commander**. Roiryua was assigned to *Saubh Dtirér Mata* (Trample-Blitz Squadron 2), and the other Senior Ship Commander, *Clapaimh*, was assigned to *Saubh Dtirér Bina* (Trample-Blitz Squadron 3). The Senior Staff Officer, *Semlaich*, was made the **Commandant** of *Saubh Dtirér Gona* (Trample-Blitz Squadron 4).

In addition, some among the **staff officers**, all of whom now had valuable experience under their belts, were assigned to the new **squadron command centers**, and some were appointed as **ship commanders**; those officers left the

command center of Squadron 1. The Ship Commanders were allocated to the new squadrons as well. Not even Squadron 1's **flagship**, the *Lymcaubh*, was able to stay with Squadron 1.

Only **Commandant** Atosryua was left at the *Glagamh Saubr Dtirér Casna* (Trample-Blitz Squadron 1 Command Center). And the *Flicaubh* was the only original ship that stayed in Squadron 1.

As a matter of course, Atosryua set up a provisional command center on the *Flicaubh*, but in this situation she was no different from a freeloader. The "provisional command center" consisted of a single starpilot's quarters.

"I'm going to be made **Senior Staff Officer**?" Sobash couldn't believe his ears. He'd come to pay her a visit, curious what she was doing holed up in her quarters, only to discover she was working out the personnel shifts.

"Correct," she said, sipping her tea. "This isn't favoritism."

"But why, ma'am?"

"You're better suited to being a **staff officer** than a commander. Not that you weren't an excellent commander, but as an assistant and advisor your skills will shine even more."

"I know you wouldn't have picked me if this were just favoritism, **Commandant**, but I'm afraid it hasn't sunk in yet," he told her from the heart.

Sobash was a merchant. Ever since he was young, he'd thought he'd stand at the top — and that he'd only be working for others for a very tiny sliver of his existence.

"If you don't pass muster, then I'll fire you without hesitation, so don't worry."

"That's a relief," he said, again with all sincerity.

The electricity of the battlefield was gratifying, particularly at the beginning of his tenure, when the fresh new sense of danger kept him sweating and on his toes. But as of late, he'd had his fill. He missed his free-wheeling days as a trader. It was too much to hope for such an unfettered lifestyle in a time of war, but the urge to be a **supply ship** captain and serve at the rear while taking it

easy grew with each passing day.

But if someone wanted him on the frontlines this badly, his personality forbade him to decline. Now, even if he dove back into his ideal world, the fact that he disregarded her best-laid wishes for him would gnaw at the back of his mind and suck the joy out. At the end of the day, it was just easier to prioritize the will of another over his own. If that other person (i.e., Atosryua) truly had need of him, that was to be appreciated. On the other hand, if he ended up focusing all of his efforts on what turned out to be a flight of fancy, then misfortune would darken the doorsteps of both parties. Thankfully, Atosryua seemed to be the type to acknowledge her own mistakes without friction.

“I’m happy to hear that.”

“Who will be commanding this ship? I’m curious.”

“I think you know full well,” she laughed lightly.

Sobash likewise laughed. She had him pegged. “It’s really her, then?”

“It is,” she asserted.

“And are you planning to make the *Flicaubh* the **flagship**?”

“That, I won’t do,” she said, waving her hand no. “The new **Ship Commander** wouldn’t like that.”

Lafier was plowing through vast quantities of text. Tide-of-war reports for each zone, technical information (mostly about weapons), proposals from the frontlines, **Empire** production reports...

Prior to her return to the military, the **Royal Princess** needed to play catch-up. Other **starpilots** had been fighting while she was on leave. But it wouldn’t take too long to catch up — the tide of war had frozen in place. She had half a mind to think it was out of convenience for her and her break. Sure, there had been frequent skirmishes here and there, but no large battles. That was typically how interstellar wars played out anyway. A huge flashy clash where both sides threw everything they had at each other, followed by a lull (that should not be confused for a ceasefire). Then one side would have its preparations in order, leading to the next gruesome bloodbath. The larger the scope of the war, the

longer the lulls tended to be.

Thanks to that, Lafier seemed to be reenlisting just in time for the next battlefield. She had no idea what the Three Nations Alliance was up to, but each of the reports was telling her that the **Empire's** preparations were near complete.

A small window appeared on the screen. "Lafier," said Jint. "I'm back now."

"Ah. That was quick."

"My leave period's over now. I had him come to the **spaceport**."

"You're not hungover?" Lafier was slightly disappointed.

"You're really merciless, you know that?"

Lafier was on a **cargo passenger ship**, the *Sneugh Amhéc*. Now that the **Hyde Countdom** was stable, the circular route around **Ileesh Monarchy** was reopened, and it was this route that the ship plied. The *Sneugh Amhéc* was currently moored at the **Delktu Spaceport** in the **Vorlash Countdom**.

Jint had been at the spaceport to deliver a cat to his old friend. There was still time until departure, so she thought he might be chatting at length with his friend, but he actually came back early.

"How about you? Are your studies coming along all right?"

"Yes. They're coming along much faster than yours."

"I don't think mass calculation standards have changed since I went to school. I *am* a **quartermaster starpilot**. By the way, how are you for a tea break?"

"That's a good idea. How surprising, coming from you."

"All right, coming through."

The door opened that second, and he let himself in. A black-and-white kitten was perched on his shoulder.

"That leaves me with just this little guy to find a home for." Jint carried the kitten down to the chaise.

"Shall I adopt it?" she said, voicing what had been on her mind for a while now.

“You don’t mind?”

“I don’t think anyone would notice if the number of cats here increased by one.”

“Sweet. Why don’t you name it?”

“This one’s a lady cat, right?”

“I don’t think she’s old enough to be called a lady, but yeah, she’s a she.”

“Would it make you uncomfortable if I named her ‘Lina’?”

Jint’s expression was difficult to describe. “But that’s not an Abh name.”

“Your name isn’t an Abh name, either. Besides, her siblings probably haven’t been given Abh names.”

One was probably given a Martinese name, the other, a Delktunian name. “Good point.”

“So, is it okay with you? Do you dislike the idea?”

“You can’t do that,” he grinned. “I’ll want to take her with me.”

“That won’t do. She’s my cat. I won’t let you get away with her.”

“Right you are,” Jint nodded. “‘Lina.’ It’s a nice name.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“I do.”

“Do you not regret it?”

“You mean how I decided not to stay on my home planet?” Jint stroked Lina’s fur. “I’ve made up my mind not to regret it. You’ve seen my past. If I raise the floodgates on regret, there’ll be no end to it.”

“You’re one of a kind,” she said, her admiration quite genuine. “Everyone knows regret doesn’t help, but it’s a rare feat to be able to successfully swallow it down.”

“I just decided not to cry over spilt milk,” he shrugged. “That doesn’t mean I’ll actually be able to. But you don’t have any regrets, right?”

“I do.”

“You? Regrets?” said Jint, amazed. “I didn’t know that. So even you can regret.”

“I feel like you’re mocking me right now.”

“I’m not. Really. Now c’mon, let’s head back. To the **Star Forces** we go. Because once again, it’s the only place I have to return to.”

“Yes, let’s go back. For me, the Star Forces has been something like a home to me from the beginning,” said Lafier. “Incidentally, what happened to tea? How long do you intend to keep me waiting?”

Ecryua had been promoted from **Vanguard Starpilot** to **Deca-Commander**. It wasn’t so much her work attitude on the *Flicaubh*, as it was her brush with death on the *Basrogrh* that made the difference. She owed her promotion to wartime — if the Empire had been at peace, she would still have been a **rearguard starpilot**. She wasn’t particularly moved by her promotion, though. She just thought that if she was going to be made a Deca-Commander, she’d have liked it to have come after frequenting a **military academy**. Who knew how many students’ cats would be there to pet.

Ecryua had been given not just a high **rank**, but an advanced-level position. **Deca-Commander** Idlia was now a **Vice Hecto-Commander** and the **Ship Commander** of one of the newly constructed warships, leaving Idlia’s old position of **Vice Commander-cum-Navigator** for Ecryua to fill.

It seemed there had been an unofficial announcement from the personnel department about using this opportunity to have Ecryua experience being a **gunner**, but apparently, *Sarérh Raica* (Former Ship Commander) Sobash strongly opposed the notion. Ecryua didn’t particularly want to be a gunner, but she had no idea why Sobash had taken issue with it.

Idlia was hardly the only **starpilot** to be shuffled around. There had been a mass shakeup in personnel. Even the **Clerk** had moved out. Today, a new **ship commander** and clerk would arrive.

They were gathered at the arrival deck for the **gangway welcome**. It was, of course, Ecryua’s job to gather everyone together. It was a strange feeling.

At last, a **smallcraft** came side by side with the ship. The Ship Commander and Clerk descended.

A whistle was blown, and the **starpilots** saluted in unison.

“I am the **Ship Commander** officially appointed to this ship, **Vice Hecto-Commander** *Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Bærh Parhynr Lamhirh*. It’s a pleasure to be in your hands,” greeted the new captain.

“I am the officially appointed **Clerk, Quartermaster Vanguard Starpilot** *Linn Ssynec Raucr Dreuc Haider Ghintec*.”

I’m going to be battling alongside them again, thought Ecryua. Am I happy about that?

Once the brief ceremony was over, Ecryua dismissed the crew, and then stared directly at Jint’s face.

“Uhh, what is it?” Confusion crept on Jint’s face.

“I told you we’d meet again. And soon.”

“Oh, yeah. You were totally right.”

“And the cat?”

“Sorry. I didn’t bring him with me. Thought it’d be kind of selfish to take him into war, you know?”

“Where’s **Mechanics Starpilot** Samson?”

“At my **star fief**. He’s got work there.”

“What about your work there?”

“I don’t have any work to do there anymore. My battle’s over. I plan to aid in the **Empire’s** battle now.”

“You were fighting?”

“I guess.”

“Did you win.”

“I don’t really know yet.”

“Bring the cat. You just need to return it before we set sail.”

“But I’m kind of busy...”

“I’m your superior now.”

“Aren’t you mixing up the official and the private?”

“So?”

“Okay, okay.” Jint gave in.

Epilogue

Even cats dreamt from time to time.

In his dream, Dyaho surveyed his new domain. However, he could only remain for a short while. Immediately after making a circuit patrolling, a familiar pair of hands came to scoop him up from his slumber. That act alone did not rankle him, but when he caught wind of the fact that the hands were attempting to stick him inside a cage, he wriggled and writhed.

It wasn't that he disliked being in the cage. In fact, he could even be said to enjoy it. He simply wasn't in the mood at times, and this was one of those times.

"Sorry, Dyaho, this'll be goodbye for some time," said the housemate. "I was planning to live together with you at the new **manor**, but that's not in the cards anymore. You can rest easy, though. I won't be taking you with me to every corner of the galaxy anymore."

Now awake, Dyaho opened his eyes, stretched, and leapt off its fluffy cushion toward the hallway.

They were at the **Cats' Refectory** in the **Royal Palace of Clybh**. Dyaho was sure what happened in his dream happened in reality, but a cat's sense of time was not so solid, so it didn't have a clear idea how much time had elapsed since then. It felt like the distant past. In reality, its domain hadn't changed in many moons. It had come to regard this place as something of a safe haven.

Sercruca had once been nice around him, but she'd gradually turned aggressive once again. Dyaho was hard-pressed to care anymore, though. Cats were not monogamous, after all. Before now, he had no real choice in a mate. Now, he had his pick of the litter.

They were Dyaho's true family. They could be annoying, but whenever Dyaho went to sleep, he was relieved to have them around. His friends were gathered at the drinking fountain. They weren't doing anything in particular. They were

just lying languorously down. Dyaho joined them. He sipped of the water, and laid himself down.

Such idle comforts. Such easy living.

He recalled his housemate, and hoped he, too, might roll in the lap of indolence.

Then Dyaho fell asleep again.

Afterword

What do I even say, I wonder? Sorry I kept you waiting. Here's the book.

Time flies at a blistering clip, let me tell you. After the second book came out, I got hit by "CREST is getting an anime," followed by "it's getting a manga," "it's getting a game," "it's getting a Korean translation"... and now BANNER is getting an anime, too. I even hear news from across the Pacific about an English-language dub of CREST.

And what have I been doing during all this? All I did was write one longform novel and several shorts.

Don't get me wrong — it's not as though I began to dislike writing BANNER. But it is true that it prevented me from going back out into the world. While I chained myself to my desk, I realized I was turning over ideas that I wasn't sure would lead anywhere.

To all of you who were looking forward to the book coming out, I truly apologize. And while I'm at it, I might as well apologize over something else: When I wrote in the afterword of the last book that this was the "Dyaho Trilogy," many readers took that to mean that BANNER OF THE STARS would stop at three volumes. The idea of the "Dyaho Trilogy" isn't meant to be taken one hundred percent seriously, but it's technically accurate. BANNER isn't just the story of Dyaho; the Dyaho Trilogy is just one of the segments of the larger saga.

There's still more story to BANNER.

Throughout the rest of this afterword, I'll be assuming readers have already read the rest of the book, so if you don't want any story spoilers, then I ask you save the afterword for later.

My initial concept for the Dyaho Trilogy was to describe the events that coincided with the rare tiger-striped cat born in the *Clybh* Royal Palace getting dropped off at the Hyde Count's Manor, which was where the trilogy was to

end. Dyaho would obtain a family in the Hyde Countdom, and see out the rest of his days there. His owner, Jint, was also going to stay in his home system, while Lafier was going to return to the battlefield. In other words, the plan was to depict Lafier and Jint's first true parting.

But when I put that onto the page, it ended up sucking the joy out. I think that's probably one of the reasons it took so long. That aside, I just couldn't progress things as planned, so ultimately I decided to keep them together. As a result, Dyaho was now the one to settle down in his place of birth, not Jint. Pretty different from what I'd originally imagined, but all the same, I managed to wrap a bow on this section of the saga.

From here on out, I plan to focus more on the tides of history roiling between the stars than on the personal affairs of the characters. There will be more opportunities to paint the pictures of the opposing nations in greater detail, as well. I've expounded on various aspects of the Humankind Empire of Abh, but I haven't depicted the other interstellar powers much at all (which is not to say I didn't give them any thought).

The Humankind Empire of Abh and planar space navigation are inextricably tied. After all, a power like the Empire would seldom come about without it (or any other hypothetical form of faster-than-light travel using warp points). Actually, I've forgotten whether I came up with the Empire as a power capable of ruling over a world where planar space navigation is possible, or whether I came up with planar space navigation to make the concept of the Empire work. Either way, they fit each other to a tee.

It was a relief I was able to make sense of the world-building and mechanics there, but what about the enemy nations? It'd have been lame if I made their political systems exactly the same as the Empire. So I pondered whether a nation-state with modern-society sensibilities could possibly arise in such a world. I'll spare you the long process; I concluded that, while it wasn't impossible, it would be more difficult to maintain for larger-scale polities. It wasn't a conclusion I was thrilled about, but I did have fun thinking up conditions I could apply to make such a society viable. The more I came up with, the farther away the nations of my fiction veered from my image of what a nation-state entailed, but that wasn't a bad thing. These nations which

advocate for democracy share much in common with what the average modern Japanese person would associate with a democracy, but they also differ in myriad ways.

I haven't yet come up with the name of the section to follow the Dyaho Trilogy. I just know that *that* will probably happen to *them*, and then *that* will happen *there*, which'll lead to *that*, *that*, and *that*... And then a distinct new segment of the saga will come together.

My pace will be slow, but please, stick with me.

Here's hoping this time it will go according to schedule — I say, while tormented by doubt.

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Banner of the Stars: Volume 3

by Hiroyuki Morioka

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